# ESOL defence struggle continues

***We print here the text of a factsheet prepared for distribution at a meeting organised at Westminster on 18 March 2013 by ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) campaigners with the support of Heidi Alexander MP. (For details of the outcome, please see the Action for ESOL (AFE) website [details p2].)***

- 1. Action for ESOL believes that the opportunity to learn the common language of the community in which you live and work is a human right. Access to the common language is a precondition of full and equal participation in society. Denying access to learning the common language is a fundamental barrier to participation. There is a well-established correlation between poor English language skills, low pay, unemployment, poor housing, poor health and poverty. Politicians from all main parties have stated that learning English is crucial to integration. They paint a picture of communities who cannot be bothered to learn English, but the reality is that cuts made both by the Coalition and previous Labour governments have greatly reduced the provision of ESOL classes in recent years, especially in those community settings where it is needed most. It is this that is the biggest obstacle to learning English.
- 2. Where learners are prevented from learning English through a lack of available provision, they are excluded from the labour market and condemned to remain on benefits. It is clearly in the national interest to support people into employment. Immigrants to the UK bring with them a wide range of different skills; ESOL provision should not just support them into dead-end, entry-level jobs, but should allow them to reach their potential, and benefit the British economy to the greatest degree.
- 3. The funding model initially proposed for 2013/14 suggested limiting courses to approximately 100 hours per level. This is not realistic and the Skills Funding Agency has recognised this. While this has been postponed for a year, Action for ESOL would like guarantees that a realistic funding model will be sustained. In order to maintain high-quality ESOL, funding needs to be persistent and sustained, and not vulnerable to the whims of political administrations. Rather, people who need English language education to live and work in the UK should have a statutory entitlement to ESOL from the point of entry to the UK.
- 4. The changes to ESOL funding described above are still scheduled to occur from September 1914. However what is happening to ESOL has to be seen in the context of what is happening to all adult learning from September 2013. From that date all government funding for courses at level 3 or above for those students 24 or over will be removed and replaced by FE loans on a similar basis as the loans available for HE fees. BIS's own impact assessment reckoned that around a quarter of a million adults would be lost to learning because of these changes. From September 2013 Universal Credit is being rolled out. This will remove all the benefits on which skills and learning providers based fee remission. Colleges will still be able to use their discretion about charging fees to those students who are claimants but they will have to fund this out of their existing resources. Job Centre Plus advisers will be able to set conditions such as attendance on specific courses on claimants. Refusal to attend can lead to loss of benefits for the claimant. This may hit ESOL students hard as they may get referred to short programmes set up by the Departments of Work and Pensions which are often of much poorer quality than those provided by colleges.
- 5. The changes to the citizenship requirements for settlement and nationality due to take effect in October 2013 will have profound

implications for ESOL learners. Under the current arrangements, in lieu of taking citizenship tests those with lower levels of English are entitled to enrol on an ESOL class which includes a citizenship component. But from October this route will no longer be available and applicants will have to pass both the citizenship test and provide evidence of passing an English test at Entry 3 (which is at the same CEFR level as an MFL AS level). We believe this level is too high. Rather than promoting English language learning, cutting the ESOL classes route to citizenship will greatly reduce opportunities for people who might otherwise have been able to develop their English language proficiency to become fully integrated British citizens. The new rule is incompatible with the government view that ‘English language is the cornerstone of integration’.

- 6. No one government department appears to want to take responsibility for ESOL. BIS wants ESOL for employability through colleges; DWP want ESOL for jobseekers via JCP courses, UKBA want English for settlement and citizenship; DCLG want English for community integration. This leads to fractured funding streams and agendas. Learners just want to learn English. Some providers are required to run several parallel admin systems in order to operate; this is hardly an efficient use of scarce public funds. Action for ESOL believes that funding mechanisms should be transparent and encourage co-operation between providers, not competition. In particular, attention should be given to the lack of co-operation between different agencies, notably FE colleges and Jobcentre Plus.
- 7. It has been suggested that the voluntary sector plays a greater role in the provision of ESOL. Action for ESOL believes that ESOL provision requires trained and qualified teachers to be effective. This cannot be sustained by the voluntary sector.

## References:


Action for ESOL manifesto: http://actionforesol.org/action-for-esolmanifesto

SFA Funding Rules 2013/14: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/SFA/Funding_Rules_2013_14_Jan_2

NATECLA statement on 2013/14 funding: http://www.natecla.org.uk/uploads/media/208/158

UCU page on Action for ESOL campaign: http://www.ucu.org.uk/5218



# S.E.A.

The Socialist Education Association (SEA) is affiliated to the Labour Party and seeks to inform and influence party policy on education. SEA members include parents, governors, teachers and other education professionals from all sectors and people with a general interest in education.

The SEA is seeking to engage positively with the Party and to support the development of popular policies which will help Labour win. We believe that Labour’s policies on education should be based on our core values of equality, democracy and solidarity. SEA is committed to developing policy which is based on research and evidence of what works in the UK and abroad, and we offer the following key proposals:

To develop democratic and comprehensive alternatives to marketisation and privatisation which divide communities and increase inequality. Like the NHS, the locally accountable community comprehensive school is a successful and popular expression of our values – we should champion it.

To develop a single, broad and inclusive framework for the curriculum from early years to adult education. We need an alternative to the bewildering choice of qualifications, which can limit opportunities and lead to segregation by social class. This should include choice, depth, breadth, stretch and progression, and value what learners know and can do so that all learners can be proud of their achievements.

To develop ways of targeting educational investment to reduce inequalities and promote achievement as an alternative to regressive spending cuts which hit the poorest hardest. This means keeping educational routes open for all learners throughout life.

To develop, with others, an education charter based on the principles of equality, inclusivity, democracy and solidarity.

To promote the development of locally elected bodies which would be responsible for scrutinising education provision in their area.

The SEA wishes to promote the widest possible debate about the future of education and welcomes any suggestions or responses to these proposals from all those with an interest in education.

**If you are interested in joining, contact Martin Dore, General Secretary of SEA, at: socialisteducation@virginmedia.com**

# Govian social fracking

**Cliff Jones**

Tony Blair's priority of *education, education, education* gave us more Green and White Papers, more Bills and Acts of Parliament and more restructuring and initiatives than you could shake a stick at. What possibly prevented it all descending into chaos was the New Labour approach to government, which was to performance manage an entire nation. Essentially, educators and others were all part of a series of ever-changing business plans, each with its own jargon that had to be learned quickly in time for the next performance management conversation or the next inspection. At General Election time it seemed as though the electors, not the politicians, were being appraised and held to account. Government set the targets: we had to hit them.

At first I thought because Michael Gove had let the world know what an admirer he is of Tony Blair and how much he learned from his apologia, *Tony Blair, A Journey*, that to make sense of his approach to educational policy-making it helped to see it as a continuum giving us yet more Adonis-inspired thoughts and dreams. An early clue to why it is not came from a former flatmate of Gove. Nick Boles, who became the minister for planning, explained that *chaos*, not *planning*, is the key to Big Society. This was one reason why, last year, I began to draft a rather long essay for my website on what I think is going on, using the term *social fracking* as both a working title and a theme (some of what follows has been extracted and adapted from that). Apart from the satisfaction provided by the sound of the words *frack* and *fracking*, they seem to me to be a helpful illustration of what Gove and co. intend for us.

Instability, uncertainty, chaos and confusion, even de-civilisation, will ensue as educational and social stabilisers, let alone equalisers, are dismantled. As our Earth is fracked so shall be our society, and although favour shall continue to be given to the already favoured the damage will not be confined to the already disadvantaged.

Before, however, I set out the charge sheet to be levelled at Michael Gove I want to provide a bit of perspective by asking a couple of questions:

1. Which Secretary of State created more comprehensive schools than all others combined, irrespective of party?
2. Which Secretary of State for Education planned the abolition of the one-dimensional and eugenically based O-level and, learning from the multi-dimensional and far more educationally advanced CSE, gave us GCSE, with differentiation by outcome, teaching and examining that was more accessible and lots of coursework encouraging sustained independent learning and research skills? It was even possible, for a while, to design your own GCSE under Mode-3 rules.

The answer to the first question is Margaret Thatcher and the answer to the second is Sir Keith Joseph. Now, perhaps, we can better locate Michael Gove on the Left-Right Educational Spectrum. What an achievement, to have placed hard right demons in an educational pantheon of soft liberal progressives! Reflecting upon Gove it almost becomes possible to see Thatcher and Joseph as part of the narrative of Whig History: a history that includes Gladstone's 1870 Education Act making schooling compulsory, the 1911 Parliament Act which curtailed the power of the unelected, Tory-dominated House of Lords, and Harold Wilson's Open University. Wilson (a former member of the Liberal Party) used to say how proud he was to have completed what Gladstone started.

