

Lessons of the 'Plebs' strike?

We print here an article based on a talk given by Colin Waugh to a meeting of the IWCE Network at the Brunswick Centre in London on 4 February 2012

We produced a pamphlet in 2009 to mark the centenary of the 1909 'strike' by students at Ruskin College. In this talk I will assume a broad knowledge of this event and its aftermath. However, I would just like to say that what happened was not really a strike in the ordinary sense but rather a boycott by the students of specific lectures, combined with mutual instruction amongst those students, and the setting up by them of an embryonic national system of independent working-class education (IWCE).

I think that what they did was - and is - much more important than is usually realised. As far as I know it was also unique, in that, although there were, both here and abroad, many other examples of workers' education movements, there is to my knowledge no other case where core industrial workers on their own initiative took on the powers-that-be over post-compulsory education in the way that the Ruskin students did, an action which included setting up their own system of provision.

In this talk I will try to pick out, on the one hand, ways in which they were right in the approach they took and in which, therefore, we today should try to emulate them, and, on the other, ways in which they may not have been right, or in which a different approach might be required now.

In doing so, I would like at the start to emphasise that a conception or course of action could have been right for them in 1909 whereas later on a similar conception or course of action might be wrong. For example, there are grounds for thinking that those who were in the forefront of the actions taken at Ruskin in 1909 thought that socialism, or at least a make-or-break struggle to bring it into

existence, was just around the corner. I think we can probably agree that people holding this view would as a consequence also have believed that there existed an unpostponable imperative to produce working-class thinkers and organisers as quickly as possible. Furthermore, we need to see that, even though history did not take the course they expected, they could have been 'right' - in the sense that the evidence on which they based their decision could have been the best available at the time, even if it turned out later to have been misleading or inadequate, or was rendered so by factors that they could not have anticipated. Nevertheless, someone looking at the situation in, say 1933 - that is, after the failure of leftwing parties in Germany to combine against the rise of Hitler - or even in 1926, after the TUC had betrayed the miners by calling off the General Strike, might see the careful selection and extended preparation of such thinkers and organisers as a greater priority.

To set a context in which we can consider these issues, we can look briefly at some factors which have been - or at least could be - regarded as symptoms of a decline in the IWCE movement in the 25 years or so after 1909, and first at some steps by which, arguably, control over that movement tended to slip away from its working-class participants.

First, during World War 1, by virtue of their membership of the editorial board of *Plebs Magazine*, a group who we could call 'middle class' sympathisers came to coordinate the Plebs League at a national level. This group included Raymond Postgate, Frank Horrabin, Winifred Horrabin, Kath Starr (nee Horrabin), Eden and Cedar Paul and

Maurice Dobb. (Several of these editorial board members supported themselves by working as journalists on the *Daily Herald*. The only former industrial worker on the board was the ex-miner Mark Starr.) That all of these were good people who made outstanding contributions to IWCE, even contributions without which the movement might have ceased, does not alter the fact that the Ruskin strikers were industrial workers and they were not.

Secondly, there were union leaders who actively supported WETUC - that is, the state-funded trade union education arm of the WEA, set up following a meeting between the steelworkers' leader Arthur Pugh and the WEA general secretary J. McTavish in 1918. The Ruskin strike resulted at least partly from the growth of rank and file movements in specific unions, especially the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF) and the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS), and some union leaders undoubtedly saw the resulting IWCE movement as a threat to their control over their members.

Thirdly, the NCLC itself was set up in 1921 as an umbrella organisation for the Plebs League classes, and later came to include also responsibility for the magazine, along with other functions such as book publishing. The general secretary of the NCLC from the outset until the TUC wound it up in 1964 was J. P. M. Millar. Millar was essentially a middle class sympathiser of the IWCE movement. Although there can be no question that he was a sincere believer in the necessity for that movement, and also a genuine and unswerving adherent of the form of Marxism that existed in Britain before the Russian revolution, he was above all an administrator, and he set out single-mindedly to win the backing of unions, which in practice usually meant union leaders, for IWCE. It can be argued, therefore, that this opened the door to union leaders influencing the content of courses. Millar could also be bureaucratic, and the historian John McIlroy has suggested that this led him to focus on correspondence courses to the detriment of face-to-face classes. It would be important to investigate further the tension between Millar and Noah Ablett over whether the Central Labour College (CLC - see below) should be primarily a means of training tutors or whether it should, as Ablett apparently thought, be more like the nucleus of a revolutionary party. There was also tension between Millar and Starr, and we need to know more about how far this tension too arose from disagreement about the role of the CLC. (The fact that Starr was not offered the job of CLC principal is almost certainly one of the reasons behind his move to the USA in 1927.)

