

100 years on from the Ruskin strike . . .

'PLEBS'

THE LOST LEGACY OF INDEPENDENT WORKING-CLASS EDUCATION



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1. Introduction

In October 1908 students and former students at Ruskin College in Oxford founded the League of the "Plebs". From 26th March to 6th April 1909 they took strike action in the college.

The Plebs League eventually became a national movement, providing what was called IWCE (independent working-class education). Through this movement, which was still functioning in 1964, tens of thousands of working-class people both taught and learnt. The basic aim behind IWCE was that the working class should produce its own thinkers and organisers.

The autobiographies and reminiscences of many labour movement leaders in the 1930s, 40s and 50s refer to the Plebs League and Ruskin strike. In contrast, few academic historians have paid attention to these initiatives. Most histories of adult education, for example, assume that what counts is the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). They either ignore IWCE altogether or see it as an obstacle that briefly hampered the WEA. This pamphlet, in contrast, assumes that we need to find out what IWCE was really about and build on it now.

The history of IWCE went through three phases. In the first phase, beginning around 1907, the movement was driven by the aims and actions of (mostly quite young) working-class men - mainly miners, railway workers, textile workers and

engineering workers. In the second phase, beginning around 1914, a group of middle class intellectuals influenced how the IWCE movement was run. Thirdly, from 1926 to 1964, two people - J. P. M. Millar and Christine Millar - worked doggedly to make IWCE, now called the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), the education arm of the mainstream labour movement.

This pamphlet marks the centenary of the 1909 strike at Ruskin. It aims to present a truthful picture of what happened then. This involves looking into the background to the strike, both on the students' side and on the ruling class side as represented by the WEA and University Extension movement. It does not attempt to deal with what happened later.

In 1968, having investigated the IWCE classes in the North West, the historian Ruth Frow wrote: 'The question that arises is, has the social change for which the stalwarts of the Oldham class and the Hyde class, the Liverpool Labour College and the Manchester Labour College, the Number 8 Division of the National Council of Labour Colleges and the Trades Unions which supported them, been achieved? Or will the dying flame of Independent Working Class Education need to flare again to guide the workers along the path to emancipation?'

This pamphlet assumes that the answer to this question is 'yes'.

2. Extension to 1899

Following the collapse of the Chartist movement in 1848, some sections of the ruling class thought that they could forestall future threats to their power by creating within the working class a compliant layer of articulate spokespersons who would blunt the edge of class struggle. One way they tried to do this was by infiltrating the Co-operative Movement. Another was by initiatives in the field of adult education.

In the mid 1800s Oxford University was dominated by its constituent colleges. Many of these were like gentlemen's clubs, in which 'fellows' waited to be given livings in the Anglican church. There arose, especially in Oxford, a movement which aimed to reform this situation. One strand within this movement wanted Oxford to do something for working people.

Not everyone who thought this was simply a hypocrite. For example, in 1872, reacting in a personal letter to the death of some nuns during the Paris Commune, the poet and Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: 'I am afraid some great revolution is not far off. Horrible to say, in a manner I am a Communist. Their ideal bating some things is nobler than that professed by any secular statesman I know of . . . Besides it is just . . . it is a dreadful thing for the greatest and most necessary part of a very rich nation to live a hard life without dignity, knowledge, comforts, delight, or hopes in the midst of plenty - which plenty they make. They profess that they do not care what they wreck and burn, the old civilisation and order must be destroyed. This is a dreadful look out but what has the old civilisation done for them? As it at present stands in England it

is itself in great measure founded on wrecking. But they got none of the spoils, they came in for nothing but harm from it then and thereafter. England has grown hugely wealthy but this wealth has not reached the working classes; I expect it has made their condition worse. Besides this iniquitous order the old civilisation embodies another order mostly old and what is new in direct entail from the old, the old religion, learning, law, art, etc and all the history that is preserved in standing monuments. But as the working classes have not been educated they know next to nothing of all this and cannot be expected to care if they destroy it . . .’ By ‘wrecking’ here, Hopkins meant people enriching themselves when Henry VIII closed the monasteries. His standpoint was close to the ‘feudal socialism’ ridiculed in the *Communist Manifesto*. But it was also close to the impulse which made William Morris become a socialist. Christian socialists who thought like Hopkins were to play a key role on the ruling class side in the Ruskin struggle.

The growth of such views among the intelligentsia had led to the foundation in 1854 of the Workingmen’s College in London. The person mainly responsible for this was the Cambridge graduate, London and Cambridge professor and Christian Socialist, Frederick Denison Maurice, who in turn based his approach on measures pioneered by another Christian socialist Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and *Tom Brown at Oxford*. Maurice wrote: ‘The question is, how to eliminate Owenism and Chartism? Repression has proved powerless; but the Queen, in a conversation with Lord Melbourne, has indicated the proper way, to wit, education. But what sort of education will be capable of doing away with Chartism? The one that will point out to him [ie the worker] his unjust claims and will satisfy his just demands’. Also involved in the Workingmen’s College was the Oxford professor John Ruskin, who taught art there for a time.

In 1860 Ruskin had published, originally as articles in the prestigious *Cornhill Magazine*, a book on political economy called *Unto This Last*. One section of this was called ‘The veins of wealth’. Here Ruskin noted, in a figure of speech, that in England ‘the servants show some disposition to rush riotously upstairs, under an impression that their wages are not regularly paid’. He went on: ‘Since the essence of wealth consists in power over men, will it not follow that the nobler and the more in number the persons are over whom it has power, the greater the wealth? Perhaps it may even appear, after some consideration, that the persons themselves are the wealth, that these pieces of gold with which we are in the habit of guiding them are, in fact, nothing more than a kind of Byzantine harness or trappings . . . wherewith we bridle the

creatures; but that if these same living creatures could be guided without the fretting and jingling of the Byzants in their mouths and ears, they might themselves be more valuable than their bridles’. Ruskin’s talk about ‘guiding’ here shows that he wanted to value workers as human beings but also to educate them out of fighting for a better life.

Almost twenty years after Maurice’s experiment, another approach emerged. This was university extension, where academics travelled around the country lecturing to people who could not go to university. Cambridge University introduced extension provision in 1873, London in 1876 and Oxford in 1878. With Oxford, this was administered by a body called the Extension Delegacy. Some of the most successful Oxford extension lectures were given in Rochdale by Hudson Shaw, and his most popular topic was John Ruskin.

In the 1880s, after starving people from the East End of London invaded the affluent West End, another tactic was attempted: the settlement movement. People from universities went to live in areas like the East End, where they provided, among other things, adult education. The most well known settlement, Toynbee Hall, was opened in Whitechapel in 1885, by people from Oxford, mainly on the initiative of Canon Samuel Barnett. Here, as in Hopkins’ letter and Ruskin’s words in *Unto This Last*, we find two conflicting impulses - on the one hand, a genuine concern for the poor, and, on the other, a desire to block the spread of leftwing ideas. Toynbee Hall, for example, was named after Arnold Toynbee, an Oxford graduate who died at an early age from an illness he caught while lecturing in the East End. His lectures were intended to counter the influence of Henry George’s anti-capitalist economics book *Progress and Poverty*.

However, by the 1890s it was clear that the majority of those participating as students in the extension and settlement movements were not workers but fairly well-off people, especially middle class women who could not go to university. Overall, 50-60,000 people were attending extension courses, but only where organisations like the Cooperative Society backed the lectures were workers were involved. Classes in political economy had initially attracted thousands of Northumberland and Durham miners, but this interest melted away after the big strike in 1887 strike, as these workers turned instead to socialists such as William Morris. Workers, then, were rejecting extension, and as a result it was failing to create a class-collaborationist layer amongst them.

3. Ruskin to 1902

Ruskin Hall grew partly out of the same impulses as the extension and settlement movements. But at the start, because of the way in which it was founded, it existed alongside these movements without a formal link. In the beginning, it was part of a broader project started by three people from the United States. Two of these people, Charles Beard, later a prominent historian in the US, and Walter Vrooman, had been students at Oxford University. The third was Vrooman's wife, Amne, part of whose inheritance financed the project.

The Ruskin Hall in Oxford, set up in 1899, was from the outset drawn in two directions. It was both a labour college (that is, an institution controlled by trades unions and providing courses for their members) and a utopian colony. In its first two years some of the students were workers sponsored by their unions, but others were short-term, non-working-class visitors from overseas, or well-heeled cranks.

With Beard, Walter Vrooman (who was influenced by the Knights of Labour movement in the US) did try to organise a movement for working-class education. They did this by founding colleges, by teaching classes themselves, by lobbying labour movement organisations, by travelling round England promoting their version of socialist education, by creating a network of correspondence tuition, and by setting up the Ruskin College Education League 'for the purpose of making Ruskin College known in London and the provincial centres'. Beard founded another Ruskin Hall in Manchester, and others existed briefly in Birmingham, Liverpool, Birkenhead and Stockport.

Vrooman was a sort of socialist. He declared, for example, that 'knowledge must be used to emancipate humanity, not to gratify curiosity, blind instincts and desire for respectability'. Again, in the public meeting to launch the college in Oxford, he said that 'The Ruskin students come to Oxford, not as mendicant pilgrims go to Jerusalem, to worship at her ancient shrines and marvel at her sacred relics, but as Paul went to Rome, to conquer in a battle of ideals'. In line with this, Vrooman and Beard appointed a fairly high profile leftwing socialist, Dennis Hird, as the warden/principal of Ruskin, and another, Alfred Hacking, as lecturer in charge of correspondence courses. (There were only four full time staff in the beginning.)