One lesson that Michael Gove learned from Tony Blair (and from Kenneth Baker, if you remember his Gerbil) is that if you intend to *de*form something it will be clever to steal the language of Whig historians and call it instead 'reform'. Not a single BBC eyebrow is raised while reading out yet more news of Gove's 'reforms'. He has won the war to control the language, aided – it has to be said – by Stephen Twigg, who shows no signs of socialism or even of fight.

I believe that there are six components in a social fracking kit. They are numbered below. The Coalition has them all but, because of the speed at which he bypasses evidence and the views

of others, Michael Gove leads the way in using it. I am reminded of Toad of Toad Hall when, for the first time, he acquired the keys to a motorcar.

And by the way, just because Michael Gove concentrates upon schools it will be unwise to assume that the effects of his fracking will not spread beyond them.

The charge sheet against Michael Gove (so far):

**1. Anti-political behaviour**

Politics should be an inclusive and consensual process of arriving at values prior to policy-making. You and your colleagues do not work like this. Your party was given no electoral endorsement and since then you have taken no steps to include professionals, parents and pupils in discourse that could establish educational values leading to policy changes. Including, gaining consent and even pausing to reflect do not feature in your way of working.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-political.

**2. Anti-democratic behaviour**

You are removing schools from democratically accountable local government and handing them over to private and profit-making companies, disregarding the unwillingness of the electorate and the profession to endorse your policies. Democracy has many forms but it always allows for disagreement and dissent. You suppress, insult or ignore any expression of other points of view.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-democratic.

**3. Anti-intellectual behaviour**

You are unwilling to engage with evidence that might bring into question the narrow prejudices with which you began the job of Secretary of State. For example, Ofsted reported that the best way to learn to be a teacher was with a university. You ignored that evidence because it did not fit with your views. You are also de-intellectualising the profession by dismissing the importance of qualifications and by stifling its ability to undertake masters and doctoral level work. You see teachers as instructors working in narrow subject silos defined by you.

You are, therefore charged with being anti-intellectual.

**4. Anti-educational behaviour**

An educational system should be fair and fulfil all. Its purpose is perverted when schools are differentiated by resource, religious beliefs, privilege and advantage. And yet you are creating a rigged free-for-all in which the favours will go to the already favoured while the rest shall be negatively labelled for life. Furthermore, your approach to public examinations will impoverish the learning experience by returning to simplistic and divisive modes and excluding opportunity for sustained learning and the acquisition and practice of research skills and questioning. You call for rigour but you give us rigor, as in mortis.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-educational.

**5. Anti-social behaviour**

You are part of a government that seeks to dissolve and distort institutions, policies and conventions that, under the banner of the Welfare State, have worked to minimise the damaging effects of privilege and inequality. Your education policies fit into a strategy that unfairly encourages the fulfilment of a few at the expense of the many.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-social.

**6. Exploiting the ignorance of your boss**

You have a boss whose educational, social and professional lives have all taken place in a series of small bubbles in which he mixed and mixes with people from the same bubbles. Like you he went to an exclusive university that has, by being given extra public funding, worked hard over the years to construct exaggerated perceptions of its elitist brand value. He also studied for a degree famously designed for specialists in superficiality.

You are, therefore, charged with exploiting the ignorance of your boss in order to get away with it.

The fracking efforts of Gove and Co. are all part of Nick Boles's political chaos theory. Getting the occasional policy-making speeding ticket will not stop him from reducing the curriculum to an approved set of 'facts' to be learned by rote and regurgitated in tests of memory that he proposes to call World-class exams. I doubt if he remembers the fiasco of World-class Tests back in 2001. He and his colleagues will be happy if only a small percentage of school leavers go through to a shrunken number of 'elite' universities while the rest go to universities clearly labelled as inferior or, an even worse label in their minds, colleges of further education.

To be a member of a profession means that you must 'profess' something and for educators that something must include fulfilment which is dependent upon fairness. A fracked society will increase unfairness and limit fulfilment. For me Michael Gove is a greater danger to society than any of his colleagues.

# Towards or away from 'social control'?

**Colin Waugh**

Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley, *The Great Reversal. Young People, Education and Employment in a Declining Economy*, 2013, 124pp (available from www.radicaled.wordpress.com)

This is the third collaboration between Martin and Pat to be published in book form. The others are *Education Make You Fick, Innit?* (Tufnell Press, 2007), reviewed by this writer in PSE 39, and *Lost Generation?* (Continuum, 2010), reviewed in *PSE* 58.

Each book has comprised a description of the English education system, embracing schools, FE colleges and universities, followed by a section in which the authors suggest strategies that readers who want to break out of the vicious circle of dysfunctionality that characterises the system could pursue – or at least advocate. Each book updates the previous one by taking account of more recent developments. To me, the descriptions have grown stronger whereas the strategies, though always interesting, have not advanced so much.

The descriptive section of *The Great Reversal* can be recommended unconditionally. It convincingly updates the picture painted in *Lost Generation?* of an education system descending into chaos, as those in power across UK society go further and further towards abolishing most people's chance of a decent life. As in *Lost Generation?,* Martin and Pat skilfully place the development of education policy and provision against the background of economic change, bringing out especially the effects of 'de-industrialisation' – that is, the continuing loss of both skilled and unskilled jobs in mass production. This description occupies the bulk of the book, and on its own makes it worth reading. In this review, however, I will focus on the authors' efforts to propose a way forward.

Martin and Pat state clearly a number of measures that they believe should be taken to improve the situation. These include: a form of work-sharing based on the approach advocated by Andre Gorz in his 1980 book, *Farewell to the Working Class* (ie cutting the average working week to about 20 hours); giving local authorities powers to carry out green infrastructural projects and thereby create worthwhile jobs (based on arguments put forward by the former Lewisham College lecturer and UCU regional support office Peter Latham in his 2011 book *The State and Local Government*, reviewed by Pat Ainley in *PSE* 68); income redistribution; and state provision of a guaranteed basic income for all young people regardless of their employment status. Within the field of education itself they propose 'a general diploma for everybody' and the creation of 'a community of learning', to be organised mainly through local centres that would function both as schools and/or colleges and as cultural institutes, sports and arts facilities and the like. As in their previous book, they also argue that within these institutions a new, more democratic relation between teachers and taught would be needed. This would encourage negotiation about the structure and content of courses.

Martin and Pat also explain that the proposed universal diploma might 'still need a strong subject core', and that it would in any case 'continue to promote cross-circular [*sic*, ie curricular CW] themes and generic knowledge'. 'Independent providers' would not be allowed to 'side-step' this

diploma, and it would also 'have to serve as the basis for entrance to a new, localised and 'Ruskinised' free higher education system recruiting from local communities'. (A note at this point refers readers to a passage in *Education Make You Fick, Innit* where Martin and Pat cited an idea put forward by the late Caroline Benn. Caroline had proposed that Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, and presumably also their tutors, could be used for part of the year to provide residential adult education for working-class people.)

Most people who agree with the authors' description of the status quo would agree also with their specific proposals. But it is necessary also to ask: who will bring such changes about, and how will opposition to them be overcome? In short, it is necessary to pose and attempt to answer both the question of agency and that of power.

In their last chapter, Martin and Pat discuss the argument put forward by Guy Standing in his 2011 book *The Precariat*, and also make reference to Paul Mason's 2012 book *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*. They interestingly compare and contrast, on the one hand, the mobilisations by HE students against the Coalition's fees increases and, on the other, the riots that followed the shooting of Mark Duggan. They maintain (p112) that: '. . . Standing is right to say that many youth see unions as protecting benefits enjoyed by some older workers that they can never anticipate having themselves'. But they also go on to argue that ' it still falls to the labour movement organisations that have represented many of their parents so well . . . to adopt and develop policies that stretch well beyond simply protecting the immediate interests of their members . . .' They explain that unions have the potential to do this 'because of their considerable resources and their continued ability to dislocate production . . .' but it will require them (ie unions) 'to change their more general political and cultural orientation'. In other words, the authors' answer both to the question of agency and to that of power is: 'the unions'.

I think that this answer is right, but not sufficiently precise. In order to suggest how it could be made sharper, I will first consider some possible reservations about the authors' description of the education system as it is now.

If we had to sum this description up in one sentence it would be that, from the 1870 Education Act until fairly recently, those in power have extended forms of valid education to a majority of the population, but recently they have stopped doing this and reconstructed the system so that it is overwhelmingly about social control. From being only one factor amongst others, then, social control has come to be the main thing publicly-provided education does, and this is what constitutes 'the great reversal'. There are three problems with this thesis.

