Inspiration from the past and hope for the future



Education International Asia-Pacific Regional Committee at their meeting in October, including EI president Susan Hopgood and AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe.

Education International's 30th anniversary

The creation of Education International (EI) in 1993 was a critical advance for global education trade unionism. It put together democratic, international trade union and professional associations and ended long-standing divisions and rivalries. It also united all education sectors. The new organisation became the undisputed global voice of education workers and the teaching profession.

However, in celebrating its 30th anniversary, we should also recall the deep international roots of organised teachers. Many teacher organisations from the 21st, 20th and 19th centuries – and even earlier – are no longer, but traces of their DNA remain in EI.

Public education

In the 19th and first decades of the 20th century, teachers came together, with some exceptions, in professional associations rather than in labour unions. Trade unions were seen as organisations for manual workers and, indeed, blue collar labourers were the essence of the trade union base. Even if teachers rarely formed trade unions, their professional associations were strong advocates for public education and for equal opportunities for all children.

Trade unions supported public education as a way to liberate the working class or, at least, to give the children of workers opportunities for employment, development of life skills and participation in civic life. Public education was, first and foremost, an equality measure. It fostered equality for girls and boys, for students with disabilities and for different religious and ethnic groups. Public education also enabled migrant children to adapt to their new countries.

For centuries, private education was available for those who had the means to pay for it. The trade union drive for access to

quality public education came from workers wanting their children to have the same chance as those living in more privileged neighbourhoods. In other words, public education was part of the class struggle. Some education philosophers like John Dewey were socialists and advocates of profound social change. They saw education as a means to transform society.

The largest international trade union organisation from 1901 to 1945 composed of independent trade union national centres was the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).

Education discussions in the IFTU mostly focused on trade union education as well as apprenticeship and vocational education, but in 1931, at its congress in Stockholm, they discussed “general education” and agreed to submit to the Berlin Congress in 1933 a program of principles for general school education.

They called upon the international teachers federation [International Trade Secretariat of Teachers (ITST)/Secrétariat Professionnel International de l’Enseignement (SPIE)] to take the lead during the two-year process of developing the program. Although the language is from a different time, the principles are similar to those of EI and its member organisations today.

Among those principles were:

- “The International Federation of Trade Unions emphatically proclaims that the emancipation of the workers, the object for which it strives, should be intellectual as well as material.”
- “The object of education is to develop the whole personality of the child with a view to its harmonious incorporation into the community, to enable it to develop physically, intellectually and morally and to secure its active and conscious cooperation in the advancement of civilisation.”
- “In the present order of society, divided as this is into antagonistic social classes, development of the social mind or social feeling can only take place if it combines a sense of the reality of these class divisions with the conception of a future classless society as the ideal towards which human effort must strive.”

The evolution of international trade union organisations and the creation of EI

The ITST/SPIE was an international trade secretariat (ITS), a trade union organisation that was linked with other sectors and the global organisation of democratic national centres, at that time, the IFTU.

The Communist-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), created in 1945, did not have independent sectoral structures associated with it.

The next international trade secretariat in education was the International Federation of Free Teachers’ Unions (IFFTU) established in 1951. It was close to other ITSs and the
International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

The other major independent international teachers’ organisation was the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP), established in 1952 with the merger of three international teacher organisations.

When WCOTP and IFFTU merged in 1993, EI became the ITS in the education sector. (In 2002, the term ITS was replaced with global union federation – GUF.)

At global level, there is also the World Federation of Teachers’ Unions (FISE) of the WFTU, founded in 1946. It lost most of its largest member organisations when the Soviet Bloc fell apart.

The other international, part of EI as of 2007 (although its European members joined earlier) was the World Confederation of Teachers (WCT). It originated in 1963 and became the WCT in 1973. Its roots were in the Christian international trade union movement.

All of the major international organisations had consultative status at the United Nations (UN), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The democratic internationals were able to cooperate in the UN system before EI was formed. They shared the same fundamental principles on education. For example, although the effort to adopt the ILO/UNESCO recommendation concerning the status of teachers in 1966 was led by a leader from the National Education Association (NEA), a WCOTP organisation, there was good cooperation by the international secretariats and national member organisations.

That recommendation reflected policies of the democratic internationals and of their predecessor organisations. The recommendation remains a reference point for education policy.