Hird was an Oxford graduate (1875). In 1878 he was ordained as an Anglican priest and appointed

as a tutor and lecturer to students of Oxford University who were not attached to individual colleges. From 1885-87, he was a curate in Bournemouth, and then moved to Battersea, where in 1888 he joined the (Marxist) Social Democratic Federation (SDF). While there, he also became secretary of the Church of England Temperance Society for the London diocese. However, in 1893, the Bishop of London, Frederick Temple, found out about Hird's socialist activities and forced him to resign from this Temperance Society position. In 1893, Lady Henry Somerset appointed Hird to a church living at Eastnor in Gloucestershire. But in 1896, after he had given a talk about 'Jesus the Socialist', she colluded with the bishop for that area to make him renounce his orders. This meant he could no longer earn a living as a clergyman. (Published as a pamphlet, Hird's talk sold 70,000 copies.) By the time of the 1908-09 events at Ruskin, Hird had renounced formal Christianity itself.

Working-class students at Ruskin came to respect Hird so much that early issues of *The Plebs' Magazine* carried adverts for plaster busts of Darwin, Herbert Spencer and Hird himself. Years later some former students still had these on their mantelpieces. As principal of Ruskin, Hird wrote to the British Steel Smelters Association to say that: 'Many unions would be glad of an opportunity to send one of their most promising younger members for a year's education in social questions'. This gives us an important clue about what he thought the college was for.

However, although Vrooman was a socialist, he was also a Christian, from a well-off nonconformist background. His main rebellion against this background had taken place at 13, when he took himself out of school. The US socialist publisher Charles Kerr was later to say of him that, although he possessed 'the greatest enthusiasm for socialism as he understands it', 'Vrooman is hopelessly erratic . . . he wants to be a dictator in whatever he is doing'.

By deciding to name their project after John Ruskin, Beard and the Vroomans showed that they wanted it to challenge the existing order, but also that, like the Guild of St George founded by Ruskin himself, its focus would be ethical as much as economic. They timed the inaugural meeting for Ruskin Hall in Oxford to coincide with John Ruskin's 80th birthday. At this meeting Vrooman described his aim in this way: 'We shall take men who have been merely condemning our social

institutions, and will teach them instead how to transform those institutions, so that in place of talking against the world, they will begin methodically and scientifically to possess the world, to refashion it, and to cooperate with the power behind evolution in making it a joyous abode of, if not a perfected humanity, at least a humanity earnestly and rationally striving towards perfection'. These words reveal Vrooman's intention that the world should be changed by action from below ('begin methodically and scientifically to possess the world . . . [and] to refashion it'). But they also reflect his religious feelings ('the power behind evolution', and the suggestion that 'humanity' cannot be 'perfected') and his wish to prevent discontent getting out of hand.

Both labour colleges and utopian colonies had a higher profile in the US than here. On their return in 1902, the Vroomans founded a further Ruskin Hall in Trenton, Missouri, which was eventually absorbed into a university in Illinois. (The editorial in an early issue of *'The Plebs' Magazine* was devoted to the struggle round this, and the parallels with what happened in Oxford.) Not long afterwards, another US labour college, Brookwood in New York state, was founded, and survived until the 1930s. The most prominent figure in this was another Christian socialist, A.J. Muste.

In the US there was also a tradition of utopian colonies, and where labour colleges suffered from a shortage of union funding the two kinds of institution could overlap, with the college at risk of becoming some wealthy backer's plaything. For example, just before World War I the US writer and Socialist Party member Upton Sinclair used earnings from his novel *The Jungle* to found a socialist colony, Helicon Home Colony, which he intended to function also as a labour college. In the 1920s, in a later novel, *Oil!*, Sinclair dealt with arguments for and against such institutions. By this time he had experienced the collapse both of his own colony and the Llano Del Rio colony set up near Los Angeles by Socialist Party members in 1914. He had also developed a critique of mainstream higher education which he spelt out in a privately printed book, *The Goose Step*.

In *Oil!*, Bunny Ross, the son of an oil tycoon, wants to use some of his money to set up a labour college which will be 'a gymnasium where people train for the class struggle'. However, his girlfriend's father, Chaim Menzies, a union organiser amongst garment workers, thinks that 'you didn't change a colony by calling it a college, and a colony vas de vorst trap you could set for de movement', going on to argue that: 'You git people to go off and live by demselves, different from de rest of de vorkers . . . all de time dey be tinkin about

someing else but de class struggle out in de world. . . . De people vot are going to help de movement has got to be in it every hour'. This expresses in fictional form a tension similar to that which arose early on at Ruskin Hall in Oxford.

Students from a working-class and trade union background soon recognised the ambivalent nature of the Ruskin set-up. Thus in the September 1901 issue of *Young Oxford*, a magazine launched with Vrooman's support, J.M.K. MacLachlan, a Scottish student who was a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), wrote that: 'The present policy of Ruskin College is that of a benevolent trader sailing under a privateer flag. Professing the aims dear to all socialists, she disavows those very principles by repudiating socialism. Let Ruskin College proclaim socialism; let her convert her name from a form of contempt into a canon of respect'.

However, the direction in which Ruskin was going soon became clear. Between 1899 and 1908, about 450 people attended Ruskin in Oxford as full-time residential students. But over the same period about 8,000 enrolled themselves on Ruskin correspondence courses. Some of these correspondence students also participated in the Ruskin Hall Scheme. This was an arrangement by which correspondence students could meet in small, local discussion groups. By 1902 it had 96 classes running across the country, nearly all of them in industrial areas. It became the main route through which industrial workers progressed to become residential students at Ruskin Hall in Oxford. These students, in turn, came eventually to form the overwhelming majority in the college. Thus by 1903, 15 out of 20 Ruskin Hall students were trade unionists. But in 1907, 53 out of the 54 students were listed by occupations, including 23 mineworkers (thirteen from South Wales, six from Durham, one from Northumberland, one from Nottinghamshire and two from Scotland), seven engineering workers, five railway-workers, four weavers and a variety of other trades. Of these 53, only four did not have a union stated alongside their name. Most were branch officers or district officers of their unions. And again in 1908-09, 45 of the students were sponsored by their unions.

By that stage then, it was clear that Ruskin was doing what the extension movement was failing to do: recruiting and retaining working-class activists as students.

4. The WEA to 1907

The Workers' Educational Association was founded in the early 1900s by Albert Mansbridge. Mansbridge was exactly what the Christian socialists in the university extension movement hoped to produce: a working-class person who believed in harmony between the employers and the workers, and who thought adult education could bring this about. Mansbridge came up with a solution to the extension movement's problem. This solution was the tutorial class.

The Education Act passed in 1902 was shaped by two people: the Fabian 'socialist' Sydney Webb, and the former Toynbee Hall administrator R. L. (later Sir Robert) Morant. Morant was now the permanent secretary - the highest ranking civil servant - at the Board of Education. He believed that unless 'the impulses of the many ignorant' were put under 'the control of the few wise', democracy would be overcome 'by the centrifugal forces of her own people's unrestrained individualism and disintegrated utterly by the blind impulses of mere numerical majorities'. The 1902 Act replaced directly elected school boards with local education authorities (LEAs). Morant wrote into the Act a clause which allowed LEAs to organise or assist evening courses for adults. This applied from March 1903.

At the Cooperative Movement's 1898 Annual Conference, a conversation took place between Mansbridge, Hudson Shaw and the secretary of the Oxford University Extension Delegacy, J A. R. Marriott. In this conversation Mansbridge argued that the extension movement could attract greater numbers of workers if it were to concentrate more than hitherto on classes in history and citizenship. On the strength of this, he was invited to speak at the University Extension summer meeting in Oxford in 1899. The link formed in 1898 between Mansbridge and people who were influential in the Oxford Extension Delegacy was the beginning of a fundamental change in the approach adopted by the extension movement towards potential students from amongst the working class.

Mansbridge was born in Gloucester in 1876. His father was a carpenter who became a clerk of works. His mother was involved in the cooperative movement. Through her, Mansbridge came to know the Toynbee Hall founder, Samuel Barnett, who was closely connected to the Oxford Extension Delegacy. In 1880 the family moved to Battersea. Mansbridge attended Battersea Grammar School, but at 14 his father made him leave. Initially he worked as a clerk at the Board of Education, where

he founded the Junior Civil Service Prayer Union's magazine. In 1894, he tried and failed to win a Cooperative Scholarship to Oxford. Although both of his parents were Congregationalists, Mansbridge soon after this he became an Anglican lay reader. Through this he met Canon Charles Gore, and came to view Westminster Abbey as his 'university'.

Descended on both sides of his family from earls, Gore was educated at Harrow School and Balliol College, and became a fellow of Trinity College Oxford in 1875. Later he was to become bishop of, successively, Worcester (1902), Birmingham (1905) and Oxford (1911). In 1889 he helped found the Christian Social Union, and in the same year edited and contributed to the book *Lux Mundi*, an influential collection of essays by left-leaning, upper class Anglo-Catholics. In 1892, he founded the Community of the Resurrection. In the early 1900s members of this played a leading role in the formation of the Church Socialist League, through which they set out to influence the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Through Gore, Mansbridge met Christian Social Union members and also followers of the Oxford University reformer T.H. Green. Through these people he then made further contacts with Oxford dons. He became involved in an intellectual dining club called the Synthetic Society.

In 1896, Mansbridge became a clerk in the tea department of the Cooperative Wholesale Society in Whitechapel, moving shortly afterwards to become a cashier in the Cooperative Permanent Building Society. Between 1891 and 1901 he attended university extension classes (in chemistry, economics and Greek) at Toynbee Hall, eventually becoming himself a teacher there (of typewriting, economics and industrial history). During this period Mansbridge also founded an organisation called the Christian Economic Society.

Mansbridge believed that the knowledge which Oxbridge dons possessed was class neutral, and that this was one of the best things about it. In 1903, the *University Extension Journal* published three articles by him. In one, he argued that: 'deep draughts of knowledge' would 'divert the strong movements of the people from the narrow paths of immediate interests to the broad way of . . . rightly ordered social life'.

