

The movement for working-class self-education

We print here an article based on a talk given by Colin Waugh at a conference on New Unionism, held in London on 18 February 2012

In getting ready to give this talk, I was reading the biography of Eleanor Marx by Chushichi Tsuzuki, where I came across some material about her partner, Edward Aveling.

Aveling was a co-translator of *Capital Volume 1* and a prominent member of the Social Democratic Federation, but he also earned his living partly by writing textbooks and coaching people in entry exams for London University – that is, he worked in what was then called the ‘University Extension’ movement.

On p117 of his book, Tsuzuki describes an incident that took place in 1884: “Early in September, Aveling announced his intention of starting a series of lessons in ‘Scientific Socialism’, but it was not till the middle of October . . . when the executive council [of the SDF] approved the action of the Westminster branch in establishing ‘gratuitous Social Science classes’. On the first night the Blue Ribbon Hall was packed, but Aveling treated the audience like scholars at school, and the working men, who were not used to coaching, stealthily crept out of the hall.”

Let us now move forward about thirty years. In a book written in 1960, the miners’ leader Arthur Horner drew a contrast between his own approach and that of a previous general secretary of the miners’ union, A. J. Cook, in the period around 1920 when both of them were leading big struggles: “I would make a good, logical speech, and the audience would listen quietly, but without any wild enthusiasm. Then Cook would take the platform. Often he was tired, hoarse and sometimes almost inarticulate. But he would electrify the meeting. They would applaud and nod their heads in agreement when he said the most obvious things. For a long time I was puzzled, and then one night I realized why it was. I was speaking to the meeting.

Cook was speaking for the meeting. He was expressing the thoughts of his audience, I was trying to persuade them. He was the burning expression of their anger at the iniquities which they were suffering.”

We should pay particular attention here to Horner’s remark that Cook was ‘expressing the thoughts of his audience’ - ie and not just their emotions. From this we can see that what Cook did was not, as it might seem at first, demagoguery but the opposite of demagoguery. Yes, he was using oratorical techniques derived from revivalist preaching and the like, but he was also articulating the reasoning that was in the minds of the workers he was addressing, as also in his own, and doing so in such a way as to offer them a model of how they could articulate it for themselves.

I feel that the difference between the approach used by Aveling and that of Cook is relevant to our thinking about how the education of working-class activists is best conducted now. Obviously it’s not a simple matter of Cook being right and Aveling wrong. For example, the ruling class really does monopolise control over high level thought, and therefore in order to move forward the working class must at least start to gain access to this. But still, the difference between these two approaches does reflect something specific that workers had created for themselves between 1884 and 1920. They called this ‘something’ Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE). Both Cook and Horner were products – and producers – of the IWCE movement. What, then, was this movement?

In our 2009 pamphlet *‘Plebs’: The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*, I have tried to tell the story of how the IWCE movement arose. In essence, I argue, it was a collision between the effort on the part of working-class activists for socialist

education and the effort on the part of a section of the ruling class to build a compliant layer in the working class through adult education. The majority of the 54 students at Ruskin College in 1909 were miners or railway-workers. People in the Oxford University Extension Delegacy and the Workers' Education Association were trying to take Ruskin College over in order to develop it into the lynchpin of a national structure of tutorial classes aimed at producing such a compliant layer, whereas the students, most of whom were rank and file union activists, were trying to build from below a socialist education movement rooted in union branches. The principal of Ruskin, Dennis Hird, sided with the students. In March 1909 he was sacked for doing so. The students struck in protest. In the course of this struggle they, with their supporters, set up the Plebs League, *Plebs Magazine*, a network of regional classes and a Central Labour College (CLC). They called this movement IWCE. By the mid 1920s, it had over 30,000 students. Although it decayed to some extent, it continued till the TUC suppressed it in 1964.

So in the IWCE movement, then, instead of sidling out of lectures organised for them by middle-class sympathisers like Edward Aveling, working-class people themselves now built a large, positive adult education movement. What was the relation of this movement to New Unionism?