A similar recommendation concerning the status of higher-education teaching personnel was adopted by the UNESCO in

1997. An international university association, International Conference of University Teachers' Organizations (ICUTO), with leadership of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), along with EI defended trade union positions on that recommendation. Subsequent to the adoption of the standard, the university association dissolved. Its members joined EI.

The recommendations do not cover early childhood education; however, many of the same principles informed the development in 2013 of ILO Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for Early Childhood Education Personnel. EI made an important contribution to the guidelines and served on the group of experts that developed them, along with several member organisations.

These examples and others show several important characteristics of EI:

- The history of WCOTP, IFFTU and the WCT, but also of other organisations as well as informal international groupings, have contributed to the evolution of EI. The accumulation of histories continues to shape the present and future of EI.
- As sectoral issues are addressed, unions from those sectors join and become active. That is not only true for higher education and early childhood education, but also for education support personnel.
- The reach and impact of EI is strengthened by the involvement of member organisations. EI is its members, not just its secretariat. This is true whether it is campaigns like ones on education for all during the Millennium Development Goals process, Unite for Quality Education for a stand-alone sustainable development goal or education funding (Go Public! Fund Education) as the key to the transformation of education. Member organisation involvement also explains the success of the annual International Summit on the Teaching Profession, organised with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- EI was founded around principles of democracy and human rights, especially trade union rights. In recent years, history has required EI to do more to support embattled member organisations. Again, we must and will adapt to that challenge with an even greater mobilisation at national level to support those who suffer from repression.

Moving forward

The creation of EI 30 years ago did not, on its own, reduce challenges, but it places education unions in a stronger position to engage and to fight. EI is recognised as the voice of organised workers in our sectors. EI, with the active participation of member organisations, is an important player in global education policy.

EI will stay on the frontlines defending human and trade union rights. It will support member organisations that are in perilous situations. It will continue to campaign and educate for democracy and oppose arbitrary rule.

Over 30 years, mobilisation of trade unions to defend the profession of teaching and develop and use EI's professional standards, research and priorities to strengthen trade unions has also become fundamental to EI culture.

That does not give us the power to undo, on our own, misguided "reforms" that undermine quality education and the teaching profession. It does not give us the ability to stop the haemorrhaging of the teaching profession, which is producing an unprecedented teacher shortage.

However, we continue to be faithful to universal, free, public education to increase opportunity and social justice. We seek, as in the past, to develop critical thinking and free discussion so that young people can break down barriers and co-exist in our communities and so that democracy has a chance.

Since the 25th anniversary of EI, radical changes beyond our control have taken place.

They have changed neither our values nor our determination. They have, rather, built support for good jobs, good public services and decent societies.

The Covid pandemic generated a wave of support for workers in public services and vital private services. Words flowed fast and furiously, but, at the end of the month, it became even more difficult to make ends meet.

In education, the use of distance learning generated an appreciation of the need for social relationships if education is to take place. However, at the same time, those whose mission in life is to cut budgets are still exploring the idea of children interacting with screens rather than with other human beings.

When the next generation looks back at these times, they will see that EI insisted on putting professional teachers at the centre of education. It acted to ensure that they were at the education policy table and were not crowded out by vendors selling their wares.

EI defined a better future for children and teachers, defended wellbeing in the school community, provided an alternative to the corporate vision of education and laid the foundation for deep changes in education.

EI, with its member organisations, also developed allies, including parents, who wanted their children to count rather than be counted. The 1933 program for general education of the ITST/SPIE and the IFTU, says:

“In all stages there should be a drastic reform of the examination system, examinations being used only to provide rational guidance for the different forms of intelligence. Over-pressure for the sake of examinations would thus disappear.”

It is a simple and sensible statement. Either people were smarter then or the multinational standardised testing industry was weaker.
One can hope that a generation from now, the 30th anniversary of EI will mark the beginning of a deep transformation of education to restore the joy of learning
to students.

Talented young people will seek careers in education. Experienced teachers will want to stay in an exciting, valued and rewarding profession. If history is a lesson for today, all is possible.

Fred van Leeuwen is the general secretary emeritus of Education International and co-author of On Education & Democracy: 25 Lessons From The Teaching Profession. This article was first published on the EI website and is reproduced here with permission. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the AEU or SSTUWA.

By Fred van Leeuwen

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026