In February 1903, Mansbridge founded the organisation which eventually became the WEA. The full title he gave this at the start was: 'An Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men, primarily by the extension of university teaching also, (a) By the assistance of all

Working Class efforts of a specifically educational character (b) by the development of an efficient School Continuation System'. This was a more truthful name than 'Workers' Educational Association'.

Mansbridge's organisation drew support almost at once from sections of the labour movement and working men's clubs. In July 1903, the first meeting of its provisional committee took place, at Toynbee Hall. (This committee included two members of the TUC parliamentary committee - ie its ruling body.) The organisation's public launch took place on 22/8/03 at a special conference in Oxford held during the Annual Meeting of the University's Extension Delegacy, which gave its full support. At this conference, which was presided over by the Bishop of Hereford and the Dean of Durham, the organisation adopted a constitution. According to this constitution its aim was: 'to construct a working alliance between university extension and the working-class movement'. At this stage, Mansbridge also won the support of Sir William Anson, warden of All Souls College, Oxford and Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education. In 1904 the first local committee of the WEA was established (in Reading).

In 1904, the Mansbridge organisation's annual conference was again held in Oxford as part of the Extension Delegacy's Annual Meeting. By 1905, it had enough financial backing for Mansbridge, now living in Ilford, to become its full time general secretary on a salary of £50 a year. Shortly after its 1905 annual conference, yet again held as part of the Oxford Annual Meeting, the organisation changed its name to the Workers' Educational Association, the declared aim of which was now to promote 'the higher education of working men, primarily by the extension of university teaching'. (At the 1905 conference, the WEA also launched a demand that the Government make it compulsory for adults to attend evening classes.)

By 1905 Mansbridge had developed further his idea about how to solve the problem of working class non-participation. He now argued that, as well as concentrating on classes in history and citizenship, extension should focus less on lectures and more on 'tutorial' classes. The university would still supply a lecturer, but now this lecturer would work closely with a smaller group of students (ideally about thirty). The students would have to commit themselves to a long term (eg two-year) course, with a formal syllabus. They would have to read specified material and write essays, which the lecturer would mark. Some of them would take an exam at the end. This exam would, in turn, be part of a system of diplomas leading potentially to study within the university itself. Mansbridge and those who agreed with him argued that this method would

allow the content of what was taught and learnt to be determined by academic criteria, rather than by the need to attract large audiences. In present day terms, then, they saw old-style extension lectures as 'dumbing down'.

Gore and Barnett and Morant now threw their support behind Mansbridge's approach. Also in 1905, a group of eight young tutors at Oxford University joined Mansbridge's adherents. The most important of these people turned out to be R. H. Tawney, another Christian socialist, who, on graduating from Balliol College in 1903, worked and lived for three years at Toynbee Hall.

In his most influential book, based on lectures given in 1922, Tawney was later to write: 'Compromise is as impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the practical religion of capitalist societies, as it was between the Church and the State idolatry of the Roman empire'. This book, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, presented an account of how capitalism had emerged from the social order existing in Western Europe in the Middle Ages but in so doing had also destroyed it. Tawney, then, held a more academic version of the feudal socialist tendency noted earlier in Hopkins.

These Oxford tutors referred to themselves half-jokingly as 'conspirators', and also called themselves the Catiline Club. (This choice of name indicates that they saw themselves as struggling against the powers-that-be in Oxford University to open it up to less well-off people.) One of them, Alfred Zimmern, was later to help Mansbridge write the crucial report, *Oxford and Working-Class Education*. Another, William Temple, later to be archbishop of Canterbury, was to become in 1908 the WEA's first president. (Temple's father, Frederick, was the bishop of London who in 1893 deprived Dennis Hird of his job as London secretary of the Church of England Temperance Society.)

This group set about building a current of opinion amongst the well-off and influential in support of Mansbridge's tutorial concept. In May 1905, Barnett published an article in *University Review* backing Mansbridge, and this was followed in the February and March 1906 issues of the *Westminster Gazette* by eight articles on 'The University and the Nation' written by Tawney under the pseudonym 'Lambda'. There was also an article by Zimmern in the *Independent Review*, and one by Marriott in *Fortnightly Review*. Meanwhile, Dr John Percival issued advice to the Oxford Delegacy for Extramural Studies along the same lines.

In 1921, attempting to summarise 'The W.E.A. spirit', Mansbridge would write: 'The genesis of the Association was due to the lamentable situation which had arisen in English life owing to the neglect

of education for the people. In this matter the ordinary working man was disinherited . . . There never was a single occasion upon which the ideals expressed were not in harmony with the spirit of labour. The scholars and others who joined the movement were as men watching all the time how they could assist and forward the wishes of the majority . . . always there was the manifest desire to perceive and understand the spirit and needs of those engaged in manual toil. Yet because scholarship is a vital force the fusion of it with the experience of life and labour produced a greater wisdom than could have been the case if scholars had been absent or quiescent. That is indeed the whole case for the Association'.

This reveals a genuine insight into the necessity for dialogue between people with a high level of formal education and working-class people who have been denied this. However, Mansbridge's

project also fitted in with the desire of a growing section of the ruling class to draw union activists into liberal education and through this, class collaboration, or - as it was often put at the time - to 'sandpaper' them. This would, it was hoped, create within the working class a layer of articulate people who would blunt the edge of class struggle.

At this stage the WEA had committees but no classes, while the extension movement had the same kind of classes as before. So now the WEA/extension alliance, was looking for a chance to put Mansbridge's approach into practice. The ambivalent character of Ruskin Hall, the fact that it was on the doorstep of Oxford University and, above all, the fact that it was recruiting and retaining working-class students, meant that sooner or later they would try to take control of it

5. The Left 1902-1907

In the early 1900s a new type of leftwing socialism was spreading amongst union activists. When it came to educating themselves through books, however, the members of this movement faced a problem. Unlike elsewhere in Europe, universities like Oxford or Cambridge did not produce a layer of educated people who were prepared to throw in their lot with working-class socialists. This in turn meant that, when it came to educating themselves through books, activists relied heavily on translated texts. This meant they were dependent on publishers' decisions about what to translate.

Writing in *Plebs* in 1952, one of the Ruskin strikers, Stan Rees, took up a claim made by one of the Ruskin lecturers, H. Sanderson Furniss. In a book called *Memories of Sixty Years*, Furniss had said that he 'lectured on Marx and was chiefly occupied in refuting Marx's theory of value to which most of the students clung with religious fervour, but which I regarded as absolute nonsense'. Commenting on this, Rees wrote that: 'The majority of the students had not heard of - never mind, read - Marx when Mr Furniss began to lecture at Ruskin; and it was immediately after one of Furniss' lectures in which he had criticised Marx that a student suggested that the lecturer was not putting the position but putting up a dummy Marx and then destroying the Marx of his imagination. The students then began reading Marx themselves because of Mr Furniss' distortions'.

What was the true position? Were the Ruskin students in a position to base themselves on Marx's ideas? What other ideas did they have access to? What role did socialist groups play when it came to ideas?

The largest leftwing membership organisation at the time was the ILP. More of the Ruskin students belonged to this than to any other group. In the period leading up to the 1909 strike, the ILP published the Socialist Library series of pamphlets and books, which was aimed at countering class struggle conceptions. This series was edited by Ramsay MacDonald. Some of these writings were by continental 'revisionists' of Marxism such as Eduard Bernstein or Emile Vandervelde, while others were by Macdonald himself, for example his *Socialism and Society* (1905). ILP publications, then, really offered people like the Ruskin strikers a socialistic version of the approach purveyed by Lees Smith.

Another influential organisation in this period was Robert Blatchford's *Clarion* movement. It was Blatchford who had published Dennis Hird's *Jesus the Socialist*. However, the Clarion movement did not provide material for activists seeking theoretical back-up.

Thirdly, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) had at this stage about 15,000 members. It was dominated by a group round H.M. Hyndman, the businessman who had founded it as the SDF in the 1880s, and whose money kept its paper, *Justice*,

going. Hyndman did not believe that strikes or union activity in general would benefit the working class. This did not stop grassroots SDF members from being active in unions, but it did mean that the leadership usually took a negative attitude towards the focus on rank and file union activity which was growing amongst activists in the early 1900s. With Hyndman, this attitude towards unions was part of a broader rejection of any notion of socialism from below. One of his favourite sayings, for example, was that no enslaved class had ever liberated itself (implying that none ever could). Hyndman's view of the world was based on Marx's economic analysis, but it had little in common with Marx's emphasis on workers' conscious self-activity. In a period such as this, then, when groups of workers were increasingly taking action which challenged the capitalist class's right to rule, a tension was bound to develop between the Hyndman group and workers looking for ideas to guide them in union activity. In 1903, after three years of disagreement about whether socialist politicians should take part in non-socialist governments, a part of the SDF broke with Hyndman. This breakaway centred on the SDF's overwhelmingly working-class membership in Glasgow.

Another political group participating in this so-called 'impossibilist' revolt was the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in the US. The SLP had been dominated for nearly ten years by the academic Daniel De Leon. At one stage, De Leon, like Hyndman, had believed in the primacy of electoral politics. But now his priority was to break the control exercised over the working-class movement by trade union leaders. In the US many of these leaders were happy to call themselves 'labour lieutenants of the capitalist class'. Craft unions dominated by this approach were organised in the American Federation of Labour (AFL), created by Samuel Gompers in a struggle against the Knights of Labour.

De Leon believed that the way to defeat Gompers was through industrial unions: that is, unions organising all grades of worker in an industry (for example mining). He also believed in dual unionism - that is, the idea that a group like the SLP should set up its own industrial unions. (Many activists accepted industrial unionism but rejected dual unionism.)

Following a speaking tour by De Leon in Scotland and England in 1904, the SDF dissidents in Scotland formed a British wing of the SLP. By the time of the Ruskin struggle, this had developed a small number of branches in England, including one in the North East and one in Oxford.