The New Unionism period was marked by movements from below, initiated and led by workers, as for example the matchworkers, dockers, gasworkers and rubber workers. Working-class activists such as Will Thorne, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett and John Burns rose to prominence via movements like these. At the same time, there was a sharp growth of individual autodidacts, of individual workers going to great lengths to educate themselves in science, economics, literature, socialist politics and the like. However, there was in this period also an incursion into the socialist movement of high profile figures from other classes, for example Edward Aveling, Ernest Belfort Bax, Annie Besant, Edward Carpenter, Harry Champion, Charlotte Despard, H. M. Hyndman, William Morris, Beatrice Potter, Bernard Shaw, Dora Montefiore, Daisy Warwick and many others. These people exercised a big influence on the ideological direction taken by the working-class and socialist movement.

In the early 1900s, on the other hand, there was a push by sections of working-class activists themselves to take control of the ideological side of the movement, and to do so in particular by reshaping its internal education processes.

In the case of the Socialist Labour Party group in Scotland, for example, this involved workers who broke away from the Social Democratic Federation, and in the process introduced into their internal education

procedures a participatory teaching and learning method aimed at producing working-class activists who could argue for socialism against anybody, including ruling-class spokespersons such as academics then were. This method was developed by the refuse collector James Connolly and the engineering worker and university lab technician George Yates.

Another contemporary example of this from-below focus on education is Robert Tressell's *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, which portrays the efforts by Frank Owen, a building worker who is a socialist, to convince others workers on the site of the need for socialism – in short, it can be read as an extended case study of workers' collective self-education.

This drive towards from-below working-class self-education was clearly a key factor in the 1909 Ruskin College 'strike'. That movement, then, is the 'something' that separates Aveling's attempt to 'coach' workers in scientific socialism, from the approach of activists like Cook. However, there was behind the Ruskin 'strike' a tradition that goes back much further. We can find evidence of this in Frederick Engels's book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which he wrote in 1844, in the aftermath of the so-called 'Plug Plot riots', and which he based on his contacts with industrial workers in Salford, Manchester and elsewhere who were active in the Chartist movement.

Discussing the relation between Chartists and Socialists (that is, followers of Robert Owen), Engels says: 'The Chartists are theoretically the more backward, the less developed, but they are genuine proletarians all over, the representatives of their class', whereas: 'The Socialists are more far-seeing . . . but proceeding originally from the bourgeoisie are for this reason unable to amalgamate completely with the working-class.' However, he goes on to say that: 'the union of Socialism with Chartism . . . has already begun' and '[only] when this has been achieved will the working-class be the true intellectual leader of England.' We should note here, then, Engels's assumption that there needs to be a process of mutual or reciprocal education between educated socialists and grassroots working-class activists.

Engels also describes Chartist self-education arrangements. For example he talks about 'reading-rooms' in which 'proletarian journals and books alone, or almost alone, are to be found' and further, he says that: '. . . in how great a measure the English proletariat has succeeded in attaining independent education is shown especially by the fact that the epoch-making products of modern philosophical, political, and poetical literature are read by working-men almost exclusively'. (This may be the first explicit reference to independent working-class education.)

In fact, even at that time the appetite for education amongst working-class activists had a history,

including a history of action taken by workers and people close to them to bring collective self-education into existence. This tradition arguably goes back to the 1790s, in the form of the discussion method used in the London Corresponding Society. Further examples include the Spenceite free-and-easies, and the struggle around the setting up and curriculum of the London Mechanics Institute in the early 1820s. There are also grounds for thinking that some of these activities include organisational forms that are thrown up spontaneously whenever workers organise their own education, for example the forms of collective reading that reappear in the early 1900s in SLP teaching methods.

So in a sense, then, the question is not: why do workers organising themselves sometimes give this activity an educational dimension? but rather: 'why do they sometimes not give it this dimension?' And especially for us now, the question we should address is: 'why has there been virtually no attempt by working-class activists themselves to renew or rebuild an IWCE-style movement since 1926?' For example, why was there no such attempt by shop stewards in a range of industries in the 1970s, or by miners during the 1984-85 miners' strike?

Some will argue that this resulted from the decay of the IWCE movement itself, and more specifically of the bureaucratisation that it underwent through the control exercised by J. P. M. Millar after the formation in 1921 of the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). Again, others may wish to argue that Marxist ideas were discredited in the eyes of working-class people who might otherwise have been drawn to them by manoeuvring on the part of the leadership of the USSR, especially at the start of World War 2. To me, however, it seems likely that the single most important factor, in the UK at least, was the post-war expansion of state-provided higher and further education, and the state funding of TU education and training.