First, it is going too far to claim that the education system as a whole is now mainly about social control. This is because a big, and growing, section of 'education', namely the scientific and technological research done within the dominant universities, plus the teaching and selection mechanisms that support this, is driven by the ruling class's need to develop constant capital as a factor in production or, if you prefer, to keep on designing, making and installing new machinery. The ruling class cannot avoid using the education system in this way, and it puts a massive amount of resources into doing so. The fact that HE teaching in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths - or sometimes medicine) subjects is still funded is evidence that this is the case.

Secondly, 'social control' means different things to different people. For example, to people who take a social democratic and reformist view of the world it means measures aimed at containing unwanted side effects of policies which in themselves may be seen as neutral or even 'progressive' – for instance ASBOs to discourage young people from getting drunk in the street could be seen as a side effect of the Labour government's policy, which Martin and Pat initially supported, to move towards forcing 16-18 year olds out of the labour market and into education. (The grounds they gave for supporting this re-appear on p104 of *The Great Reversal*.) But to people who see the world from a more leftwing perspective, 'social control' means measures taken by the state on behalf of the capitalist class to stop workers fighting back – for instance paramilitary police battering strikers. So if you talk about social control you need to spell out what you mean.

Thirdly, there are grounds for saying that the 'reversal' is in the opposite direction to what the authors think: in other words, that the key development now is that the ruling class is abandoning the strategy of using education for social control.

Martin and Pat themselves do in fact recognise this. Thus on pages 81-82 they review ways in which state education since 1870 has always included ruling-class efforts to extend social control alongside working-class gains. They refer to 'the dangers [ie from a ruling class perspective CW] from working class 'self-education' and to the standpoint adopted by the architect of the 1870 Education Act, Robert Lowe, that the extension of the franchise in 1867 as a result of trade union pressure had made it necessary to 'compel our new masters to learn their letters'. (They quote a slightly different formulation by Lowe on p82.) They conclude that: 'In a way, the

comprehensive reforms and subsequent widening participation to HE can be seen as an attempt to educate the working class out of existence by professionalising the proletariat.'

I don't agree entirely with this way of putting it, but I do believe that a central function of state education – especially post compulsory provision, and including things like the WEA which falsely purport to be independent of state control – has up till now always been to create from amongst sections of the working class a compliant layer through which the rest of that class can be controlled, thereby blunting the edge of class struggle and securing, where possible, 'social control'. In short, there are areas of state education, especially higher education in the humanities and social sciences, which exist primarily because the ruling class has (since, in my view, the defeat of Chartism in 1848) wanted them as a weapon in the class struggle.

The decision by the Coalition to raise HE fees to £9,000, and even more so its decision to cut virtually all the funding for teaching everything in HE except STEM subject areas, strongly suggests that the ruling class no longer needs this weapon. If so, this must be because it has found other, more reliable means for achieving the same ends, and these means, in turn, must largely be factors which Martin and Pat have identified like rising levels of debt, less and less access to secure employment, lack of housing for people under 35 and so on, plus developments in information technology and the mass media.

In other words there is a 'great reversal', but it is primarily a move away from, not towards, the use of education as social control, and the deterioration of curriculum content in schools and FE colleges can be more cogently accounted for on other grounds. In particular, it seems to me far more likely that over the period from the mid 1980s till now the ruling class demand on statutory schooling (ie as opposed to post-compulsory provision) to provide social control has continued much as before, as has its demand that such schooling should help to cream off a minority of people from working-class backgrounds to become scientists, technologists and the like, but that over that same period the ruling class has become less and less anxious that the social control function be camouflaged by the appearance of an egalitarian qualifications framework.

For people who see 'the unions' as key actors in any conceivable fightback over education, it matters which view we take on this issue of social control. For example, if we think the turn is towards social control our priority should be to convince the leaders of Labour Party-affiliated unions to put pressure on incoming Labour ministers introduce the diploma and local institutions which Martin and Pat advocate. But if we think that the ruling class has turned away from using post-compulsory education as an instrument of social control, this strategy would no longer be feasible, because it is only if the ruling class needs education for social control purposes that it will concede a space for progressive measures of this type. So in the latter case our priority would be, rather, to convince rank and file activists in unions, especially those involved in organising drives amongst casualised workers, of the need to rebuild the tradition of independent working-class education (IWCE) across the labour movement. This is both because we need IWCE as a class struggle weapon, and because rebuilding it is the best method working-class people possess for influencing the direction in which education as provided within colleges, universities and, eventually, schools, is going.

# Where we stand:

***Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.***

***For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.***

***Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.***

***Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.***

# The Shaftesbury E.E.E.P. project

**Ian Duckett** ***describes a programme devised for the Shaftesbury Young People charity, which works with 8-25 year olds in or leaving care***

The Shaftesbury Engagement, Employability and Enterprise Project (EEEP) is concerned with re-engagement, learning and developing the skills of employability and enterprise. There are three main curriculum components to the programme, which are leadership, employability and volunteering. It is also designed to deliver the following attributes to all participants: team-work; target setting and skills for learning; problem solving; language and communication.

EEEP equips learners with the personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS), which are those of: independent enquirers; creative thinkers; reflective learners; team workers; self managers; and effective participators.

The programme also covers: working with others; improving own learning and performance; problem solving.

The EEEP also counts as three out of twelve credits for the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness at Level 1 and 2. This is the intended qualification outcome for the programme.

Activities that support the programme are in three categories: leadership (Box 1); employability (Box 2); and volunteering (Box 3). Credit rating: 3 (30 hours in total.)

## 1. Skills for leadership (1 credit = 10 hours)

1. Introductory skills session - what will you need to succeed? Team-work; target setting and skills for learning; problem solving; language and communication.

2. Describe yourself - using a method of your choice (paper, film conversation with a partner), try to explain who you are. You should think about background, ambitions and words which describe you. Record your evidence.

3. Objects that represent your life - bring in three objects which represent who you are. Discuss with a partner or a group what they represent and why you have brought them.

4. Research a topic that interests you - use the internet, library, newspaper or other source to find out information about a subject of your choice. Present the information in an interesting or original way.

5. Think about leadership skills and communicate to a group what it takes to be a good leader. Take some examples of famous leaders and, as a group, discuss what made them good or bad. How do you compare?

6. On your own or as a group draw a mind map on respect, showing what it means and examples of when it is and is not shown. Compare examples with others.

7. Find a current topic which interests you and hold a group debate, looking at all sides of the subject. Record your outcomes about this and consider how a good discussion works.

8. Hold a debate or role-play a situation on trust or the lack of it. Find and record examples of each in a suitable way.

9. Which are the objects in your life which inspire you? Find examples from home or other and be prepared to explain to a partner or a group the reasons behind your choice.

## 2. Skills for employability (1 credit = 10 hours)

1. Discuss career options with other people in your group. Which areas of work would you like to follow and what qualifications or skills do you need to get there?

2. Things I'm good at / could do better - make a list of things which you are already good at. This can be academic subjects but should also consider other skills which you have. Then list things which you would like to improve in the short and long term. Keep a record of your thoughts.

3. Use a careers resource, either on-line or paper-based, to help you find out more about jobs which you would like to follow. Make a list of the key requirements.

4. Create an individual career plan, showing your current position and the steps to getting to your chosen job.

5. Update your CV by drafting and redrafting the document. Liaise with your tutor to ensure it is both accurate and appropriate. Compare yours with somebody else's.

6. Visit a sixth form or FE centre which you would like to go to. Collect information about the centre and the courses which they run and annotate the key points for your going there.

7. Hold an equal opportunities discussion looking at different aspects such as gender, country of origin and disability awareness. Prepare for this in advance.

8. Investigate trends in the labour market and try to identify where the best opportunities are for work in the future. Find out what sort of skills and qualifications are needed and how to get them. Create a poster or other platform to show this information.

9. Practise completing real job applications. Reflect with a partner on the accuracy of your application and decide whether you would employ them on their application.

10. Write a letter of application for either a real or imaginary job. Compare with a partner on the accuracy of your letter as well as checking other details with your tutor.

11. Source job vacancies on-line, in a paper or at the job centre. Make a list of ten jobs which interest you and place them in rank order, explaining why.

12. Invite an employer to come to your centre and hold a question and answer session. Reflect on what you learned afterwards.

13. Prepare for and take part in a mock interview or presentation to a group. Record the evidence on film and discuss your thoughts with others.