Fourthly, problems arose from relations between the NCLC and the Communist Party (CP). These

problems began, it can be argued, before the CP itself had come into existence, in the sense that the 1917 revolution in Russia, and then the end of wartime full employment, convinced many activists that syndicalism was a dead end, thereby discrediting the union strategy most clearly associated with those founders of the Plebs League such as, in particular, Noah Ablett, who in 1910-11 had been central to the Cambrian Combine strike and in 1912 to *The Miners' Next Step*. Tensions continued during the period when the CP was being set up, in that prominent figures in the IWCE movement, including Raymond Postgate and Eden and Cedar Paul, joined it but left soon afterwards. The problem became more acute after the Comintern issued its 21 conditions for political groups wishing to affiliate to it, because these conditions were taken as requiring that the CP set up its own education department. Some prominent CP figures, for example T. A. Jackson, continued to work as NCLC lecturers and/or organisers, but in any case the idea was growing up among at least some CP spokespersons that the Plebs League and NCLC classes had become preoccupied with abstract philosophical discussion at the expense of developing class struggle activists. Then in 1933 the CP attempted to deal with the failings which it attributed to the NCLC by opening its own adult education scheme, based at what is now the Marx Memorial Library in London and in Manchester. And in 1936 the CP's critique of NCLC philosophy teaching surfaced again in the attack made by Jackson in his book *Dialectics: The Logic of Marxism and its Critics* on the NCLC lecturer Fred Casey, essentially on the grounds that Casey was part of a 'cult' around the writings of the 19th century German worker-philosopher Josef Dietzgen. Irrespective of the extent to which the CP standpoint on the NCLC was or was not right, there can be no doubt that in the 1920s and 1930s a section of working-class support transferred itself from the NCLC to the CP.

Active

Fifth, there were problems associated with the CLC - that is, the institution set up in 1909 in the aftermath of the Ruskin strike by the most active section of the strikers in conjunction with a broad spread of left-wing support. (The CLC opened in Oxford in September 1909 and moved to Earls Court in London in 1911.) One such problem was financial misconduct by people involved in running the college, two of whom - Will Craik and George Sims - had been leaders of the 1909 strike. Another was the collapse in 1925 of the Eaton Lodge scheme. This

was a move coordinated by the TUC to bring together Ruskin College, the WEA, WETUC, the NCLC and the CLC in a national structure centred on Eaton Lodge, a country house owned by the wealthy socialist sympathiser Daisy Warwick (ie the Countess of Warwick.) One of the main reasons for this collapse was the withdrawal by the WEA/WETUC, after the schools inspectorate told them that the aims agreed between the intended participants could put the WEA's state funding at risk. Thirdly, in the aftermath of the General Strike, the funding from the mineworkers' union which sustained the CLC ran out, leading to its closure in 1929.

Testimony

The conclusion that in my opinion we can draw from these 'symptoms' and from other evidence, including the testimony of former NCLC lecturers and organisers that we are in touch with today, is that, yes, NCLC courses did tend to become at least partly a left-wing version of WETUC-type branch officer / official training, and, yes, the continuing declared allegiance to Marxism did camouflage this tendency, but nevertheless the original spirit and working-class basis of IWCE were never totally destroyed, and survived up to – and arguably beyond – the point where the TUC closed it down. Nevertheless, because our project is to build a movement in the spirit of the Plebs League – that is, the organisation founded by the Ruskin students in 1908 – we need to ask whether – and if so, to what extent – the developments sketched out above resulted from things the strikers themselves did wrong, or failed to do, and/or from flaws in their thinking. Let us start, then, by identifying ways in which the strikers were unreservedly right.

I believe they were entirely right to think that adult education, and in particular the political and general education of working-class activists, was important, and by implication to assume that ideological struggle was as necessary as economic and political struggle. They were right also to set up classes in their local areas, right to think they could act for themselves, and right to take on the Oxford University Extension Delegacy, and hence in effect the university itself and – behind that – a central section of the ruling class. Their critique both of the Extension movement and of its creation, the WEA, was also right, and so also, with reservations to be discussed later, was their rejection of what they called 'orthodox' (that is, mainstream academic) education.

Next, there are some respects in which they were right but with some qualifications. They were right,

then, to see 'independence' – that is, the principle that the adult education of working-class activists should be controlled by working-class organisations and not by agencies acting for other classes – as vital, and in adopting this standpoint they were really just extending into the field of adult education assumptions and practices that had been – or would shortly be – developed in other fields by politically active workers, examples of which include the formation in the field of electoral politics of the Independent Labour Party, the growth in the field of economic struggle of from-below amalgamationist and industrial unionist movements, and, soon afterwards, in the field of agitation, propaganda and mass media, the conversion of a print-workers' strike paper into a mass circulation newspaper, the *Daily Herald*. However, we still need to pose the question: would they have been better to think of independence less as something they had already achieved simply by breaking away from Ruskin, and more as something they were trying to achieve by this and other actions? And in thinking about this it is reasonable that we ask ourselves whether their understanding of 'independence' owed more to the conception of 'cleavage' developed by Georges Sorel and by the more direct action side of syndicalist movements like the IWW than to the tradition stemming from Marx. In other words they perhaps tended to see ideological (as distinct from organisational) 'independence' as something which could be achieved once and for all by a single act of collective will rather than something that had to be worked towards and struggled for over a long period.

