

The IWW and the Plebs League

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In his book on the Plebs League in the north east of England, *Left for the Rising Sun, Right for Swan Hunter* (2014), Robert Turnbull quotes an account of a meeting in 1919 between the leaders of the Triple Alliance (which brought together the Railwaymen, Miners and Transport Workers) and the prime minister of the day, Lloyd George. Here Lloyd George admitted that this combine of probably the strongest unions of the day could, if they so chose, overthrow the government. However, such an act would then mean they would have to be ready to take over the function of the state. He cites Raymond Challinor's *Origins of British Bolshevism* (1977), who discusses how seriously we should take the suggestion that 1919 constituted a missed revolutionary chance from a Trotskyist perspective. One reason he had for dismissing this suggestion was the political immaturity of the working class. Whilst Challinor views this from a Trotskyist perspective, I shall be looking at this point from a different viewpoint, one more critical of 'Leninism'. At the time, this political viewpoint was not well understood in the English-speaking world.

My viewpoint will be more sympathetic to syndicalism (or industrial unionism, if you prefer) and will argue that the development of the Plebs League/Labour College was an important factor in developing not just the political maturity of the working class but more generally their access to independent working-class education. Indeed, I will argue that this perspective can be better understood in relation to two movements internationally. In this the first article, I shall look at the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the USA. In a second article I will focus on the Proletkult movement which was developing from the 'anti-Leninist' wing of Bolshevism which had first emerged around Alexander Bogdanov. I shall also link these to the earlier 'proletarian positivism' movement.

The IWW was founded in Chicago in 1905 as a non-sectarian industrial union which aimed to overcome the limitations of craft unionism, particularly as found in the American Federation of

Labor (AFL). Within three years, an acrimonious debate led to the departure of Daniel De Leon and the 'political faction' which was aligned with the Socialist Labor Party of America. The remaining faction was centred around Vincent St. John and William Trautmann. They refused any political alliance and instead focused on direct action.

But perhaps more interesting than this in-fighting is the transformation which US industry was undergoing at the time, and how this transformation helped shape the IWW. Mike Davis (1975) has chronicled how the 'scientific management' of Frederick Taylor was transforming, first, the US workplace and was, subsequently, to have an impact across the world: the real message of scientific management was not about efficiency but about power. According to Gramsci, it was a brutally cynical expression of the purpose of American society (1).

Davis highlights the role of scientific management in the strikes in the East of the US, where the IWW developed as an organisation. Thus before the strike at McKees Rocks, the boss, Frederick Hoffstot had introduced aspects of scientific management, and Davies goes on to describe similar innovations at other workplaces which produced some of the most famous IWW strikes: Lawrence, Patterson etc. The material factor which had a major impact on the old craft unions' ability to organise was not the competing ideology of industrial unionism but this reorganisation of work, which led to deskilling and a recomposition of the workforce on the shop floor. This meant that their practical ability to organise on a craft basis was being dissolved, whereas industrial unionism - which unified all the workers in an industry in 'one big union' regardless of craft - proved more effective.

But Davis makes an additional point : the new industrial unionist approach also adopted a scientific approach to organising. He quotes William Walling: '... in proportion as the scientific methods of increasing efficiency are applied in industry, one of the laborers' best and most natural weapons is the

scientific development of methods of interfering with efficiency, which methods, it seems, are likely to be lumped together with entirely different and often contradictory practices under the common name of sabotage.' (2)

This reference to sabotage needs unpacking. It relates to the split with De Leon, who accused the St. John and Trautmann faction of 'dynamitism', conjuring up the image of the anarchist bomber, when what was being proposed by their wing of the IWW was precisely a more nuanced approach to disrupting capitalist production through mass action on the job. This re-fashioned more traditional approaches of simply working more slowly ('soldiering') through work-to-rules, slow downs and other disruptive practices which can actually build the strength of the union, as they are also open to non-union members. It encouraged mass participation through action at the point of production.

As Trautmann theorised the experience of McKees Rocks in the pamphlet *One Big Union* (1911) (3), he remarked: 'A heavy load of traditional falsehoods, holding living human beings in a bondage of ignominious, deep-rooted, and ingeniously fostered intellectual, and hence also in industrial, serfdom must disappear'. This was to be resolved by mobilising at an international level to implement a scientific programme: 'Institutions of learning, schools and universities are linked together by the uniformity of fundamental laws governing science and the dissemination of knowledge and discoveries'. In this way, science and education were to become key elements of the IWW approach shared by both the non-political faction and the faction around De Leon, to which Trautmann was to subsequently go over.

This interest in a scientific approach can be contextualised in terms of the publication of the English translation of Joseph Dietzgen's *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy and Philosophical Essays*, both in 1906 (although Trautmann may well have read Dietzgen in the original German). Dietzgen was a German Social Democrat, writing in German for their paper *Der Volkstaat* and later *Vorwärts*. The way he was praised by Marx as 'our philosopher' is well known. However, his writings also reflect the impact of positivism. This was an approach to social transformation which placed science and sociology at its heart. Many Positivists were middle class, such as Edward Beesley (1831-1915), the professor of history who chaired the founding meeting of the First International. However, particularly in France, a current of Proletarian Positivists developed.