14. Prepare questions and role-play a part on an interview panel. Record the evidence as above.

## 3. Skills through volunteering (1 credit = 10 hours)

Volunteer for a minimum of ten hours in one of the following areas, and log the time completed:

- sports trainer;
- church role;
- charity shop;
- old people's home;
- voluntary work experience;
- mentoring young people;
- other agreed role.

# The WEA: a discussion essay

**Greg Coyne** ***looks at the possibility of developing a radical, action learning-oriented educational approach in the Workers' Educational Association to deal with old challenges in new times***

This short essay attempts to open a discussion about reinvigorating WEA education in the challenging social, economic and political circumstances in which we currently find ourselves. It arose out of work I was conducting for my own research, out of the discussions leading to piloting new approaches to our classes in the North West Region and out of the context of New Look, the WEA's project to re-shape and reorganise the Association to enable it to survive and thrive in the difficult times ahead. It seeks to roughly sketch a background with which we are all familiar and to suggest that it is giving us profound consequences which necessitate a more considered educational response than we have given hitherto. It goes on to posit an action learning approach to education that could allow the WEA to make a unique and distinctive approach to adult education in the 21st century, rebuilding the WEA as an educational movement as we do so. It argues that such an approach would provide a more exciting, compelling educational programme and perhaps more importantly would enable a more significant impact upon the communities in which we live and work. It is essentially about the role of adult education in supporting and informing a flourishing democratic re-engagement which was after all one of the key reasons for establishing the WEA in the first place.

Since the collapse of the post war consensus with the rise of Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s, the shape of Britain has been changing. Thatcher oversaw a steep rise in inequality with the poor and working class incomes becoming significantly less as a proportion of wealthy incomes. This is a process which has continued or been maintained under Major, Blair and Brown. Many observers have linked this phenomenon with the success of neo-liberal economics globally. Particular approaches to economic development have been adopted, impressed upon countries or through economic or military means, forced upon countries. Whilst they have often been successful in creating new local elites of the wealthy, concentrating a country's resources in fewer and fewer people, they have also and overwhelmingly seen the penetration of a country's life by large global enterprises that control ever greater concentrations of the national fabric. The rise of the neo-liberal project is widely documented and is not discussed in any detail here. But for further information see in particular George, 2008.)

Economic and social developments have seen parallel changes in education. This is characterised by a mantra in the developed world about developing education to allow populations to compete in the global knowledge economy so that countries can develop high skill, high wage employment to replace the manufacturing and other jobs that have been stripped and moved to low wage economies. The emphasis is on personal commitment, effectiveness, competence, achievement and success. In order to attain this, there has been a concentration upon basic subjects like English and maths, less emphasis on other activities such as creative subjects, humanities or PE and the development of a rote and drill style framework to get students through whatever test or accreditation they are currently studying for. Achievements have risen and we are told about the successes of these

approaches. (Although there are many interesting critiques – see 23 Things You Didn't Know about Capitalism, 'Thing seventeen: more education in itself is not going to make a country richer' [Chang 2011] or see Wolf, 2002, or Coffield 1999, or Brown and Lauder, 1996.)

However there is continued anecdotal evidence that whilst achievement rates have risen, many features of a broad education are in decline. It is perfectly possible now to study English literature at GCSE without actually reading the set books. I have come across schools where the adult numeracy tests are used with under-performing maths students in order that they have a level 2 qualification in maths. This is used because the young people can take the multiple choice exam over and over again until they pass. Modularised study appears to have led in some cases to an approach that crams for the module exam or assignment and is then ignored. Students cover the set ground for the subject but the modularisation, or rather the way that it is approached, appears to leave some students unable to link the various modules together in an overall grasp of the subject. This modularisation of learning reflects, at its root, a commodification of education that reinforces 'surface learning' approaches at the expense of the development of 'deep', reflective and critical learning techniques.

Vocational education is often even worse. Most vocational education for most young people is concentrated on high volume, low skill, vocational areas such as hairdressing, beauty, retail and social care. The structure of these courses is often mind-bogglingly boring and patronising to the people involved. The educational approach is, in my view, very questionable, concentrating as it does on accrediting competence with too little emphasis on theoretical or underpinning knowledge and no wider contexts discussed. Serious skills-based courses such as engineering vocational qualifications have astonishingly few enrolments per year compared to the high volume subjects. There is supposed to be equivalence between level 2 vocational courses and the achievement of five GCSEs. I can find nobody who seriously believes that a Full Level 2 in Controlling Parking Operations or in Nail Technology (both of these qualifications exist) is equivalent to the breadth of study contained in five GCSEs. Essentially, and contrary to the assertion about a high skills economy, we are actually preparing masses of young people to work in and accept low paid, low skilled, insecure employment in the service sector rather than the knowledge economy.

We can see this all around us. In Britain alone, the fifth or sixth richest nation on earth, our cities and our rural areas are characterised by poverty. We have not seen the replacement of lost jobs by high skill, high wage employment. Instead we see whole areas that are run down and desperate. In the worst of these areas, poverty ghettos, the cycles of deprivation place usually insuperable barriers in the way of people escaping. Those who do manage to succeed at school and achieve good results and even university education are not guaranteed success. In the WEA alone, our offices have significant numbers of employees with degree level qualifications occupying jobs that in previous years were undertaken by staff with A-levels or GCSEs. The change is not because our jobs have become significantly more demanding, it is because the promise of a high skill, knowledge economy does not exist and there is fierce competition for any job. In the UK the median wage is below £22,000 per year. Over half of all wage earners earn less than this amount. At a societal level, this is reflected in a 300 per cent decline in social mobility since 1979 (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

The situation is set to get dramatically worse as the ConDem Coalition mounts a massive attack on the remains of the welfare state, with large cuts to benefits, pensions and public sector employment.

In this context we need to consider how the WEA responds educationally. There are a number of challenges we have to face:

- 1. The ongoing reduction of funding for adult and community learning.
- 2. The consequent reduction in the number of learning opportunities for adults.
- 3. The high variability in the standard and depth of the educational skills of adults, with major concerns that current school education approaches are creating new groups of school leavers whose knowledge base is too shallow.
- 4. That poor initial education is concentrated on the most disadvantaged.
- 5. That university education will be increasingly tied to wealth.
- 6. That the emphasis of universities is upon younger entrants.
- 7. That universities have progressively withdrawn from community learning, closing extra mural departments.
- 8. That academic provision by colleges and local authorities for adults, leading for example to A-levels, has declined significantly.
- 9. That our own programmes are often too concentrated on leisure interests and that we are not contributing enough to education for change.
- 10. That in reality there are very few avenues for serious study available to anybody except the privileged.

- 11. Following collapse of much of the left 20 years ago, political education is virtually non-existent. Even in major political parties like the Labour Party, there are few opportunities for significant political and social education. Even here education has been replaced by competence training in operating political machinery, the media and electoral processes etc.
- 12. This has the consequence that those independent-minded individuals from working-class backgrounds who have not progressed to university but who wish to understand and develop a critique of their situation have virtually no access to formal educational resources to support them in doing so.
- 13. Given the strength and breadth of the British intellectual tradition, leaving aside the European and global traditions, it is an appalling indictment of the educational system of such a rich and advanced country that it has virtually withdrawn from critical education for adults.
- 14. While access to information, through the internet for example, is exceptional, there is a widespread decline in community social life where individuals can discuss what they may know.
- 15. Communication of everything but the face-to-face kind is often controlled by large corporate interests. They are often supplying a diet of low-brow pulp culture which reinforces a range of stereotypical views.

Over one hundred years ago, in a period of much stronger political ferment, a small educational initiative called the Working Men's Educational Association was formed to address a situation where working people were excluded from study. Nearly one hundred and ten years later the WEA faces a situation that is worse. The time has come to act.

But we cannot do this with an approach that follows the same educational methods that seem to be failing in schools. We need to find new ways that enthuse, inspire and motivate our students and teachers. There is no need, however, to invent everything from scratch, rather we need to begin to look outside the confines of the standards discussion that has constrained the discourse in the last twenty years. The need to respond to Ofsted, the professionalisation of adult teachers, the emphasis on individual learning, achievement and success rates, have confined our thinking. Fortunately there is a rich literature and experience in adult learning stretching back for a hundred years, with much current discussion and debate, although all too frequently confined to a narrow higher education focus. As the mainstream provider of adult and community learning in Britain, it is surely our role to re-invigorate and if necessary rebuild an adult education practice that can address the education challenges that I have outlined.

There is a need to think about how adults learn best, why collective and collaborative learning is crucial to successful learning, how we encourage curiosity, both natural and epistemological, how we make our classrooms socially aware, developing wider knowledge, how we build confidence and inspire people to tackle issues courageously and honestly, how we make our students confident to take action, to shift their role from students to educators in their own right. These are exciting, liberating, motivating discussions which need to develop across the Association. I try to outline below some thinking on how this might move from discussion to practice in our courses.