In the two or three years after the formation of the SLP in Scotland, a much broader layer of union activists, especially amongst miners in South Wales

and in the North East, were attracted either to industrial unionism, or to syndicalism. A key concept associated with syndicalism was 'cleavage' - the idea that the conflict of interest between workers and capitalists is so sharp that any settlement between them - as for example, in a union dispute with an employer - is a betrayal of the workers' cause.

Both industrial unionists and syndicalists tended to share this view. They also tended to equate 'politics' with electoral activity and parliamentary speech-making, which they in turn looked on as a trap to be avoided. This approach gained ground after the 1906 general election. This was because the new Liberal government appointed trade union officials to administer welfare measures. Many activists regarded these measures as palliatives intended to divert workers from struggle. At the same time the 37 MPs elected for the first time as the Labour Party failed to challenge this. (The idea of class politics as a struggle for state power, as spelt out in the *Communist Manifesto* or as developed in this period by the Bolsheviks in Russia, did not play much part in the thinking of activists in this country at the time.)

Under the influence of syndicalism, some of those active at the time of the Ruskin strike, including several of those who led it, would shortly move towards a rejection of leadership per se, a standpoint which those who were members of the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF) would soon afterwards embody in the Unofficial Reform Committee and *The Miners' Next Step*.

De Leon had raised the question of leadership in two lectures which he gave in New York in 1902, which were then published by the SLP in a pamphlet called *Two Pages from Roman History*. In the first of these 'pages', De Leon dealt with the activities of the tribunes of the people (plebs) in ancient Rome. He detailed how the office of tribune was brought in after the secession of the plebs from the city. He argued that the tribunes did not truly represent the mass of the plebs but rather acted on behalf of that small section who were acquiring wealth, thereby helping to divert the anger of the poor into channels which did not threaten the well-off. In the second 'page', which dealt with the Gracchi, he went on to spell out the parallel between, on the one hand, the tribunes and the Gracchi, and, on the other, present day trade union leaders. This, then, was part of De Leon's case for building new, industrial unions separate from and opposed to the AFL.

Just before the end of the first of these talks, De Leon had said: 'The Socialist Republic depends, not upon material conditions only; it depends upon these, - plus clearness of vision to assist the

evolutionary process. Nor was the agency of the intellect needful at any previous stage of social evolution in the Class Struggle to the extent that it is needful at this, the culminating one of all.'

In the second 'page', De Leon also listed what he saw as characteristics of the 'proletarian revolution', including that it 'abhors forms', that it is 'relentlessly logical', that it regards 'palliatives [as] palliations of wrong', that it 'brings along its own code', that it is 'irreverent', that it is 'self-reliant', that it 'spurns sops', that it is 'impelled and held together by reason, not rhetoric', that it 'deals not in double sense' and that it is a 'character-builder'. Here, then, De Leon emphasised, on the one hand, the need for working-class activists to be independent and critical, and, on the other, the need for them to use their intellects to understand society as it really is rather than as those in power falsely represent it.

Two Pages from Roman History was only one of many pamphlets published by the SLP in Scotland. In fact, a key contemporary activist, T.A. Jackson, was later to write: 'The Labour College, and the movement for independent working-class education, was in the immediate sense, a product of S.L.P. and De Leonite literature'. Jackson cited in support of this a translation by De Leon of Karl Kautsky's book *Das Erfurter Programm*. This was an explanation of the German Social Democratic Party's 1891 programme, which the SLP in Scotland made available as a series of four pamphlets. In Jackson's view, this 'gave a reasonably complete survey of Marxist theory', although he added that: 'De Leon, of course, had taken care (avowedly) to "adapt" the translation "to American conditions" and the British S.L.P. cheerfully readapted the adaptation to "British conditions".' This illustrates a wider problem that activists at this time had when they needed to get hold of theoretical texts.

A number of leftwing books were popular amongst militants. These included Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, Jack London's *The Iron Heel* and Blatchford's *Merrie England*. Some more theoretical material, such as Auguste Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* (translated by De Leon) and writings by Kautsky, Josef Dietzgen, Antonio Labriola and Georgi Plekhanov, was also available, mainly via translations produced in Chicago by Charles Kerr. However, when it came to writings by Marx and Engels themselves, several key texts were not available at all in English at this time. These included Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts 1844*, *Grundrisse*, *Class Struggles in France* and *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Engels's *The Peasant War in Germany*, *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Duhring* (except for the *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* extract), plus the jointly

written *German Ideology*. There is also no sign that activists knew about any writings by Lenin or Rosa Luxemburg. Finally, activists - especially when trying to educate others - were heavily reliant on non-socialist texts that they perceived to be generally progressive. Such texts included Ernst Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*, and material by Herbert Spencer. (Haeckel's book, along with Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, was published in a series of sixpenny reprints by the Rationalist Press Association in 1902.) This in turn helps to explain why the Ruskin strikers placed what now seems like too much value on the writings of the pioneer US sociologist Lester F. Ward, and on James Thorold Rogers's *Six Centuries of Work and Wages: The History of English Labour*.

Both the difficulty in getting hold of translations and the lack of theoretical writings by British socialists reflected a difference between universities in England and in continental Europe.

Under the influence of the 1789 revolution in France, universities on the continent normally contained a broad layer of students who, though often close to poverty in terms of their family background, were trying to become professionals, especially lawyers. From amongst this layer of students, who were often in or around a higher education environment for much longer than students here, a radicalised section usually emerged. Within this, a smaller section would be drawn to socialist - and specifically to Marxist - ideas. Some might eventually become lecturers. In times of rising class struggle, this group interacted with working class militants, and it was from amongst them that most of the classic theorists of modern socialism, starting with Marx himself and continuing through Labriola, Plekhanov, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Lenin, Pannekoek and Gramsci, were drawn.

In England, on the other hand, the class character of the two dominant universities was set at the end of the English Civil War rather than in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Both these universities - and Oxford especially - were tied to the established church. Their main products were Anglican clergy, colonial civil servants and apprentice politicians. The layer from which Marxist intellectuals developed on the continent effectively did not exist. There were people at Oxford and Cambridge who looked upon themselves - and were looked on by those in authority - as 'socialists'. However, like the group round Tawney and Zimmern who supported Mansbridge, they were Christian rather than class-struggle socialists.

There was amongst these upper class socialists some awareness of Marx's ideas. Now, however,

more and more of them were coming to view Marx's ideas as both incorrect (the standpoint adopted by the dominant academic economist, Alfred Marshall) and dangerous, because attractive to workers.

The students at Ruskin in 1908, then, did not have access to a group with higher education who

would help them develop the ideas they wanted to develop. With limited exceptions, such as the influence of De Leon, they had to do most of their thinking for themselves.

6. Oxford and Working-Class Education

Under the pressure of rising working-class self assertion across the country, the extension movement accepted Mansbridge's scheme for tutorial classes. This acceptance was spearheaded by a group of young, socialistic Oxford tutors. Supported by prominent figures in the church, civil service and ruling class generally, members of this group worked with Mansbridge himself and the other main WEA activist, J. MacTavish, to produce a report, *Oxford and Working-Class Education*.

In 1907, after years of leftwing lobbying, the TUC Congress made a more high profile appeal to unions to give financial support to Ruskin. This triggered a drive by the WEA/extension alliance to seize control of Ruskin before it could become irreversibly a labour college.

During April and May 1907, *The Times* published several articles by Catiline Club members. On 27th July, in the climate of upper class opinion formed by these articles, Gore started a debate in the House of Lords about the development of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. This in turn set the scene for the WEA annual conference in August, which was held under the title 'What Oxford can do for Working People', again in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Oxford Extension Delegacy. At this joint event, MacTavish, a shipwright and Labour councillor in Portsmouth, who would later succeed Mansbridge as general secretary of the WEA, made a demagogic speech in which he said: 'I am not here as a suppliant for my class . . . I claim for my class all the best that Oxford has to give. I claim it as a right wrongfully withheld . . . What is the true function of a University? Is it to train the nation's best men, or to sell its gifts to the rich? . . . To Oxford I say: Open wide your doors and take us in; we need you; you need us'.

Following this speech, on 10th August the meeting set up a committee. Seven members of this committee were nominated by the vice-chancellor of Oxford University. These included the

Dean of Christ Church College, and fellows or tutors of New College, Balliol College and St John's College, as well as Catiline Club member Alfred Zimmermann and H. B. Lees Smith, described in the report's preamble as 'chairman of the executive committee of Ruskin College'. The other seven were nominated by the WEA. These included Mansbridge and MacTavish, along with Ruskin governor David Shackleton, 'representing the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress'. The remit of this committee was to produce by Easter 1908 a report on *Oxford and Working-Class Education*. It met for the first time at Christmas 1907, and in fact put out interim recommendations in May 1908. These were followed by the full report on 28th November.

Oxford and Working-Class Education was the manifesto in which the WEA/extension alliance announced its project to the political class, to the middle class public, and to sympathetic trade union leaders. Specific plans for Ruskin College were also included.

The 189-page report includes chapters on: 'Educational movements particularly affecting workpeople'; 'The University and colleges of Oxford. Their purpose, history and endowments'; 'The Oxford University extension movement'; 'The demand made by workpeople for university education'; 'The establishment of tutorial classes beyond the limits of the university'; 'The admission of workpeople to Oxford'; and 'The after career of the working-class students', plus a summary of recommendations and nearly 100 pages of appendices.

Its main recommendations are as follows. Tutorial-type classes should be set up all over the country for working class adults. The tutors for these classes should be supplied by the universities. The funding should come mainly from LEAs. The running of the classes should be controlled by the students themselves, organised through the WEA. These classes should have three main

purposes. First, they would make life more enjoyable for the people who took them. Secondly, they should counter bias, and help working-class people, especially those involved in unions and/or the Labour Party, to make objective judgements about the world. Thirdly, they should provide a route by which a minority of this group could become students at Oxford University itself. (Here they would do either a special two year diploma in Economics, based on one that already existed, or another, to be introduced, in Political Science. It was expected that many if not most of those following this route would then become union leaders and/or M.P.s.)

