

What Thompson means for IWCE now

Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a conference organised by Calderdale Trades Union Council to mark the centenary of E. P. Thompson's birth, held in Halifax on 3rd February 2024

I'm speaking as a supporter of the IWCE Network (IWCEN).

As far as I know, the first recorded use of the phrase 'independent working-class education' (IWCE) was by the South Wales mineworker Noah Ablett at a meeting in Oxford in 1907. Ablett and others went on to build the IWCE movement. The IWCEN is trying to build a modern equivalent to that movement. So what, then, was IWCE?

From the 1880s onwards in the UK there was a revival of working-class self-organised economic struggle, for example by the matchworkers, gas workers and dockers. This was accompanied by revived attention to socialist ideas. The first UK Marxist party - the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) - was founded in 1883. The SDF leadership was largely focused on elections, but working-class members at the base of the SDF were more focused than its leaders on what they called 'making socialists'. They did this via individual and collective self-education in the economic side of Karl Marx's ideas, combined with public (for example, street-corner) speaking. Some members of the intelligentsia - for example William Morris (died 1896) and Eleanor Marx (died 1898) - participated in this approach. (Eleanor Marx's 1896 history pamphlet *The Working Class Movement in England* was a key contribution to such education.) Ten years later this tradition gave rise to a large-scale, systematic, free-standing IWCE movement. How did this come about?

In parallel with the revival of socialism, a section of the ruling class organised to intervene in working-class movements and divert them from class-struggle goals. One attempt to do this was made by well-off Christian Socialists acting through the Oxford University Extension Delegacy. In the first instance this organisation promoted a national programme of one-off 'extension' lectures, but by the early 1900s it was clear that these lectures were not

winning sustained working-class support. At this point, a protege of the Extension movement, Albert Mansbridge, convinced the Oxford Delegacy that systematic 'tutorial' classes, for example in economics, would be a way of building a compliant layer amongst working-class adults across the country, and in 1903 he founded the Workers' Education Association (WEA) as a vehicle for doing this. In the meantime, via the 1902 Education Act, the state had authorised local education authorities (LEAs) to fund WEA classes, which meant that university tutors could be paid to conduct them. The Extension delegacy and WEA now needed a base in Oxford at which workers who they intended to select via local tutorial classes would be able to pursue a full-time Oxford University diploma in conventional economics.

Let us look now at what was termed 'impossibilism'. In 1904 there were two leftwing breakaways from the grassroots of the SDF. One of these, based in Scotland, formed the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and the other, based in London, formed the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB). A similar group formed around Noah Ablett in South Wales. Those involved in these groups were heavily influenced by socialists in the United States, including by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Together they constituted the UK arm of an international tendency whose adherents were condemned by dominant sections of the then socialist movement (the Second International) as 'impossibilists'. These 'impossibilists' were also the main fighters for the IWCE tradition. This fight came to a head in 1909 at Ruskin Hall (later College).

Ruskin Hall had been founded in 1899 by three well-off Oxford University students from the USA: Walter Vrooman, his wife Amne Vrooman, and Charles Beard, as a college mainly for workers. This was a left-liberal type of initiative. It was in Oxford but not part of the University, and provided two-year residential courses. The founders appointed an SDF

member, Denis Hird, as principal. In 1902 the founders went back to the US, giving rise to a funding problem. By this time most Ruskin students were working-class activists sponsored by the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF), the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS) and some other unions. By 1907, the students at Ruskin included some of the most militant workers in the country. In 1907-09 there took place at Ruskin a make-or-break struggle between the IWCE movement and its opponents

In 1907, a joint agreement was reached between the Oxford Extension Delegacy and the WEA to launch tutorial classes as proposed by Mansbridge, the first two of which in fact ran from January 1908. Meanwhile, the TUC had finally agreed to lobby member unions for funds to support Ruskin College. This triggered a joint Delegacy/WEA drive to take over Ruskin before it was too late. They now appointed governors and economics lecturers over Hird's head, banned Hird from teaching sociology, made exams compulsory and banned students from public speaking. Oxford University lecturers were by this time teaching anti-Marxist economics at Ruskin in their spare time.

Led by a group of impossibilists, the students at Ruskin organised to resist this takeover, their declared aim being to make Ruskin unequivocally part of the labour movement. They formed the 'League of the Plebs' and began to run their own Marxist economics classes. Hird supported the students, and in March 1909 the Ruskin governing body, packed with Delegacy supporters and backed both by Oxford University itself and by big money donors, sacked him for 'failing to maintain discipline'. All 54 students then went on 'strike' - that is, agreed to boycott all classes except Hird's, demanding Hird's reinstatement. This action hit national headlines. Nobody could believe that miners and railwayworkers could take on the poshest university in the world. The governors closed the college for two weeks and ratified Hird's sacking.

This led by August 1909 to the creation of a national IWCE movement. The main strikers left Ruskin and, with broad support across the left, set up an independent Central Labour College, a network of classes across South Wales, the Northeast, the North West and elsewhere, a correspondence tuition structure, a book publishing house and the monthly *Plebs Magazine*. The local and correspondence classes were re-organised from 1921 as the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), which in the mid 1920s had 30,000 students. By that time *Plebs Magazine* had a circulation of 10,000. Although all

the students at Ruskin were male, women, especially Mary Bridges Adams and Winifred Horrabin, were central to building this IWCE movement.

By the mid 1920s, then, IWCE was a powerful force within the overall working-class movement. It's also important to be aware that 'industrial history' was a key element in the IWCE movement's educational model. To them, as for Eleanor Marx in the 1890s, this meant mainly UK history from the late 1700s with an emphasis on working-class agency.