Essentially we need to build a back-to-the-future approach where WEA classes move from passive instruction to 'Action Learning'. Action learning programmes are popular educational techniques that build interest and commitment by encouraging participants to develop their own confidence and skills. Typically they build upon a range of themes, encouraging people to have a go at information-seeking and action for themselves. Action learning has always been a part of our best classes but it needs to become the standard if we are to develop an informed and active citizenry.

Our Community Action Learning programmes must encourage and enable learners to identify key issues that affect them and their communities at local and 'global' levels, to develop simple but robust approaches to researching those issues, to develop understandings of the contexts that surround them, to produce first-step plans that support individual and collective action, to put plans into action and finally to take time to review and reflect on the process, identifying next steps and progression routes.

In the past the WEA sought to do this in classes dedicated to social science and political economy. In the main these classes no longer exist in WEA provision and we are not facing significant demand for their re-establishment. We do therefore need to consider how we can approach this problem given our current range of provision. In my view we do not need to change the classes we are offering, we simply need to change our approach to how we teach and learn within them.

Our first change must be about how we conceive of education. It is first and foremost a social process where human-beings learn off and with each other. The WEA has been drawn too far into a default mindset in education and we need to lead a questioning of this and a reassertion of our belief in a shared process where teaching and learning is shared by student and teacher alike and not simply

a process where the expertise of the teacher is passed to the passive student, without, as the saying goes, 'passing through the brains of either'. The WEA needs to consider the balance of teaching and learning, ensuring that the emphasis is shifted from the 'sage on the stage' towards the 'guide at the side'.

It is worth noting by the way that in this discussion I am increasingly dropping the word 'learner', which seems to me to have so many patronising connotations compared to the word 'student'.

Our second change must be to re-establish a critical pedagogy in our classrooms, making our classrooms socially aware spaces, not simply social spaces. This does not mean that we are moving our courses into a radical political project but rather that we are encouraging our students to engage in a more deeply reflective approach to learning, drawing upon knowledge bases that challenge and confound as well as confirm our existing experience. It is critical pedagogy in the sense that it develops critical thinking but not in the sense that it necessarily develops a particular political project or indeed any political project. It is about enabling our students and ourselves to re-examine our knowledge so that they consciously determine what it is they wish to think rather than simply acquiring the thinking of the most strident voices in our environment.

This could be achieved by building an action research approach to our learning in all of our classes. Action research in a classic academic sense is a research process where the participants are active subjects in the study, framing, conducting and analysing the research. Often this is with the aim of assisting a change process and often with a socially critical agenda. Many students will, of course, not start with the objective of conducting action research. Indeed, at times a research approach may appear inimical with the aims of the course. I nevertheless think that this is essentially a process that could usefully be used in WEA classes. In fact it is difficult to conceive of a situation where active research by students would not be a useful activity in a WEA course. It is such an obvious teaching approach that I contend that it should usually be the most important teaching approach in our classes. That is because it promotes active learning, it undermines the process of receiving pearls of wisdom from the teacher, it promotes new understandings, it encourages the students to take action, eg if they have to seek views from community members or leaders. It is seldom what the teacher or the student expects and therefore helps a student challenge their own perceptions. It provides information to structure and inform the class and finally it turns the student into a teacher as they report information they have uncovered to the class, their tutor, their family and community.

We should seek to do this in all of our classes. One idea that we have been discussing for practical classes, for example, is to set an activity which asks students in all such classes to find out where the materials for the class come from and what journey they have been on to arrive at our classes. An example in Manchester was of flower arranging classes, where the flowers had been imported from Africa to UK Markets. An obvious question is why? And follow-on questions are: what implication does this have for African and UK farming and economies?; why grow flowers and not food? In this way we are introducing a critical discussion into understanding the subject of study.

Another idea was to use a theme. Following the successful Spirit Level lecture in Manchester (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010) we have introduced the theme of inequality into one of our art classes and asked the students to research inequality in their area and use this as the basis for their art works. In yet another class we have used history through utilising museums and cultural institutions to introduce the discussion themes. In this case we have used historical banners in the Working-Class History and Co-operative Museums to inspire our sewing classes to make modern banners. Inevitably, in the examination of what has gone before the students and teachers discuss the themes and motifs of the earlier age and why they were represented on their banners. The links, parallels and continuities as well as the critical differences resulting from changed historical context can then be emphasised and explored. What was the response then? What is to be done now?

Our third change must be to introduce broader contexts into the class discussions as the key understanding tool for WEA classes. Basically the job of tutors is to help students link their new knowledge to other broader contexts such as why their subjects of study or issues arising from the research have local relevance and impact. How do regional, national and international influences, constraints and opportunities impact upon the discussion? Questions such as: what power relations are at work?; which individuals and groups would gain or lose by the current or any potential changed situation?; how do the media influence the issues and report them?; what political responses are happening or could be developed?

The idea here is to purposefully set about broadening the discussion frame for our students and teachers. It is about helping to challenge assumptions and stereotypes; it must be reinforced

by asking students to find out about things that they say, constantly building upon our research, but always suggesting new elements or considerations. In a garment-making class in Rochdale, students of Pakistani backgrounds were asked to consider why their materials were originating from Pakistan when Rochdale had once been at the heart of a global rag trade business. What were the forces that had brought about this change and, given their cultural heritage, what did they know of the realities of the new nexus of the global rag trade in Asian countries? How did their knowledge compare with mainstream representations of the flight of manufacturing to low wage economies? What racist underpinnings fuelled such representations?

Alongside context it is important that individuals and groups become more conscious of the processes by which personal agency becomes narrowly defined and restricted. The notion of curiosity is helpful here in the sense that it has been successfully built into Narrative Approaches and Constructive Approaches to learning and change in more radical approaches to social care and community work. The two approaches (Community Action Learning and Constructive Approaches) are complementary and could easily be accommodated in a Community Action Learning Programme.

It is worth noting, as a tangential point to this discussion but one, nevertheless, that if we are to change the WEA's approach, we must return to. We need a more regular, consistent and ongoing examination of educational theory in the WEA. We have become practitioners without theory. Yet there is much to consider, discuss and learn from both historical and contemporary theory of how adults learn. We are not routinely discussing educational ideas from the likes of Dewey, Freire, Piaget, or educational movements like social constructivism or related theoretical models from current debates in post modernism, discourse theory, linguistics and critical theory. The evidence in the North West is that adult educators love to talk about their passion for learning and how it works. It is surely self-evident that a great educational movement like the WEA should have a constant and ongoing discussion about the nature of education at its heart. The WEA does have many educational staff that are familiar with some or all of these discussions. Yet even in our teacher training they are seldom featured. If we are to become more socially purposeful we cannot afford to miss out on the understandings that such study promotes.

Our fourth change is to develop an active response to our study by undertaking as a class an activity or action. In my view this active element is possibly the key learning tool for WEA classes since it has the potential to solidify learning and give experiences which make lasting changes for the students. They are moving from being passive to active citizens, and this move to activity presents a dramatic climax to the learning journey. During the course, the growing confidence of students in discussion, in representing their views and in the research that informs them, facilitates the desire to act. The process of working, discussing and changing together builds a cohesive class, and this growing confidence in the class group gives support to act. If the class has gone well then issues have been explored and can be acted upon. Taking action consolidates the learning and builds new opportunities and avenues to explore.

This genuine focus on 'action learning' activity is the key to making a difference in local communities; it can be the distinctive feature of WEA classes of the future and will represent a vital educational and social statement at a time when adult learning can no longer hide behind conformity in the hope of 'clinging on'. For the successful curriculum of the future, doing nothing should not really be an option for the student. The point of this part of the course is to encourage and enable people to take a first step in engaging at community level, however modest that may be. The students and teacher work together to create or change something relating to their area of study and the key issues they have researched and understood during the course.

This could take any number of forms, but for example we are thinking that the Art course, concentrating on inequality, might make a presentation of their course art works and the thinking behind it to their local councillors. It is likely that many of the students will never have formally met their political representatives before and it is likely that the councillors will never have come across the issues developed in the Spirit Level. A citizenship education therefore takes place in both directions. In the flower-arranging course it may be that students undertake an activity that raises awareness of the use of flower arrangements, perhaps even using floral arrangements to tell the story, in local churches, mosques and other places of worship. The aim might be to raise awareness of the flower economy and how worship patterns unwittingly help maintain it. A secondary aim might be to establish contact with the flower growing areas and the local places of worship to establish the possibility of a discursive exchange and even practical solidarity between the two areas. In the banner-making sewing class we could envisage the banner getting a debut on a practical demonstration around one of the issues for the course. A banner is made to be seen. The students could ensure that it is seen and that its message is put to use.