Secondly, their conception of what should constitute the core content of adult education for working-class activists – namely Marxist economics, 'working-class history' (ie history from which workers' experiences and struggles were not omitted), and 'philosophy' (in the sense of the systematic development of people's capacity to think things through for themselves) – was right, but we do need to consider further whether their specific conception of philosophy was adequate (see later discussion of their emphasis on the writings of Josef Dietzgen) and if not, why.

Thirdly, their method of teaching and learning – that is, the participatory procedure developed especially by George Yates and others in the Edinburgh-based Socialist Labour Party (SLP), which was centred on reading key texts round the class, discussing them thoroughly, utilising insights from this in agitational public speaking, and then assessing collectively how this went – was right. In particular there are, arguably, continuities between this method and the discussion procedure used in the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s, as well as the kind of no-holds-barred exploration of

ideas through discussion that took place in the 'free and easies' run shortly after that by Thomas Spence and Robert Wedderburn. In other words, this method may well have been a version of one which working-class activists have spontaneously adopted in every historical period where they thought revolution was on the agenda. There are also grounds, as for example in T. A. Jackson's account in *Solo Trumpet* of the classes run in London by Jack Fitzgerald, and in Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of the working-class base of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in *Labouring Men*, for thinking that a similar method evolved within the SDF itself. But we do at the same time need to investigate how consistently this original participatory method was carried forward into the NCLC. For example, were NCLC classes always sufficiently open-ended, and how much truth - if any - was there in the WEA allegation that they consisted mainly of indoctrination delivered through a lecturing format? Or again, if, as seems likely, NCLC tutors did not work out an approach to teaching and learning akin to that evolved by Lev Vygotsky and his collaborators in Russia (ie an approach that took account of Bolshevik practice), why was this? (Part of the answer to this question too may be Mark Starr's move to the US, because he was one of main people who tried to initiate discussion of teaching methods in *Plebs Magazine*.)

Access

Fourthly, the Ruskin strikers' conception of 'independence' did not prevent them from realising, rightly, that they still needed access to the work of traditional intellectuals, witness their use of economic history texts by James Thorold Rogers and H. T. Buckle, their admiration for Daniel De Leon, their attachment to the Ruskin principal Denis Hird (whose writings included the logic textbook *Palaestra Logica*), and the relationships they formed with the US sociologist Lester Ward and later on with the US socialist and communist writer Scott Nearing. But it is still relevant to ask whether the IWCE movement as it developed later on assimilated as fully as it needed to the issue which the Bolsheviks, in the light of their experience of organising an army during the wars of intervention, termed the 'problem of the bourgeois specialists' - that is, the need to use (but also to keep control over) the expertise of professionals produced through the mainstream educational system (in the Russian case, of officers from the former tsarist armed forces). Did the IWCE movement as a whole underestimate the power of the mainstream educational apparatus? In any case, its activists seem not to have worked out a conception of the

relations between industrial workers and traditional intellectuals equivalent to the one elaborated by Gramsci in Italy, and we should consider whether this imposed a limitation on the movement's longer term development.

Let us now turn to some aspects of the Ruskin strikers' actions which experience has shown to be more problematic.

One such, arguably, is the decision taken during the strike by leading figures to give up on the struggle within Ruskin College itself and work towards setting up the Central Labour College. (This decision was taken after the Ruskin governors endorsed the decision by the college executive to sack the principal, Denis Hird, ostensibly for 'failure to maintain discipline' but actually for siding with the students in opposing the Oxford Extension Delegacy / WEA takeover.)

Obviously this decision was in line with one of the strikers' key influences - that is, Daniel De Leon's lecture / pamphlet *Two Pages from Roman History*. This described the secession of the plebeians from Rome in 494 BC, and argued that once they were persuaded to return to the city by the promise that their interests would from now on be represented by tribunes of the people, those tribunes in reality betrayed them, just as union leaders and reformist politicians were betraying the interests of industrial workers in capitalist society. We can, then, ask whether in reality the Ruskin strikers had a choice about returning to the college after the two week shutdown which the management announced during the 'strike'. How likely was it, for example, that those who could be identified as ringleaders would have been accepted back? Or again, we can return to the idea that the most militant of them almost certainly thought that a revolution was imminent. As argued earlier on, we should not assume too readily that they were wrong about this. For example they were probably in a better position than academic historians since to gauge the mood of other workers, and there is no reason to think that they, any more than, say, Lenin, could anticipate that Social Democratic parties across most of Europe would support their governments' declarations of war in 1914. Therefore their decision to give up on attempting to change the college from within and instead give priority to forming the educated organisers on which the success of such a revolution would depend may well have been the most rational one under the circumstances. (A good study of oppositional movements amongst Ruskin students after 1909 would help us to judge whether their decision was right.)