Let us look now at the background to E. P. Thompson's work.

As Pushpa Kumbhat has shown in her 2017 thesis, there was a powerful NCLC - that is, an IWCE - presence in and around Sheffield in the 1930s. The Yorkshire North District of the WEA, on the other hand, was dominated from 1913 to 1923 and from 1929 till he retired in 1945 by its District Secretary George Thompson, who was a carpenter by trade. George Thompson regarded tutorial classes in economics for working-class students as the key mission of the WEA. At this stage, then, the dominant approach in the Yorkshire North WEA was much closer to the IWCE ethos than was the case in WEA districts elsewhere in England.

Sidney Raybould worked in the Yorkshire North WEA under George Thompson from 1929 to 1946, and then in 1946 became head of the Extramural Department at the University of Leeds. In 1948 Raybould appointed E. P. Thompson as a full-time probationary extramural tutor (one of ten such) at Leeds. It's likely that George Thompson's influence was still strong when Edward Thompson started this job. So what did Edward Thompson's work involve?

From 1948 to 1965 Thompson taught WEA classes in English and History across much of Yorkshire. Typically he taught four (sometimes five or more) two-hour classes a week, all in the evening, between September and April each year. He taught such classes in Leeds, Ossett, Bingley, Shepley, Harrogate, Morley, Todmorden, Middlesbrough, Keighley, Northallerton, Hemsworth, Brotton, and especially Batley, Cleckheaton and Halifax. In 1953 he reported that his then class in Batley contained: 'two doctors, housewives, a textile worker, printer, painter, saw-mill manager, rag, wool and waste merchant, post office engineer, clerical worker, and head teacher'. This class composition was fairly typical. Research evidence collected by Roger Fieldhouse and David Goodway indicates that Thompson did this work very well. While doing this

work, Thompson also wrote a biography of William Morris. Why did he choose to focus on Morris?

Thompson had joined the Communist Party in 1942. He began drafting his book about Morris in 1950. It's likely that he was attracted to Morris as the highest status English Marxist intellectual. The original version of Thompson's 900-plus pages biography of Morris, titled *William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary*, was put out by the Communist Party publisher Lawrence and Wishart in 1955. Thompson, then, researched and wrote this book while he was still a Communist Party activist, but in 1956 he left the CP. What was Morris's influence on Thompson?

Morris' many talks, speeches and articles were always designed to: connect with workers' own good sense; centre on patient persuasion using reasoned argument; stay close to concrete realities; use an informal approach; be fairly short and meticulously prepared; use plain language; recognise the need to keep ideas and actions linked; and recognise the role of working-class agency. In his 1966 pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism*, Hal Draper wrote: 'Morris's writings on socialism breathe from every pore the spirit of socialism-from-below'.

His research for the biography of Morris, combined with his experience of adult education teaching, led Thompson to think that Morris's from-below version of Marxism was better than the version then available via the Communist Party. How did *The Making of the English Working Class* develop from this?

From 1953, Thompson had planned to write a short history of the working class in the West Riding of Yorkshire between 1750 and the 1950s, on the grounds that: 'This is something we need very much indeed in our tutorial class work . . .'. This indicates that the people in his extramural classes were interested in what the IWCE movement used to call 'industrial history'. Morris's approach to 'making socialists', then, in combination with the influence of Thompson's classes, stimulated him to do the research that in 1963 became *The Making of the English Working Class*. So, from an IWCE standpoint, what are the key concepts in this book?

First, it centres on the from-below self-organisation of artisans, outworkers and agricultural labourers as they underwent enforced proletarianisation in the period studied (1790-1832), thus a key concept throughout is that of working-class agency. Secondly, it focuses on how the people investigated did this in the ideological as well as the economic and political spheres. In particular, it details how they developed from-below versions of Methodism and Jacobinism,

and how they actively drew on and adapted to their own purposes ideas of radical oppositionist intellectuals (for example, Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Cobbett, Thomas Hodgskin, Anna Wheeler and Robert Owen). In short, it reveals respects in which they organised themselves as (in Marx's terms) a class 'for itself' - that is, one that was developing class consciousness. *The Making of the English Working Class*, then, embodies what at the time was an innovative concept of from-below ideological struggle. So what does this book, written originally in 1965, mean for our IWCEN project now?

Since the 1980s, we have experienced the breakup of large blocks of unionised industrial workers in the UK - if you like, a partial 'unmaking' of the working class as it would have appeared to Thompson in 1963. However, this breakup can also be seen as part of a process by which a globalising capitalist class is 'making' a global working class. This development, of course, is entangled with a massive growth of world-scale problems - such as climate change, environmental devastation, war, disease and famine.

The capitalist class cannot solve these problems. The working class has the potential to do so. Actualising this potential depends on a broad movement for working-class conceptual self-emancipation - in other words, on IWCE. Such a movement will go in circles if fails to reassess the ideas that guided earlier movements. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* is a rich source of such ideas. However, if we are to use it as part of an IWCE programme now we would need to invite people to discuss what it says in relation to some areas that Thompson didn't address, for example: the triangular trade; the Haitian revolution and other uprisings by enslaved people in the Caribbean; the East India Company's operations; ecological aspects of the process by which workers were separated from the land; and the central role of women in the UK textile industry - of whom Frederick Engels's partner Mary Burns is a key example (Anna Clark's critique of Thompson in her 1995 book *The Struggle for the Breeches. Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* would be an important guide here.)

In conclusion, then, the IWCEN invites you to join us in such a project.