Finally there is a need to draw out and draw on

the lessons of the research, the course work, the discussion and the activities, by reviewing, reflecting and refining, deciding how the group should continue and develop and say how they would approach things differently. In essence, WEA classes need to learn from their practice. It is a truism that even empowered groups and individuals never get it right all of the time. We all make mistakes. There are unpredicted reactions or consequences, and so our activities and actions need to be reviewed. This rounding up and reflecting on experience provides for a genuine learning cycle that is never-ending because the reflection provides fresh inputs for a new cycle of questions, research, context, activity, action and review exercises.

The aim, of course, is to turn all WEA courses into courses that, as a by-product of their study, promote active citizenship and community involvement. This approach recognises that the WEA will never simply run a programme of courses that provide social and political awareness, it would be too restrictive, too boring and would not recruit students. This approach brings the social and political into whatever we teach and develops an emancipatory, involved style of learning that fits with our ethos and mission. It also lays the ground for a significant return to our historical mission of using voluntary activity to build a broader education. This is now a significant imperative given the withdrawal of adult learning from many sections of the community, through cuts, higher fees and changes to types and patterns of provision.

Peter Caldwell, WEA Director for West Midlands Region, speculated during discussions of the WEA response to the emerging cuts agenda that the WEA might only be able to offer individual students a limited entitlement to study for perhaps two or three years. If this were the case then this empowering education could lead to students establishing their own study circles using this educational approach, once again with the aim of study for activity, not passivity.

This would build on discussions that have been taking place across the Association on how we build from the success of the Learning Revolution project, developing a widespread study circle approach that would surround our main programmes. The educational approach and the emphasis on activity would distinguish WEA circles from U3A for example. Our organisation would need to develop a significant network support role for encouraging, maintaining and developing study circles and study circle leaders. Building once again on our recent projects concerning the training of Learning Champions, our networks could begin to provide encouragement for study circle leaders to become Community Learning Champions and to begin to provide an impetus and leadership to the existing networks that were established during the projects.

Obviously these projects provide continuing study for our students, but they do more. They provide the space for excluded communities to begin to discuss what is happening to them, they stimulate and encourage students to find out more about the issues affecting these communities in detail and they begin to explore ideas, long-standing and new, about how they might go about changing the situation. It also encourages people to identify, critically evaluate and connect with existing community groups and movements operating locally and beyond. The activity elements of our courses and study circles, then, give people direct experience of what it is to *take action*; a vital step forward and the basis for more coherent, informed and considered approaches to social change in the future. It would not be difficult to imagine, for example, that such groups may then start to make demands about the need for greater support for community education. In Manchester, for example, the University has withdrawn extra-mural provision, wishing to concentrate on high standard young undergraduates. This organisation occupies huge slices of city centre real estate. Despite the cuts, it has huge resources at its disposal, yet it appears to have no intention of deploying any of them in support of the adult citizens of the city or the region. Why should this be acceptable and why shouldn't WEA groups campaign and exert pressure to persuade the University that the impoverished communities that live just a stone's throw from its city centre buildings also deserve university-level educational support? Similar arguments could also be made about local authorities and other public bodies.

Once upon a time, such activities were the very lifeblood of the WEA.

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# The Plebs League in the North East

**Rob Turnbull** ***explains the background to his forthcoming book, titled Their Swords Shall Not Rust***

For the last two years I have been a researcher on the North East Labour History 'Mapping Popular Politics' project. This has been a two year National Lottery-funded project which aims to uncover the often hidden history of the North East of England. My area of research has been the Plebs League in the North East, and I am currently writing a book on the subject entitled *Their Swords Shall Not Rust*, which will be finished in 2014.

If South Wales was the cradle of the Plebs League, the North East can be said to have been its kindergarten. Many of the independent working-class education (IWCE) activists in the North East went on to achieve national prominence in a number of fields, for example Will Lawther in the NUM and the novelist Harold Heslop, whose autobiography *Out of the Old Earth* is an essential read.

Sadly, many of the leading IWCE activists in the North East are all but forgotten, and it has often been an uphill task to piece together their story. History remembers Ebby Edwards, a prominent figure in the Northumberland Miners Association and later briefly MP for Wansbeck, as well as Jimmy Stewart, a baker from Wallsend who was enough of a troublemaker to come to the attention of the Special Branch in 1919. Other Plebs League activists in the region included the prominent syndicalist George Harvey, author of a book entitled *Industrial Unionism* which was published in 1917.

The North East was a latecomer to IWCE, as the area appears to have been somewhat of a WEA stronghold. It was not until 1916 that Newcastle had its own Labour College, but from my research it would appear that there had been outreach classes running for several years prior to this, principally in the Ashington area, where the efforts of a small number of IWCE supporters began to bear fruit. After 1916, IWCE begins to take off in the area, especially around Chopwell, where the influence of Will Lawther can be clearly seen.

Much of my research is on-going, and I am making good use of the Working-Class Movement Library as they have a full print run of *Plebs Magazine* which has proved invaluable. Prior to 1919 the journals are difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, and it is simply a case of toiling away in places such as the Northumberland Archives at Woodburn or the Durham Record Office.

I have taken my narrative up to 1926, as the general strike seems to be a good point on which to end. 1926 saw the winding up of the original Plebs League and its incorporation into the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). 1926 also proved to be the final blow for the Central Labour College itself, as it closed in 1929. I hope to be able to return to the period post 1926 at a later date.


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# Noah Ablett 1883-1935: an agitator to the end

**Rob Turnbull**

A comrade once remarked to me with a certain degree of irony that the left just mouth off about class war while the Tories actually practice it. He had a point. In 2013 after more than two years of incessant and unrelenting class war it is becoming clear that the ruling class under the thumb of international capital are intent on turning the screw still further. Where should socialists turn to for inspiration? What tools can we use in our struggle? Part of the answer may lie in an older radical tradition exemplified by Noah Ablett and the causes he espoused.

Noah Ablett (1883-1935) was one of the defining figures of the British left in the first half of the twentieth century. A working miner, syndicalist teacher, scholar and autodidact, steeped in classical Marxism, and the language of class war, part author of *The Miners' Next Step*, and a man who was instrumental in the founding of the Plebs League, Ablett died in October 1935 following a long battle with cancer.

A working miner for the majority of his life, his descent into alcoholism and subsequent death at 52 robbed the labour movement of one of its most influential and charismatic figures at a time when his influence should have been most keenly felt. Such was his influence that Will Lawther referred to Ablett as '[t]he greatest pre-war Marxist' and yet today his influence is all but forgotten.

Ablett's legacy rests on his uncompromising attitude to class conflict, which was personified in his rejection of the moderate policies of the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF) under William Abraham (or 'Mabon'), a stance which led to the formation of the Unofficial Reform Committee and publication of *The Miners' Next Step* in 1912, a document which became a landmark within the labour movement for its embrace of syndicalism and its rejection of consensus politics following the Cambrian Combine strike of 1910.

Ablett, who had been heavily influenced by the American socialist writer Daniel De Leon, was self-educated, having read Marx and other socialist writers whose works had been imported into Britain through the publisher Charles Kerr of Chicago. In 1907, he won a scholarship to Ruskin College in Oxford, via the SWMF.

It was at Ruskin that Ablett began leading unofficial classes in Marxist history, philosophy and economics. The students at Ruskin, many of them also influenced by De Leon, and the personality of men such as Tom Mann, were asked to end their unofficial classes. They refused, and a stand-off ensued which led to the principal, Dennis Hird, being sacked. The students formed what became known as the Plebs League after De Leon's *Two Pages from Roman History*.

Hird, who had supported the students, went on to become principal of the Central Labour College, which had as its motto: 'Educate, Agitate, Organise', the main aim of the college being to counter what was perceived to be the bourgeois ideology of mainstream education as it was being taught by the WEA at that time. The movement for independent working-class education or IWCE which grew out of the Plebs League is summed up in the first issue of their magazine *Plebs*: 'We want neither your crumbs nor your condescension, your guidance nor your glamour, your tuition nor your tradition. We have our own historic way to follow, our own salvation to achieve, and by this sign we shall conquer.'

The motto of the Plebs League may well serve as a fitting memorial to Ablett's life and career. The ideas for which he fought, most notably in the field of education, are ideas that are just as relevant today. At a time of mass unemployment and lack of educational opportunities for young people, it is as well to remind ourselves that education is a right and not a privilege. Ablett was just one of many young men who were prepared to bring capitalism to its knees in pursuit of a better world. History records Ness Edwards, A. J. Cook and Nye Bevan, yet somehow Ablett stands alone in that time of industrial and social turmoil as an agitator and educator.