The report recommended that the decision about which members of a tutorial class could progress beyond it should be taken by a selection committee. This should consist of: 'the class teacher, two University representatives, a representative of the Workers' Educational Association, of the local organisation [ie in the area where the class took place], and of the class'. Among three criteria to be used by this committee should be: 'the character and influence of the students, and in particular of any probability which may exist that they will be asked to hold places of trust and responsibility'. The last point here was important because 'it is one of the objects of the scheme which we recommend to give the broad general training needed to qualify workpeople for public positions'.

Students selected in this way should be supported financially - either by Oxford University itself, or by unions, or by local authorities. They should 'come up [ie to Oxford] either as members of an ordinary College, or as Non-collegiate students, or as members of Ruskin College'. The first year at Ruskin should become a route to entering the University as a diploma student. Those doing such a diploma could do it either via a second year at Ruskin or by one of the other routes cited above.

If adopted, these proposals would gear teaching at Ruskin to diploma course entry, and transfer virtually all decision-making about what was taught and learnt there to the university.

Alongside these administrative proposals, anxiety about Marxist ideas was reflected in the model curricula attached as appendices to the report, as well as in the notes about how lecturers should handle such topics.

Appendices VII and VIII set out specimen study units. Appendix VII does this under the title 'Courses of study', and provides units and detailed reading lists - for Economics, Recent English Literature (1785-1900), Recent English History, Modern World History, General English History, and Political Science - considered suitable for tutorial classes. Appendix VIII, written by Zimmern and

MacTavish, does so under the title 'Suggestions for Preliminary Study', and includes the following specific areas: 'The study of politics or political science'; 'Government and democracy'; 'War'; and 'The organization of knowledge'. These units aim to give an idea of what could be done with lower level students, who by this means could be prepared for tutorial class entry. These two appendices reveal the kind of curriculum and teaching method supporters of the WEA/extension alliance thought suitable for trade union students.

The report contained elements intended specifically to counter Marxist ideas. Thus in Appendix VII, under 'Recent English History', a recommended unit on 'The Labour-Socialist Movement in England since 1880' suggests to potential tutors that the 'gradual spread of the movement after 1880' was due, among other things, to 'the influence of the Continental Socialist movement (mainly in London)'. Reference is also made to Henry George, Marx and Hyndman. Again, a unit on 'Modern World History' includes a section (XI) on 'The Working Class Movement in Europe and England'. This covers, among other topics, 'The Carbonari', 'Robert Owen and the Chartists', 'Communism', 'Karl Marx and the Internationale' and 'Revisionism and Syndicalism'. Or again, the recommended unit on 'Economics' says that 'If many members of the class have socialistic views, it would be well to preface this part of the subject [ie the transition to economic theory] by reading Marx's *Capital*. . . . The first nine chapters of Book I contain the essence of the whole. The style is rather difficult, but a simplified statement is to be found in Hyndman's *Economics of Socialism*. . . . The teacher who adopts this course must, however, be very sure that the criticism of Marx, implicit in the ordinary textbook, is equally carefully explained. . . .' Finally, in the appendix on 'Suggestions for Preliminary Study', a discussion question under 'The Study of Politics or Political Science' asks 'Does not an ignorant fanatic achieve more in politics than a skilled political thinker?'

Oxford and Working-Class Education emphasised the need to foster 'harmony' between the classes by giving workers a 'broad outlook' and a 'synoptic mind'. Its tone was liberal and progressive. Despite this, it assumed throughout that the existing distribution of wealth and power in society would stay the same. In the end, it was an attempt by one section of the ruling class to convince other sections, including within Oxford University itself, that the growth of working class power could not be ignored or simply repressed, and that tutorial classes leading to university entrance via Ruskin were the best weapon for combating it.

7. The students' concept of education

In trying to educate themselves about socialism, activists like those at Ruskin began to solve for themselves the problems about lack of texts and of support from radicalised intellectuals discussed earlier on. Against the model proposed in *Oxford and Working-Class Education* they were able to set at least the beginnings of a coherent approach to socialist adult education from below. In developing this they brought back to life educational content and methods that had been developed by working-class organisations in the past.

In the ten years or so before the Ruskin struggle, activists began to evolve a set of common assumptions about what adult education for rank and file trade unionists should be like. As a result there existed amongst at least some of those who were students at Ruskin in 1908 a fairly precise conception of what should be taught and learnt. This conception was incompatible with *Oxford and Working-Class Education*. It revolved round three elements: Marxist economics; industrial history; and philosophy.

Activists who adopted this approach focused mainly on Marx's version of the labour theory of value, which they saw as the key to understanding the capitalist social order. They wanted to explain this to as many workers as possible, and they saw the study of economics as a way in which they could equip themselves to do this. In this, they were continuing an approach pioneered by Hyndman and Morris. Knowingly or otherwise, however, they were also revisiting the struggle over 'really useful knowledge' of eighty years before. (In that struggle, activists had tried to defend the economic ideas of people like Thomas Hodgskin against the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.)

Secondly, they knew from experience that the best way to convince other workers that Marx was right was by connecting his analyses to their working lives. This was a step towards socialism from below, because it was about finding things in workers' experience which would help them understand underlying forces, rather than simply announcing the law of value from above as the key to everything. They saw study of industrial history as the best preparation for activists planning to use this approach.

Thirdly, they based their approach on points made by both Marx and Engels about dialectics.

Marx and Engels believed that workers could use dialectical thought to cut through ruling class ideology. The Ruskin students focused on the version of dialectics that was accessible to them. This was Josef Dietzgen's *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* as published by Charles Kerr, which included the essay 'The Nature of Human Brainwork'. Although Dietzgen's approach was rather limited, this too represented a turn towards socialism from below, because it was about activists equipping themselves - and helping as many other workers as possible to equip themselves - with a capacity for reasoning, viewed both as a process inside each person's mind and as a tool for use in discussion and debate.

The Ruskin students also had a method by which teaching and learning could best be conducted. This method was arguably the key contribution made specifically by the SLP to the development of IWCE. The education historian Brian Simon was later to claim, convincingly, that it was similar to a method developed in the late 1700s by the London Corresponding Society.

Many of the 54 students at Ruskin College in 1908-09 were either in or close to the ILP or SDF. However, in June 1908, one of the first year students, George Harvey, left the ILP and joined the small branch of the SLP in Oxford. When he came to Ruskin, Harvey, born in 1885, was a checkweighman at Follonsby colliery in County Durham. (He was later to write books about the structure of the mining industry, and for many years the Follonsby miners' banner carried his portrait alongside that of Lenin.) Harvey was recruited to Ruskin via the Ruskin Hall Scheme. SLP ideas were known about in County Durham as a result of people from Scotland going to speak there. The SLP branch in Oxford was in existence by July 1905 and in 1910, after a period of growth, was still one of only 13 in England. Its most prominent member was Leonard Cotton. Cotton had been a founder member of the SLP. From 1910 to 1919 he was its national secretary. Between 1910 and 1912, Harvey would edit the SLP's main publication, *The Socialist*.

There are grounds for thinking that it was through Harvey that a teaching and learning method developed mainly by the SLP came to influence the students then at Ruskin. However, other factors too

bolstered this influence. First, as discussed earlier on, several key items of socialist literature were available to working class people in Britain at this time only through cheap translations produced by the SLP. Secondly, the SLP in Britain, partly as result of De Leon's influence, had a more rigorous approach to the ideological side of socialist activity than the SDF or ILP. Thirdly, this was the case not only at the level of the ideas which members held, but also in the means by which they equipped themselves to argue for those ideas. The overwhelmingly working class composition of the SLP may well have meant that, even more than other groups, it had to produce for itself, from amongst its own ranks, people who could conduct struggles about ideas.

Tom Bell, later prominent in the Communist Party, described the SLP method as follows: 'Our method in the classes was to open with an inaugural survey of the whole field we proposed to traverse, and to make the workers familiar with the subject as a whole; the textbooks etc, which included *Wage Labour and Capital*; *Value, Price and Profit*; *Capital* . . . Each student was given a series of definitions of terms used by Marx. These had to be studied, memorised and discussed thoroughly, for perhaps the first four weeks. The student would study *Wage Labour and Capital* at home. At the class we would read it over paragraph by paragraph, round the class. This practice aimed at helping students to speak fluently and grammatically. At the following class meetings questions would be put and answered, and the points raised thoroughly understood by everyone, the results of each lesson being summarised by the leader. This method was applied in the same way to industrial history. Later on, simple lessons in historical materialism and formal logic were added. So that, after six months of this, every worker who went through the entire session came out a potential tutor for other classes.'

Bell also described the classes held in Glasgow on Sunday afternoons: 'We had two and a half hours tuition; reading out aloud; questions and answers to last week's lessons; short discussions and examination of home-work; after which tea was made and for another hour we talked and discussed freely on all manner of political and educational subjects. An hour's respite and we would repair to Buchanan Street . . . or to Glasgow Green, to hold forth on socialist propaganda to large audiences who collected there every Sunday night.'

It seems likely that this method was devised before the split with the SDF by one of the founders of the SLP, George Yates. Yates was an engineering worker, who at the time was employed as a draughtsperson but who had also worked as a lab

technician at Edinburgh University. This method would have been attractive to students at Ruskin because many activists then, especially in England or Wales rather than Scotland, would have had only a basic primary schooling, learning by rote in classes of up to 100, under the threat of physical punishment. Many would have left at an early age, and any text-related education they had beyond that would usually have taken the form of private reading. The SLP method was rather rigid. However, it did involve discussion, it did emphasise understanding and it did produce workers who could argue with confidence in more or less any company. In fact, when he talks about the lectures on Marx's economics given from 1906 by the SDF/ British Socialist Party member John Maclean, Bell claims that: 'MacLean's method had the merit of popularising economic study amongst large numbers of the workers, but had the defect of becoming a propaganda lecture. The S.L.P. method was more intensive and produced a crop of competent class tutors, who led classes inside the factories. No such tutors came from MacLean's classes in this period . . .'