Having decided to withdraw from Ruskin, were the strikers and their broader circle of supporters right to set up the CLC? This is a complex question but at

the very least it can be seen that, in the circumstances that actually developed, in particular the cutbacks in production that took place at the end of WW1, the strategy of sending the best militants full-time for two years to a college which openly aimed to make them still more militant was likely to lead to many of them being refused re-entry to their former occupations, and hence to them either facing a hand-to-mouth existence as Plebs League organisers or being drawn into the world of union officialdom. In Scotland during the war itself, John Maclean proposed a different way of continuing the socialist education of the strongest militants. In his 1916 *Proposal for a Scottish Labour College*, Maclean argued for setting up a regional college in the Glasgow area, funded by a levy on all union members (ie a levy raised via branches, not national unions), with student places allocated on the basis of membership numbers, and with courses lasting three months (in contrast to the CLC's two years), and with both lecturers and students directly elected from union branches. It's at least worth considering whether a set-up along these lines would have been less vulnerable than the one adopted for the CLC.

Philosophy

Then there is the question of whether the approach to the teaching and learning of 'philosophy' that became dominant both at the CLC and in many Plebs League and NCLC local classes was the best one that was possible. This is in effect the same as asking whether key Plebs League figures like Will Craik set too high a value on Josef Dietzgen's version of materialist dialectics, which in turn involves asking why they valued his work so much in the first place. One reason is almost certainly that cheap editions of Dietzgen's writings were available from the Kerr publishing house in Chicago. Another is that, as a tanner – an artisan – Dietzgen was obviously closer to being a waged worker than, say, Hegel. We can also say that they were right to place a high value on the study of philosophy, including logic and dialectics, as potentially offering working-class activists a chance to develop the skill in reasoning that would enable them to argue for socialist ideas against ruling-class spokespersons like the Oxford University lecturers who worked part-time at Ruskin in the period that led up to the strike, and that in this they anticipated the interest in philosophy that grew amongst socialists after WW1 around the writings of Gyorgy Lukacs, Karl Korsch, August Thalheimer, Abram Deborin and others. Even if we decide that Dietzgen's writings did not measure up to the faith placed in them, we have to acknowledge that IWCE activists were constrained

by the fact that, with the exception of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx's own philosophical writings were not available in English until the 1930s.

Lastly, we need to go back to the question of how the Ruskin strikers and their immediate successors conceived the possible relations between people like themselves and mainstream (or in Gramsci's term 'traditional') intellectuals, and here further investigation may lead us to conclude that circumstances did not allow them enough time to work out answers to key aspects of this question. It may be, for example, that, in rightly stressing working-class independence and critiquing 'orthodox' education, they also underestimated the problem that the IWCE movement would eventually face from the fact that too few traditional intellectuals were prepared to support it (in contrast, for example, to the relatively large numbers who were prepared to become WEA and university extension lecturers, who of course were paid). In other words, as intimated earlier on, they arguably failed to see that the key question was not how to stop traditional intellectuals interfering in the IWCE movement, but rather how IWCE activists could attract traditional intellectuals to their cause and control them within it.

Behind this debate stands the history of tensions between working-class union activists who were members of the SDF, the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Party of Great Britain or the SLP and people from other classes, including traditional intellectuals, who took - or attempted to take - leading positions in the movement, such as H. M. Hyndman, Edward Aveling, Annie Besant and Ernest Belfort Bax. At a deeper level, it reflects also the fact that the social structure in the UK did not, as in France, Germany and Russia, generate a group of university educated people who saw themselves as parasitic on a layer of immiserated peasants, and as a result opted genuinely to commit themselves to - and often risk their lives for - revolutionary movements amongst former peasants who were now industrial workers. In short, no Lenins, Luxemburgs or Gramscis came out of universities in England.

In the end all the problems raised here with respect to the IWCE movement have been, and arguably continue to be, problems for the whole socialist project. To dismiss what the Ruskin strikers and their successors did because they encountered these problems would in effect be to deny the capacity of workers to act - as opposed merely to react - for themselves. Instead, we need to rebuild what they did that was right, and in a modern context solve the problems that they did not manage to solve.