# Gramsci's balance sheet of IWCE

***We print here an article based on a talk given by* Colin Waugh *at the IWCE Network meeting held at Northern College, near Barnsley, on 24 November 2012***

The 1909 'strike' (actually a boycott of specific lectures) by trade union-sponsored students at Ruskin College, in Oxford but not part of the university, is, to my knowledge, unique. As I tried to show in my 2009 pamphlet *'Plebs': The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*, these students, mainly mineworkers and railway-workers - in short, core members of the working class - took on the ruling class, in the shape of an alliance between the Oxford University Extension Delegacy and the Workers' Educational Association, over the nature of adult education. Was it to be, as these organisations hoped, a means for producing a compliant layer amongst working-class activists, and thereby for blunting the edge of class struggle? Or was it to be a means by which workers could pursue that struggle more effectively? In the lead-up to the 'strike', the students, with former students, organised the League of the 'Plebs', and began to put in place a national structure of 'labour colleges' (ie part time classes in working-class heartlands), while after it they set up the Central Labour College (in effect an institution for training tutors for those classes) and a publications structure. This alternative and oppositional system of what they called 'independent working-class education' (IWCE) grew until the mid 1920s, and elements of it survived until 1964.

However, despite the uniqueness of the Ruskin 'strike' and its aftermath, there emerged in the period between the late 1880s and late 1920s several other traditions of working-class collective self-education. In the UK, for example, at least five other traditions developed, only some of which contributed to the Plebs League.

First, there were the classes in Marxist economics conducted informally within the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), as described for example by Tommy Jackson in his autobiography *Solo Trumpet*. The initiator and main practitioner of this approach was the bricklayer and technical education instructor Jack Fitzgerald. (When he was expelled from the SDF in 1904 Fitzgerald continued these classes within the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB). There are grounds for thinking that this expulsion took place because the group around the SDF leader, H. M. Hyndman, saw these classes as a place where discussion could take place amongst ordinary members and where, therefore, Hyndman's authority might be questioned.) Secondly, there was a tradition stemming from the Clarion movement initiated by the former factory-worker Robert Blatchford. The most influential novel of working-class life in English, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, written by the painter and decorator Robert Tressell, can be read also as a study of these first two forms of working-class self-education. Thirdly, the Socialist Labour Party group, formed in Edinburgh by, among others, the carter and refuse collector James Connolly, had a distinctive teaching and learning method which is described in Tom Bell's *Pioneering Days* and which was probably devised by the engineering worker and university lab technician George Yates. (This tradition did contribute directly to the Plebs League.) Fourthly in Glasgow there was the tradition of - originally factory gate - economics teaching initiated by the schoolteacher John MacLean, which developed into the Scottish Labour College. Fifth, among garment workers and similar trades in the East of London, the majority of whom were Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, there was a tradition of which the single most influential figure was the German anarchist print-worker and bookbinder Rudolf Rocker. Like the Plebs League, then, all these movements were initiated and/or built by people who themselves were - or had recently been - workers.

In other European countries too there emerged during this period several different forms of

independent adult education for working-class activists, though here people from other classes who had sincerely dedicated themselves to the workers' cause tended to play a more influential part. In France, for example, the *Bourses de Travail* that developed under syndicalist influence from the 1890s had a strong educational dimension which is described by their main organiser, the journalist Fernand Pelloutier in his history of that movement. In Germany, the SPD conducted a programme of activities similar to that of the Clarion movement, as well as systematic classes for union officers, and also, from 1906, the political school in which, for instance, Rosa Luxemburg gave lectures on economics. In Italy during the ten years following the execution in 1909 of the Spanish anarchist and child-educator Francisco Ferrer there existed in Turin an anarchist adult education group called the *Circolo di Studi Sociali Francisco Ferrer* (Ferrer Circle). Or again, in the aftermath of the 1905-07 revolution in Russia a group of socialist intellectuals around Aleksandr Bogdanov set up in 1909, initially in Capri, a school for exiled Russian workers, while another was started by Lenin near Paris in 1910.

By 1930, however, with certain exceptions, this powerful impulse towards class-conscious working-class collective self-education had become much weaker. In Britain most of the traditions that developed from 1890s onwards decayed after 1926. The Central Labour College, for example, closed in 1929. And in the period between 1930 and now, few if any new forms of fully independent provision have developed. In particular, during the period of militant labour struggles between about 1966 and 1985 no education movement comparable to the Plebs League grew up. There were several initiatives that might have fulfilled this role - for example the Socialist Education Centres which Ralph Miliband attempted to set up in 1965, the day-release schemes for mineworkers initiated in the early 1950s by Bert Wynne, and run eventually through the extramural departments of Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds Universities, the work of E.P. Thompson with WEA students in Yorkshire, from which *The Making of the English Working Class* in part arose, and History Workshop, founded by Raphael Samuel and others in 1966. But none of these were initiated, built or funded purely by industrial workers themselves in the way that the Plebs League had been.

If we today want a model of valid independent working-class education which will help us to rebuild this tradition, we have, therefore, to look back to that earlier period, and in particular to find out whether anyone who had been actively involved in it drew up as it was ending a critical analysis of what it had and had not achieved.

Several of those who would have been best qualified for this were unable to do so. For example, Pelloutier died of tuberculosis in 1901, and Tressell of the same illness in 1911. Connolly was executed in 1916, Luxemburg was murdered in 1919, and MacLean, broken by imprisonment, died in 1923. Bogdanov died, possibly by his own hand, in 1928, and Fitzgerald in 1929. Yates dropped out of the movement in 1904, and two key figures in the CLC, George Sims and Will Craik became involved in a corruption scandal there in the 1920s. On top of this, Noah Ablett, the person arguably most qualified to draw up such a balance sheet for the Plebs League, to my knowledge never did so, dying in 1935 of cancer compounded by alcoholism. Of course there may still be undiscovered papers, and there are some articles and responses in *Plebs Magazine*, which continued till the 1960s. There are also comments made later by prominent Communist Party members such as Tom Bell and Arthur Horner. However, none of these amount to a systematic analysis.

Nevertheless something close to a balance sheet of IWCE in its classic period does exist, within a document that is readily available and in theory well-known to many students of socialist thought. This document was written in the early 1930s by Antonio Gramsci, and now forms part of his *Prison Notebooks* (also available in David Forgacs [ed.], *A Gramsci Reader. Selected Writings 1916-1935*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1999, pp 324-343, under the title 'Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture. 1. Some preliminary reference points'.

Gramsci, was well, even perhaps uniquely, qualified to draw up such an analysis. First, although not born into the working-class nor a worker in adult life, he had been a child labourer, in that at the age of eleven, because of his father's imprisonment he was taken out of school and afterwards worked for nearly three years, usually for six and a half days a week, moving ledgers about in a land registry, often going without a meal for days on end, to help support his family. Secondly he was, in his own terms, a 'traditional intellectual' - specifically someone who, in choosing to become a Socialist Party journalist, threw up the virtual certainty of a career as a professor of linguistics. Thirdly, he was also an autodidact - because, when he did eventually return to school, he had to claw his way back into study by his own efforts, such that at the age of 20 he was still at school. Fourthly, he was influenced by - or at least able to view at first hand - all the main leftwing political tendencies of the period, including petty bourgeois nationalism, reformist socialism, Second International-style Marxism, Bolshevism, syndicalism, anarchism, and

centrism (in Italian terms, Maximalism). Fifth, he had played a prominent role in big industrial struggles in the period 1919-20, including in relation to the general strike in Turin in April 1920 and the factory occupations across much of Italy in September of that year. In addition, as general secretary of the Communist Party of Italy from 1924 he had to coordinate the struggle against fascism. Sixth, he was conversant with a tradition of philosophical thought - the Italian tradition stretching back through Benedetto Croce, Antonio Labriola, Bertrando Spaventa, Giambattista Vico and Giordano Bruno - which enabled him to be extremely independent-minded and to think in a dialectical fashion. (He was influenced also in this respect by contemporary French commentators, especially Georges Sorel, Henri Bergson and Charles Peguy.) Seventh, at every stage in his political life, including during the early stages of his imprisonment, he had tried to set up and conduct forms of IWCE. Finally, his imprisonment cut him off from political activity, including from reading and writing the documents, and participating in the spoken exchanges essential to that activity, such that virtually the only course open to him was to analyse the past.