This involved the use of state funding to expand HE, partly to produce scientifically and technologically qualified labour power and especially to secure its loyalty to the status quo, but also to draw out from amongst working-class families articulate young people who might otherwise become thinkers and organisers within the ranks of that class, buying so far as possible their allegiance to the ruling class and turning them into various types of public sector functionaries, and thereby using them to help rule the working class from which they were drawn. Humanities and social sciences curricula - the very areas, that is, seen by the Ruskin strikers as crucial to IWCE - were used to achieve this. So from the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s and early 1970s, we see the state extending to a wider section of the working class, though still a small minority, the strategy pioneered by the Oxford Extension Delegacy and WEA with union

activists that triggered the strike at Ruskin College in 1909.

At the same time, the mid 1950s to 1970s saw a big expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships in industry, particularly in engineering, and with it an expansion of FE - that is, of technical colleges - to accommodate the part-time release of these young people onto craft and non-advanced technician level courses. (These courses also included an element of liberal education.) This was done to increase the supply of skilled labour but also, arguably, to weaken by dilution the control exercised by craftspersons over aspects of production.

Thirdly, following the take-over by the TUC of both the NCLC and of the Workers Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) in 1964, and the Donovan Report (1968), a drive to undermine the power of shop stewards culminated in the decision by the Labour government elected in 1974 to promote state-funded trades union studies courses run mainly in FE colleges with a TUC-devised and supervised curriculum focused on skills of bargaining and the like rather than on political education.

One effect of these and other later state-sponsored measures was to reinforce a sense among at least some of those who might otherwise have involved themselves in an IWCE-type movement that this would be unnecessary, because the state had conceded post-compulsory education that was within the reach of virtually anyone who wanted it. However, the policies pursued under Thatcher and consolidated by Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron have changed the objective situation and shown this to be a mistake.

First, the expansion of FE that took place from the 1950s to the 1970s was undermined by the 'de-industrialisation' of the UK economy carried through under Thatcher, in particular by the expulsion of young people from the mainstream, full-time labour market and hence from the part-time technical further education that accompanied apprenticeship.

More broadly, production, the labour force and the working class have over the last thirty years been restructured in fundamental ways - by the export of industrial production to lower waged economies overseas, by technological changes to the production that remained (centred especially on the use of computers to control machinery), by the defeat of key groups of unionised workers and by changes in management techniques, and followed by massively increased levels of indebtedness, especially in relation to home ownership, the regrowth of a petty bourgeoisie, plus chronic unemployment, under-employment and precariousness of employment. The results of this have in turn included drastically reduced union density in the private sector, such that the power exercised by shop stewards in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s is not now a major threat to the powers-that-be, with the

consequence that the capitalist class can arguably dispense not only with post-Donovan style TU education but also with large areas of publicly-funded HE and FE – because they do not feel the same pressure to secure compliance through post-compulsory education that they formerly did. Or so at least the HE fees regime introduced by Blair and intensified by Cameron, and the Tories’ abolition of HEFCE funding for teaching in non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects, along with cuts to FE and to TU education suggests. As a result, then, the system of FHE developed between World War 2 and 2008 is now in crisis.

This crisis must have several effects. First, it must push a section of working-class people out of full time HE. Secondly, it must push many of those who still manage to enter it off Humanities and Social Sciences degree courses onto nominally vocational courses. Thirdly, there must eventually be fewer openings for people from less well-off backgrounds to become lecturers. Fourthly, the employment of those who still manage to do so must become increasingly precarious. Fifth, the FE sector must move further and further towards becoming a semi-privatised provider of training and ESOL, and focused on producing flexible IT-related workers. Sixth, FE and HE must be pushed closer and closer together, as the Russell Group part of HE prices itself out of working-class reach. Seventh, the cuts to trade union education, involving the closure of college TU education sections, must push the TUC’s Unionlearn provision still further towards becoming a generalised basic skills outsourcing agency. In short, much if not all of the FHE system is rapidly becoming dysfunctional for the working-class people who use it or would like to use it.

However, this is happening at a time when the working class has a greater need now than ever to organise itself. In theory at least, then, it also has an increasing need to rebuild self-education as a natural and normal dimension of this organising process. To put this another way, the crisis in FHE is creating both a space and a demand for IWCE-type struggle both within vocational FHE and outside it, including via unions’ educational arrangements. It is all the more essential, then, that those who perceive this find ways both of rebuilding the tradition of IWCE and of fusing this with practical organising, both in the mainstream union sector and with the hitherto unorganised.



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