Commenting later on equivalent classes organised amongst SDF members in London in the same period, Jackson described a similar approach: 'It was our practice, then, to form classes for the study of Marx's economics. In Scotland, these classes were usually promoted and conducted by the S.D.F. branch, officially - and were often attended (more or less under obligation) by every member of the branch. In England, and especially in London, they were formed by the members individually . . .' He added: 'I have noted . . . a difference between Scottish and English practice in the matter of economics classes. This difference turned upon . . . the fact that the 'traditional distrust of theory' which Engels notes . . . in England, was nothing like so evident in Scotland . . . the level of education in the public elementary schools was definitely higher in Scotland than in England: and in addition, for historical reasons, there was in Scotland a popular respect for learning that had no counterpart in England. I fancy - though this is only my guess - that an early drilling in the Shorter Catechism had something to do with giving our Scottish comrades their taste for, and respect of *logic*.'

The SLP method, then, produced articulate activists, people who would be confident enough, for example, to challenge the Oxford University graduates employed to lecture on economics at Ruskin.

As well as possessing a view of what the content of education should be, and a teaching and learning method which went with this, some Ruskin students

and ex-students also began to develop a critique of the dominant university curriculum, which they referred to as 'orthodox' education. This critique went much further than a narrow demand for training in Marxist economics or techniques for winning debates.

That there was an urgent need for a kind of training was expressed well by a delegate to the Rhondda No. 1 District of the SWMF, when he said: 'We have to contend with the masters, who have men thoroughly versed in the laws of supply and demand, and we want to bring into our ranks young men educated in these matters at Ruskin College, able to hold their own against all comers'. In line with this, an article in *'The Plebs' Magazine* issue 2 by the Western Valleys miner Ted Gill (at Ruskin in 1907-08), titled 'The function of a Labour College', integrated this need within a broader framework. Gill argued that 'What he [the working class student] requires is a knowledge of the social forces operating in society, and how best they can be utilized for the benefit of the people. While it may be as well for him to know the other side of the case in the field of Political Economy, it is essential that he should know his own side. The theories of men, who dedicated their lives to the Workers' cause, should be interpreted to him in a sympathetic and efficient manner. He should be made conversant with the origin, and growth of all working-class organizations in the manner which would enable him to comprehend both their possibilities and shortcomings. The workings of his own organization should be his special interest in order to detect possible defects, the removal of which would lead to greater unity'.

Gill's formulation, like the poems by activists in the early issues of *'The Plebs' Magazine*, testifies that what they wanted was anything but narrow training or crude agitation. Rather, there was a tradition which encouraged them to be critical of academia. We can see this in, for example, the section of the *Communist Manifesto* which discusses 'the ruling ideas', in Morris's description of capitalist intellectuals as 'the crowd of useless, drabble-tailed knaves and fools who, under the pretentious title of the intellectual part of the middle classes, have in their turn taken the place of the mediaeval jester', in Engels's description of Oxford and Cambridge as 'protestant monasticism', or in Josef Dietzgen's characterisation of academics as 'graduated flunkeys' - which encouraged them to be critical of academia. Walter Vrooman himself had described Oxford tutors as 'giants of understanding' who were 'walking cyclopaedias crushed like the miser beneath the weight of their possessions'. In line with these views, the editorial in *'The Plebs' Magazine* issue 3 (April 1909) would argue that:

'University life is the breeding ground of re-action. It incites by its very nature toward breaking away from working-class aspirations and cleaving unto the ideals of the class above. The knowledge that is to be of any service to the Labour Movement is not to be gained in that quarter. The problem of the workshop, the mine and the factory, is not to be solved in the University. All that the latter can do for the Labour leader is to intellectually enslave him, and through his enslavement to clog and confuse the working-class movement . . .'

In the polemical struggle against the WEA, which was still going on in *Plebs* in the 1960s, one of the key charges was that the WEA's emphasis on tutorial classes required students to accept 'orthodox' education rather than challenge it. It is therefore not surprising that the Ruskin students rejected the WEA's central assumption: that all true education is class neutral. Thus in *'The Plebs' Magazine* issue 3, the author of an unsigned article about 'Our critics' would address the claim that "Education is not a class question" in the following way. "Is this true? To a large extent it may be true of the physical sciences, but it is *not* true of social science, i.e., history and economics. To the working-class the present form of Society is a temporary stage, and a painful one at that, in social evolution; one whose exit must be hastened as speedily as possible. To the other class on the contrary, it is the natural form of Society, just and eternal: "everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds". Needless to state these different views result in different interpretations of history and economics. In history, progress will be due to the activities of the ruled or the rulers: in economics, the owners or employers will be either benefactors or parasites. In short, *in the world of education there is reproduced the antagonism which prevails in the world of production*. That all workers do not recognize this no more disposes of the fact, than is the value of industrial organization discounted, because so many workers remain unorganized. Indeed, there is a curious resemblance between unorganized labour and uncontrolled [ie by the working-class] education, and in both cases the capitalist class stands to benefit". Or again, in *'The Plebs' Magazine* issue 5 (June 1909) an unsigned editorial ironically summed up the WEA project in this way: 'Behold I show unto you [ie the ruling class] a more excellent way than the ballot box and the lock-out and the injunction, a way of dividing the working class and of strengthening the status of your class: by the W.E.A. shalt thou conquer'.

In the period leading up to the strike, Ruskin students began to teach one another, using the method described here. There existed in the college, then, on the one hand, the official

programme of lectures, the majority of which increasingly came to conform to the model set out in *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, and, on the other, an alternative model introduced by the students from below.

Describing his arrival at Ruskin as a student in 1908, the former South Wales railway-worker Will Craik would later say: 'We new arrivals had little or no knowledge of what had been taking place at Ruskin before we got there. Most of us were socialists of one party shade or another . . . We were, however, soon made aware that the socialism of the second-year men was hewn from more solid and durable stone than ours. Very soon, too, they were urging us and helping us to dig with them in the same quarry. They had been quarrying in the works of Karl Marx . . . Still earlier students had begun to do the same thing by conducting among themselves study classes'. He went on: '. . . it was the practice in those self-service classes for each member to be given one of the more difficult

sections of the first volume of *Capital* . . . to explain to the class what he understood it to mean.

Through these classes and the individual study which they involved we gradually gained a knowledge which was simply unobtainable from the resident lecture staff, with the exception of the Principal.'

The activists concentrated at Ruskin College in 1907-09, then, understood the need for the working class to produce from within its own ranks people who, as well as being practical organisers, could also think for themselves as socialists, and spread the capacity to do this to an expanding circle of people. They also possessed a teaching and learning method for bringing this about. Between October 1908 and the strike in March/April 1909, their approach and that of the Extension delegacy/WEA, as set out in *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, squared up to one another within the college.

8. Interventions in Ruskin 1907-09

Achieving control of Ruskin College was central to the WEA/extension project. From the summer of 1907 onwards, its supporters threw themselves into open propaganda, behind-the-scenes lobbying and bureaucratic manoeuvring - all aimed at purging the college of whatever stood in their way.

As well as setting up the committee to oversee the writing of *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, the August 1907 Oxford Delegacy/WEA conference also set up an Oxford Tutorial Classes Committee, with Temple - for the University - and Mansbridge - for the WEA - as its joint secretaries. Under this, and with support from a number of Oxford colleges, eight tutorial classes were eventually started.

The first two of these began in January 1908 when, on Mansbridge's initiative, Tawney, by this stage a part time lecturer at Glasgow University, began to teach tutorial classes for working people at Longton in Staffordshire and in Rochdale. By the way he ran these classes, Tawney showed that Mansbridge's approach could work in practice. At this point, the WEA/extension alliance moved on from promoting tutorial classes to organising them. At the same point, influential backers within Oxford University began manoeuvring to control Ruskin.

In 1899, when Ruskin was founded, there were in Oxford some academics who supported the founders' project. One such, for example, was Professor Yorke Powell, who chaired the public meeting at which the college was inaugurated. Similarly, the faculty chosen by Vrooman included, along with Hird and Hacking, two Oxford graduates who were at that stage sympathetic: H. B. Lees Smith and Bertram Wilson. In 1900 Lees Smith, who was now the vice principal, wrote an appeal to unions for funds. He concluded this by saying: 'We shall be quite content if we have a Labour College, no more and no less'. However, the situation began to change in 1902 when the founders ceased to provide an income.

First, three Oxford professors sent an appeal round the university asking for donations, on the grounds that otherwise Ruskin would become dependent on union funding alone. Although this appeal was unsuccessful, Bertram Wilson, as general secretary and treasurer of the college executive, began to pursue the same goal by appealing to wealthy individuals across the country. In the process, he also distanced himself further and further from his initial sympathy with what Beard and the Vroomans wanted to achieve.

Among those who contributed in response to Wilson's approaches were the Duke of Fife, the Duke of Norfolk, Lord Avebury, Lord Crewe, Lord Monkswell, Lord Ripon, Lord Rothschild, Lord Tweedmouth, Lord Northcliffe, Lord Roseberry, the Right Honourable Sydney Buxton (ie the vice principal's father), and Alfred Marshall. Clearly, the more 'non-partisan' the curriculum at Ruskin could become, the more chance there was of raising money from such sources.

This does not mean that it was part of the WEA/extension project to exclude union funding altogether. On the contrary, in 1906 one of Mansbridge's clerical supporters, Dr John Percival, Bishop of Hereford, wrote to the Chair of the Oxford Extension Delegacy to advise him that 'to exercise its highest influence among the working class generally', Oxford should work through leading TUs. The role played in 1907-09 by the Ruskin TU governors Bell and Shackleton shows that mainstream union leaders were more than willing to support this collaboration. The point was, rather, that the extension side did not want Ruskin to be funded exclusively by unions because they believed that this funding might eventually come under rank and file control.