However, to recognise that key sections of the notes made by Gramsci in prison are about what in Britain was called IWCE, and to understand what those notes say, we need to put aside nearly all of the conventional views about his thinking, in particular that he originated the concept of 'hegemony', that he advocated the production of 'organic intellectuals', and that he proposed to substitute cultural permeation for class struggle.

First, on hegemony: the idea that industrial workers must lead other subject groups and classes in a broad movement aimed at socialist revolution was at least as old as the first Marxist writings by Gyorgy Plekhanov in the early 1880s. In addition, the related idea that the capitalist class rules through, amongst other things, control over the production of ideas is at least as old as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). Secondly, on 'organic intellectuals': Gramsci neither pointed to nor advocated the formation of a distinct sociological category that could be so called. Thirdly, there is no evidence that he regarded Fabian-style permeation of the ruling class, or of any other classes, by socialist ideas, habits of thinking or cultural values, as a substitute for the taking of state power by the working class.

The discussion of IWCE by Gramsci in his prison notebooks centres on his view of the Popular University in Turin.

The first popular universities were started in France in the 1890s. The impulse behind them was similar to that behind university extension and the WEA here. That is, a section of the ruling class aimed by this means to draw to their side workers and, on the continent, peasants, who might otherwise develop as leaders of leftwing movements. They spread rapidly through France, Spain and Italy. In several places, anarchists became involved in their running. (In Italy, for instance, between 1901 and 1918 the anarchist Luigi Molinari edited the paper *Universita Popolare* which coordinated the overall work of these institutions. Parts of their curricula, especially in small towns, were focused on knowledge areas like agronomy that would be of interest to peasant proprietors. They tended to be dominated by positivist approaches to knowledge. As with university extension and similar movements here, middle class people rapidly came to form a majority of their students.

Gramsci had made dismissive comments about the Popular University in Turin in several earlier writings, and had also written one longer and deeper comment in late 1916 ('The Popular University' in *A Gramsci Reader*, pp 64-67). In the note made in prison, however, he stressed that there was a genuine and powerful appetite amongst working-class and other subject class adults for what the Popular University claimed to provide. But what it actually provided did not, in his opinion, begin to meet this demand. Its curriculum was, he alleged, a mishmash of items lifted from mainstream university course content, without underlying principles or structures that would make these items of value to people who had not reached them through the usual educational route. In particular - and this is explained most clearly in his 1916 article, they asserted ideas about the world without taking the students through the processes of intellectual exchange and struggle through which those ideas had been produced. In short, unlike practice in the strongest areas of mainstream university teaching, they gave no sense of the history of these ideas. Gramsci ascribed these shortcomings to the dominance exercised over Popular University teaching by traditional intellectuals with a positivist standpoint. Further, he maintained that this dominance resulted from the fact that the best Italian thinkers of the day - those influenced by the ideas of Benedetto Croce (referred to by Gramsci as 'immanentists') - stood aloof from such popular educational initiatives. He said of the Turin Popular University that: 'One got the impression that it was very like the first contacts between English merchants and the negroes of Africa. Trashy baubles were exchanged for nuggets of gold.'

However, Gramsci then went on to discuss the characteristics that a valid Popular University would need to possess. In so doing, he set out in a few pages an entire conception of working-class and

socialist self-organisation for ideological struggle. This discussion was part of a broader reflection on the ideas of both Marx and Lenin, and in the process it implicitly addressed the thinking of many other people. It is concerned with the nature of 'philosophy' and focuses on the idea that, like the Catholic Church historically, the Communist Party in Italy faced, and would continue to face, the problem of a split developing between intellectuals and (in Church terms) 'the simple'. At the same time it reflects on Gramsci's own practical involvement in educational initiatives for working-class political activists.

I will summarise here some points that in my view are stated or assumed by Gramsci in this section of his Prison Notebooks.

First, a valid Popular University could be built only by conscious activity on the part of the working-class movement as a whole. This activity would form part of the movement's efforts in the field of ideological struggle, which in turn would need to be conducted in conjunction with political and economic struggle.

Secondly, ideological struggle includes two other types of activity - that of developing ideas, and that of disseminating those ideas to a wide public. Education is where these other two types of activity overlap, and is a necessary condition for each of them to take place.

Thirdly, those involved in educational work must organise the overlap between ideas and activity in such a way as to turn the ideas into theory and the activity into practice. They can do this by establishing within the educational activity the right kind of relation between intellectuals and all other participants.

Fourthly, two specific sets of people need to collaborate in socialist educational activity: industrial workers who are seeking to educate themselves as socialists, and socialistic traditional intellectuals.

Fifth, by engaging in reciprocal and mutual education, education circles or cells comprising people from both of these groups can start to reverse the division of labour between intellectuals and workers which is intrinsic to class society. So whereas previously you have ideas which may or may not be related to actions, and actions which may or may not be related to ideas - that is, ideas and actions related to one another only in arbitrary or contingent ways - now you would start to get ideas which arise from and feed back into activity, and activity which is prompted by and itself prompts ideas.

Sixth, this process brings into being a group which has made itself capable both of theorising (in the sense of elaborating conceptions) and of practice (in the sense of envisaging, planning, carrying through and reviewing actions). This group (in Gramsci's words) 'elaborat[es] a form of thought superior to "common sense" and coherent on a scientific plane' (that is, develops, deepens, extends and updates socialist views of the world as developed in the past by Marx, Lenin and many others, or as Gramsci called it 'the philosophy of praxis') at the same time as (again in his words) it 'never forgets to remain in contact with "the simple" and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems [ie 'the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity' CW] which it seeks to study and to resolve' (that is, it carries out the most important work entailed in replacing a capitalist social order with a socialist one).

Seventh, through maintaining this contact, those involved in the educational activity expand their own numbers. As a group they reach out to sections of the subject population which are not part of the industrial working class - for example, sharecroppers, agricultural wage labourers, artisans, some industrial managers and some intellectuals.

Eighth, within this educational group the workers who are involved level their capacity for abstract thought up to that which, as a result of their mainstream educational formation, the traditional intellectuals already possess.

Ninth, this demands of those intellectuals a degree of self-discipline, but not a requirement either to oversimplify their input or to silence themselves, as was traditionally imposed by the Church upon its intellectuals.

Tenth, all this takes place in - or as preparation for - the type of historical situation in which the 'instrumental classes' start to act and think for themselves, casting aside their normal thinking - that part of their 'commonsense' which under normal circumstances they borrow from traditional intellectuals acting as ruling class agents, especially in the form of religious beliefs.

Eleventh, the conception of the world thus developed rejects both utopias and myths (in the sense discussed by Georges Sorel) and fosters a high level of working-class pro-activity and problem-solving capacity.

Twelfth, it must therefore be grounded in valid history, including the history of how knowledge itself is produced.

It is important to understand that many of the working-class people who Gramsci envisaged taking part in these educational groups were close to - and at risk of being drawn back into - other classes, especially peasants or artisans. At the same time, the intellectuals who he expected to participate

would often be drawn from a stratum of the intelligentsia which was close to the rural poor - in short they would be people like Gramsci himself.

Gramsci saw the creation of a valid Popular University as a method by which the working-class movement, led by its conscious Communist section, could play in relation to Italian society as a whole the role played by the Catholic Church in its healthiest periods, with the crucial difference that, although the tendency for a split to develop between the intellectuals and the simple would still exist, so too would a means for overcoming it.

These points made by Gramsci in 1932 are crucial for us now, for the following reasons. First, the raising of HE fees and withdrawal of funding for the teaching of non-STEM subjects strongly suggests that the ruling class is abandoning as no longer necessary its strategy of using adult and higher education to buy off sections of the working class. These changes are already leading to the exclusion of many working-class people from HE, both as students and as lecturers, as well as the narrowing of curricula in schools and FE colleges. Eventually this is likely to produce amongst a significant minority of working-class people a sharpened appetite for knowledge in such fields as literature, history, philosophy, and some of those concerned will also be people who are union reps or shop-stewards. The changes to mainstream education are likely, through this route, to connect themselves to the crisis in trade union education and training. The obvious symptoms of this latter crisis are the cutbacks in funding and such events as the destruction of archives at Ruskin College as management repositions it to provide social work training rather than TU education. However, we can also expect to see heightened dissatisfaction with Unionlearn.

In these circumstances it will become increasingly urgent for socialists both to defend and organise within mainstream FHE, and to rebuild the tradition of IWCE in a modern form as a dimension of trade union education and training. Neither of these things can be done in the absence of - or in isolation from - the other. The criteria for building a valid Popular University movement put forward by Gramsci in the early 1930s arguably offer the single most promising conceptual starting point for doing this.

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