Fabien Magnin (1810-84) had been Comte's named successor for the leadership of the Positivist

movement, and by 1863 he had founded the Society of Positivist Proletarians, which in February 1870 joined the First International. But as the political crisis in Paris developed, the Positivists started organising as a political party, founding the Positivist Club in Paris shortly after the founding of the French Third Republic. They remained active in Paris during the establishment of the Paris Commune (18 March 1871). Despite Marx's disparaging remarks about the Positivists in the first draft of *The Civil War in France* (4), it is worth looking at what the Positivist Club was proposing during the Paris Commune. Eugene Semerie (1832-84) wrote the pamphlet *La Republique et le Peuple Souverain* (5), which was published even as the Commune was being crushed. Here he argues against investing the majority of the population of a republic with power, seeing this as simply a new dogma which will be seized by reactionaries to thwart a progressive (ie Positivist) development of society. Rather, he says, put our trust in the urban populations - and in France this means Paris above all - as only they have the cultural development to run society scientifically. More specifically, he says that this actually boils down to giving power to the proletariat, citing an earlier Positivist document concerning plans to form a proletarian government in Paris during the 1848 revolution: '... we shall say that the workers, having not received a metaphysical education, are more free from prejudices; belonging to the most numerous class, they have the most generality in views; with the fewest interests implicated in common affairs, have the most disinterestedness, and, finally, pressed more closely by the necessity of a social renovation, are the most energetically revolutionary. It is precisely to all these titles that the political direction of France belongs to Paris; to all these titles also power comes to the proletariat'.

More interesting, for our purpose, is the way that Semerie introduces the division of labour: 'The true principle of collective activity, in politics as in industry, is not to make everything done by all, but in the co-operation, by distinct functions, with a common work, according to the principle of Aristotle' (7). This presages the IWW notion of One Big Union, scientifically organised around the division of labour itemised through a system based on the Dewey method of cataloguing books.

I am not going to detail the story of the Plebs League as this has already been done so admirably by Colin Waugh in *'Plebs': the Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education* (2009) (8). However, I shall simply make a few remarks to contextualise it with the previous brief account of the IWW. The Plebs League was influenced by IWW activist Daniel De Leon, and indeed took its name from his pamphlet *Two Pages from Roman History*,

which spoke of the history of the Plebs in ancient Rome, whilst linking this to contemporary issues of working-class leadership. Indeed, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), set up in Scotland in 1903, was inspired by De Leon and his industrial unionism. James Connolly attempted to recruit for the new party before departing for the USA later that year. Whilst in America, Connolly became an IWW organiser and challenged De Leon's policies in the Socialist Labor Party of America. Although the SLP made little headway in establishing industrial unions in pre-war Britain, they did develop effective methods of independent working-class education in the way they worked, in the pamphlets they produced, and in their impact on the foundation of the Plebs League.

My final point in linking the IWW to the Plebs League and the Labour College movement is to highlight an article by George Hardy (1884-1966), a Yorkshire-born IWW member who returned to England to gather support for the mass of IWW members who had been jailed in 1918. He arrived in the UK in time to participate in the General Railway Strike launched in late September 1919. He participated in the mass strike meetings in Hull and wrote a report of the strike for the IWW paper, *One Big Union Monthly*. Here, after describing the general characteristics of the strike, he mentions the role of the Central Labour College in educating the district officials of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR). After providing a brief account of how the College was initiated and run by the unions, he remarks: 'The work being carried on is as near to the IWW propaganda as can be found anywhere and not be in the IWW. In some distant future we will emerge from our apathy towards the exploiters, and with our well trained men will have sufficient ability to man industry for ourselves' (9). (Hardy was later to become the General Secretary-Treasurer of the IWW and subsequently was active in the Comintern in the UK and overseas.)

In this summary, one feature common to Independent Working-Class Education on both sides of the Atlantic was the impact of Positivism. I am highlighting this not because I want to revive interest in it as a 'philosophy' or even an 'ideology' - and least of all as a religion, but rather as an attitude to how knowledge is acquired and distributed. It is an attitude which sees knowledge as arising from experience, but not so much the individualised experience of the atomised individual, but rather a shared experience of different collectivities. And here the collectivity which arises from the shared experience of the workplace constitutes an organising principle for the seizure of the means of production at the point of production: workers' control to be articulated through the immediate control of their own labour in their workplace.

As Big Bill Haywood, one of the foremost IWW organisers put it when testifying before the Congressional Commission on Industrial Relations: 'Labor is what runs this country, and if they were organised, scientifically organised - if they were class conscious, if they recognised that the worker's interest was every worker's interest, there is nothing but what they can do' (10). I advocate this as a fruitful way of considering what Independent Working-Class Education is about, and why it has such great importance.

There will be a sequel to this article looking at the approach to education developed by Alexander Bogdanov in the 1900s and later, following the Russian Revolution, through the Proletcult movement and its impact in the UK, particularly through the book by Cedar and Eden Paul entitled *Proletcult* (1921).

Notes:

1. Gramsci, A. (2000) 'Americanism and Fordism' in *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, New York: New York University Press, p. 290
2. Davis quotes Walling, W. (1914) *Progressivism and After*, New York: pp. 301-2.
3. There are many editions of this pamphlet but see <https://iww.org/history/library/Trautmann/OBU> for the first version, which includes the passage quoted.
4. See Marx, K. (1974) *The First International and After*, London: Penguin pp. 260-1. This passage did not appear in the final edition of *The Civil War in France*.
5. Semerie, E. (1871) *La Republique et le peuple souverain*, Paris: Librairie Internationale. An English translation is in preparation.
6. Ibid p. 27, my translation.
7. Ibid, p. 19, my translation.
8. This is available as a PDF from <http://www.iwceducation.co.uk>
9. Hardy, G. (1919) 'General Railway Strike of Great Britain', *One Big Union Monthly*, December 1919.
10. United States House of Representatives (1916) Commission on Industrial Relations, 1912-1915, *Final Report of the Commission on Industrial Relations*. Washington: GPO. 64th Cong. 1st sess., 1916, S. Doc. 415.