In 1907, Lees Smith was appointed as a professor at Bristol University. At the same time the Ruskin governors made him Director of Studies at Ruskin, and chairperson of the college's executive committee. In this capacity, he acted over the head of Dennis Hird, to appoint one of his friends, Furniss, as a lecturer, and, in October, another, Charles Sydney Buxton, as vice-principal. Neither of these people could claim to have any knowledge of - or connection with - the labour movement or working class. At this time also the governors restructured the college executive. They put the vice principal and general secretary in joint charge with the principal, rather than under him as before.

Following the decisive Delegacy/WEA meeting in Oxford in August, the level of direct intervention in the college rose sharply.

Early in the term which began in October 1907, A. L. Smith, a fellow and tutor of Balliol College and one of the Extension Delegacy's nominees on the committee that had overseen *Oxford and Working-Class Education*, came to Ruskin to meet the students. At this informal meeting he told them that there was 'a sort of committee' that was trying to promote closer links between the college and the University.

Soon after this, and still within October, the chancellor of Oxford and former viceroy of India, Lord Curzon of Kedleston, who was writing a book about how the university as a whole could be reformed - also visited Ruskin. This episode was

later described in the Plebs League pamphlet *The Burning Question of Education* as follows:

'The students were all standing and had formed a ring, in the centre of which Lord Curzon spoke. Mr. Hird also advanced to the centre and stood facing Lord Curzon while he replied. The contrast between the two men was very striking. The circumstances in which they met invested the event with a distinctly dramatic colour. Lord Curzon wearing his Doctor of Laws gown - not the glittering robes of the Chancellor's office, but robes of dark coloured cloth devoid of ornamentation, as if they represented the University in mourning for the condescension implied in his visit. Not so Lord Curzon himself, however. He stood in a position of ease, supporting himself by a stick, which he held behind him as a prop to the dignity of the upper part of his body. A trifling superiority in height, increased by the use of the stick, allowed him to look down somewhat on Mr. Hird. It was easy to see that this man had been a Viceroy of India. Autocratic disdain, and the suggestion of a power almost feudal in its character, seemed stamped on his countenance.

'As the purport of Mr. Hird's reply reached his comprehension, Lord Curzon seemed to freeze into a statuesque embodiment of wounded dignity. For Mr. Hird was not uttering the usual compliments, but was actually rebuking the University for having neglected Ruskin college until the day of its assured prosperity. As he spoke, the students moved instinctively towards him as if mutely offering him support. Mr. Hird, who had begun with flushed cheeks and a slight tremor in his voice, now seemed inspired with an enthusiasm and dignity that only comes to a man who voices the highest aspirations of a great Movement.

'In substance, he said: 'My Lord, when you speak of Ruskin College you are not referring merely to this institution here in Oxford, for this is only a branch of a great democratic movement that has its roots all over the country. To ask Ruskin College to come into closer contact with the University is to ask the great democracy whose foundation is the Labour Movement, a democracy that in the near future will come into its own, and, when it does, will bring great changes in its wake.' As he concluded, the burst of applause that emanated from the students seemed to herald the dawn of the day Dennis Hird had predicted.

'Without another word, Lord Curzon turned on his heel and walked out, followed by the remainder of the lecture staff, who looked far from pleased.'

As a direct consequence of this - and again still within October - a sub committee of the Ruskin executive, composed of half of its members plus Lees Smith as director of studies, proposed that Hird be forbidden to continue teaching economics

and sociology (which he alone taught) and that instead he must lecture only on literature and on temperance. Early in November, when the students found out about this, all except one signed a petition against it.

In the spring of 1908, a meeting took place, at the students' request, between representatives of the students and the two main trade union governors of Ruskin. These governors were the general secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, Richard Bell, and David Shackleton, the general secretary of the Textile Workers Association. (Shackleton, MP for Clitheroe, was currently president of the TUC, and had from 1902-05 been chairperson of the Labour Party. He was also a nominee of the WEA executive on the committee set up at the 1907 Oxford Extension Delegacy conference to oversee *Oxford and Working-Class Education*.) The students' asked for this meeting so that they could press these governors to try harder for union funding. According to Craik, who was one of the delegates, Bell and Shackleton insisted that the college must continue to depend partly on private donations.

In the summer of 1908 the Ruskin executive, again acting over Hird's head, brought in 'Revision Papers' - compulsory written tests - for all first year students. (Up till then all assessment had been via tutors' comments on monthly essays, given in one-to-one interviews. This was the basis on which workers were recruited as students. However, whereas Hird and Hacking were good at giving feedback in this way, Lees Smith and Furniss found it difficult. Thus in a 1975 interview Jack Parks, a former Durham miner and friend of George Harvey, who before going to Ruskin had lost a leg in a pit accident and seen his family evicted as a result, described a confrontation with Furniss. Parks had made reference to Marx in an economics essay, and Furniss had written comments on the essay 'correcting' what Parks had said. Parks then produced the relevant extracts from Marx, and Furniss conceded, but also refused to change his overall mark. After this, as Parks put it, 'I never wrote for him again'.) Students who protested against these 'Revision Papers' were told that they must either take them or be barred from entering the second year. This was a move towards formalising study at Ruskin in line with the recommendations of *Oxford and Working-Class Education*.

In August 1908, the *Cornhill Magazine* printed an article by the vice-principal of Ruskin, Sydney Buxton. This article included the sentence: 'The necessary common bond [ie between working class people and the better-off] is education in citizenship, and it is this which Ruskin College tries to give

- conscious that it is only a new patch on an old garment, an idealist experiment *in faece Romuli*. 'Faece' literally means dregs.

The joint Oxford Extension Delegacy/WEA committee, still with Mansbridge and Temple as secretaries, had by this time been made permanent, and in October the WEA extension bloc and its supporters, who were now nearly in control of the college, started a carrot and stick policy towards the students and the two staff members who supported them. Thus from autumn 1908 through to the first three months of 1909, students were often invited to tea with Oxford dons. At the same time, there were more and more attempts to clamp down on them speaking at meetings both in Oxford and elsewhere. In October a sub committee of the executive had been quick to condemn the formation of The League of the 'Plebs'. Because the students had now begun to stay away from lectures by Furniss and Buxton, the executive ruled that attendance at all lectures was compulsory. On 2nd December, after *Oxford and Working-Class Education* had been officially published, Mansbridge wrote to the labour movement members of the joint committee to say that in his view 'all is now in order at Oxford'.

In this situation, Dennis Hird, although banned by the executive from associating himself openly with the Plebs League, took the students' side. At the beginning of March 2009 the governors claimed that he was 'failing to maintain discipline', and demanded his resignation, which he gave.

The WEA/extension alliance may well have anticipated that the students would protest against them setting Hird up in this way. As well as this, they probably calculated that they could use these protests to identify and purge the most leftwing students, and thereby intimidate the others. However, they probably did not realise that the students and ex-students had a positive project of their own, and the capacity to carry it through.

9. Plebs thinking 1908-09

Some of the material written by the students and former students shows that they were moving towards a coherent theoretical analysis of the factors at stake in the Ruskin struggle.

The 4-page editorial in the first issue of *'The Plebs' Magazine* was probably written by George Sims. Sims was a carpenter from Bermondsey who had left school at the age of eight to become a page boy in a Park Lane mansion. Although sponsored at Ruskin by Salter, he had between 1904 and 1907 been secretary of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Trades and Labour Council. Sims had been a member of the SDF, but he was expelled from it in 1908 for advocating industrial unionism. In 1918, while serving as a sergeant major in northern Italy he would write an open letter to *Plebs* in which he would say: 'I met Marx in 1908. True, he had been dead then some twenty-three years . . . Who can be dead when his influence appeals to, *lives* with one as intimately as the closest of friends? . . . I had tried for years to get a feeling of reality in religion . . . But with the first reading of the *Communist Manifesto*, how the pamphlet appealed to something in me . . . the Christian looks to the miracle of individual conversion and the fatalist to the event. We are neither fatalists nor believers in miracles - simply people who know the inevitableness of the end; the inevitability of social evolution, of development and progress based upon material needs . . .'

On Friday 5th February 1909, Sims spoke at a Plebs League social held in the Cooperative Hall, Cowley Road, Oxford. This was reported in *'The Plebs' Magazine* issue 1 as follows: 'Mr Sims, of Ruskin College, in a short and breezy speech, explained that the object of the "Plebs" League was to bring about a definite and more satisfactory connexion between Ruskin College and the Labour Movement. He said in order to promote those interests, it was essential that the teaching the worker received should be in harmony with such interests, and that it should not require that mental condition known as the open mind, which often betokened an empty mind. It was necessary that the control of their institution should be ultimately in the hands of the workers. Their mandate was "the education of the workers in the interests of the workers".'

The editorial's first words were: 'Enter the "Plebs", not from above but from below, not to fight a sham battle among the shadows by the orders and for the interests of our masters, but to fight a real battle in the full light and with a clear knowl-

edge of the issue before us'. Sims then explained the purpose of the magazine as follows: 'To make clear the real position of Ruskin College, to point out its present weaknesses, to outline its possibilities, to demonstrate its value to the Labour Movement if definitely founded thereon, to stimulate active interest in working-class education and to open out propaganda of an educational character from the working-class point of view . . .'

Next, he explained that the management of *'The Plebs' Magazine* 'will be entirely free from any connection with existing organisations', adding that 'we are not appealing to any party or section of the working-class but to all workers, irrespective of whether they are I.L.P.eers, S.D.P.eers, Trade Unionists or Non-Unionists'.

Then, having defined the 'mission' of *'The Plebs' Magazine* as 'to bring about a definite and more satisfactory connection between Ruskin College and the Labour Movement', he explained how this would require: 'that this institution shall be open to all workers, that it shall be controlled by a representative assembly of the workers, and finally that the education imparted shall be of a kind and of a quality capable of application in the interests of the workers as a class'.

Sims then gave over a longer section of the editorial to explaining that there were two irreconcilable sets of class interests in present day society. Within this, he said: 'Now the non-producers want more and more, and the producers want more and more. But in order that the former may get more, the latter must take less, and inversely.' (He presented, then, a conception of class struggle based on inequality of distribution rather than on the Marxist conception of exploitation at the point of production.)

He moved on to reject the education on offer via extension, saying that 'it is essential that the teaching the worker receives shall be in harmony with [his/her own class] interests . . . that it shall not require of the student that particular mental condition known in "the home of lost causes" [Oxford University] as "the open mind," *open*, in order that the apologist may write his sweet will upon it and close it with the seal of the verbal juggler'. From this it follows that: 'If the education of the workers is to square with the ultimate object of the workers - social emancipation, then it is necessary that the control of such an educational institution must be in the hands of the workers'.

In support of this principle of not trusting other classes with workers' education, Sims cited the

example of a factory owner who gives money 'for the purpose of promoting the education of working men' while denying his/her own employees the leisure time needed for study, adding that: 'Inability to recognise the class cleavage was responsible for the downfall of the Plebs of the Roman Empire'.

Sims next maintained that: 'Ruskin College provides the necessary machinery for turning out men capable of playing an important part in the fight for freedom'. He then adds three points about 'the aims and ideals of the League of the 'Plebs' (ie rather than just of the magazine). First, 'It seeks to bind the students of Ruskin College, past and present, in closer union with each other . . .' Secondly, 'It endeavours to permeate the Labour Movement in all its ramifications with the desire for human liberation'. Thirdly, 'Realising that the propelling force behind all social progress is social knowledge, it aspires to the dissemination and continuity of such knowledge among those whom it will reach'. Restating the mandate of the League as: '*the education of the workers in the interests of the workers*', he ended by defining the ultimate goal as 'INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY'.

The other main article in the first issue of '*The Plebs' Magazine*' is 'The relation of Ruskin College to the Labour Movement' by the miners' checkweighman Noah Ablett, who had been a student at Ruskin in 1907-08. Ablett had been a preacher during the 1904-05 South Wales religious revival. Soon after this, however, he joined the ILP. While at Ruskin, Ablett took part in the Oxford branch of the British Advocates of Industrial Unionism (BAIU).

In December 1909, Ablett was back in Oxford, speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Oxford branch of the Plebs League, held in the Commercial Road Schoolroom, St Ebbe's. His response to questions was detailed in '*The Plebs' Magazine*' issue 1 as follows: 'Ruskin College was not an educational experiment in the ordinary sense of the world. It arose out of the necessities of the Labour Movement. It was a temporary and specialized institution, and therefore could not be considered as part of the national scheme of education. The present institution, Mr Ablett continued, was not owned and controlled by the Labour Movement and this was a defect that this League of the "Plebs" was going to put right . . . If the present institution could not be secured, then other institutions must arise to fulfil this now indispensable function for the working-class'. In his article, Ablett argued as follows.

First, he pointed out the growing trend for the working class to act independently (as for example 'in the political arena') and noted the desperate attempts by 'the hosts of reaction, in their innumer-

able guises' to prevent this spreading to other areas of life. Noting also that: 'Nowhere is this more evident than in the controversial sphere of education', he went on: 'The number of attempts to impose education from "above" are legion. Prominent among them stands the University Extension movement with its powerful ally the Workers' Educational Association'. Conceding that education in the physical sciences may be class neutral, he insisted that in fields like 'social science e.g. history and economics', '[e]ducation, particularly the kind needed by the workers, is not that impartial universal thing so much gushed about by educationalists'. He advocated changes in Ruskin College's 'curriculum and governing authority' such that it 'will take its place as an integral part of the Labour Movement'.

Posing the question: 'What is the importance of the strategic [sic] position of Ruskin College to the Labour Movement?', Ablett first pointed out that: 'It is a rule generally recognized in the tactics of any conflict that any position which excites the envy and desire of the opposition, is worthy the effort of preservation' - in other words, we must deny the ruling class this position from which they can attack us. But he then moved at once to a positive case for 'the advantages of Ruskin College to the Labour Movement', claiming that: 'The first, and greatest of these, lies in the necessary calibre of the students. Here are fifty students annually from the trade unions, from every industrial quarter of the country. They are essentially men who have already qualified themselves for active service in the Labour Movement. And, above all, they have ideals necessarily untainted by the commercialism that is such an unfortunate blot upon most educational institutions. In the present loose democracy of the trade-unions, individuals count for much. Such a body of men, scientifically trained to adapt themselves to the needs of the workers with a knowledge of the economics of Labour coupled with the ability of speech and the pen, would naturally be expected to wield a great influence in their respective localities. Gathered together in a little community for one or two years; the interchange of ideas; the various methods of improving conditions; the lessons to be gained by successes, and failures; these things constitute advantages of too great, and unique a character to be overlooked'.

Ablett then spelt out the danger faced by the college: '. . . if the attempt now being made to attach Ruskin College to the University - and the consequent permeation of University ideas into the minds of the young bloods of Labour - should succeed, then the main source of the future strength of the Labour Movement will be drained away into channels useless from the point of view of the mission of the workers stated above'. He

added that: 'There are people who oppose this view, who think Ruskin College, if attached to the University, would permeate instead of being permeated', a standpoint he dismisses as 'ridiculously disproportioned'.

Here again, then, we see the idea that the college must become fully part of the working-class movement, that it should produce thinkers and organisers, and that the WEA/extension project would make this impossible. As Ablett put it: 'If [Ruskin] is absorbed by the University, its interest to the working class will be nil. *They will have to look in other directions.* If on the other hand, the workers take control of it, a new era will have dawned in the annals of the Labour Movement. The education of the workers will assume a new and fuller meaning.'

We can also see the students' and ex-students' analysis in the post-strike reprint of their pamphlet, *The Burning Question of Education*. This was now subtitled 'Being an account of Ruskin College dispute, its cause and consequences'. It was addressed at least partly to union activists who may have been uncertain about whether support should now be withdrawn from Ruskin College. On p7 of this, the writer argued that: 'Every class that has obtained power in our history has been able to maintain it only by controlling the educational machinery . . . There is as much conflict in the educational world as in the industrial and political world', while on page 17 the writer explained that, as a result of the extensionist take-over of Ruskin, 'the whole idea of the "Plebs" was widened so as to assume the form not merely of an institution, but of

an educational structure similar in magnitude to the Trade Unions and political parties'. Against this background, it was then argued (p20) that under the new circumstances: 'To be loyal to Ruskin College is to conceal the disloyalty of Ruskin College to the Labour Movement'. This was explained (p21) in the following terms: 'Class interests and class education are inseparable. An educational institution which either consciously, or unconsciously, neglects to recognize this incontrovertable [sic] fact, stands in the way of progress and deceives those who believe in it'.

Finally, on pages 14-15, the writer said: 'The theories contained in the "Social Contract" was [sic] the means of rallying and marshalling the forces that, set into operation, accomplished the French Revolution. But the educational structure of the working class, training the best young brains of organized labour, may have to turn out many Rousseaus, who will have to direct a movement many times larger and more important to the future of humanity than the movement which came into power with the French Revolution. How important then becomes the control of Ruskin College!' (The last sentence indicates that at this stage the League still hoped to win control of Ruskin, and in fact merger talks between the Central Labour College and Ruskin did take place - unsuccessfully - after the CLC moved to London in 1911.)

Analyses like those quoted here arose from and fed back into the practical struggle over the control of Ruskin and adult education.

10. Plebs action 1908-09

As the students and their contacts amongst former students became aware of the drive by the WEA/Extension alliance to take control of Ruskin, they began to organise themselves against it. During the 'strike' that followed Hird's enforced resignation, a qualitative change occurred in their strategy, as a result of which 29 of the current students, again supported by former students, threw their energies into creating a new institution, the Central Labour College.

From the early days of Ruskin Hall onwards, its working-class students had been forced from time to time to defend themselves against 'the university' - that is, gangs of upper class students - and to fight in the most literal fashion for the working class's right to freedom of speech and assembly. For a long time, for example, Ruskin students had

held street meetings propagandising for socialism at the Martyrs' Memorial in Oxford. These meetings could involve physical conflict with university students. On one occasion at least this led, in the words of the miner Jack Lawson, to a 'free fight, flying Ruskin men and the windows of the College being smashed with bricks'. Conflict like this also broke out when Ruskin students arranged for people like James Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and James Connolly to speak in Oxford. Or again, in 1907 there was a fist fight in the town hall when stewards tried to stop Ruskin students putting questions to the visiting speaker, Lord Carson.

In the more complex struggle against the WEA/extension alliance, the students took their first major step in October 1908, by setting up The League of the 'Plebs'.

This title tells us several things about their approach. In response to Buxton's reference to '*in faece Romuli*', it was their way of saying that they too knew about things like Roman history, and that workers were not dependent on people like Buxton for such knowledge. It also reflects the influence of De Leon's ideas, and specifically the fact that the students set a priority on workers developing their capacity to think for themselves. Lastly, it suggests that they were prepared, if they judged it necessary, to 'secede' from Ruskin College, as in 494 BC the plebs had walked out of Rome.

Secondly, they published later that autumn the first edition of *The Burning Question of Education*. This was their answer to Oxford and working-Class Education. (The title echoed De Leon's *The Burning Question of Trade Unionism*.)

Thirdly, in February 1909 they launched '*The Plebs*' Magazine as a monthly journal. (This was printed at the start by T. J. Fox, a former Ruskin student who was now a partner in a local printing business.)

Fourthly, they organised the 'strike' itself. Although Hird actually resigned on 12th March, he did not tell the students that he had done this until the morning of the 26th. In a meeting later that day, 46 of the 54 students agreed to take action, starting at once, to get him reinstated. This action, in which all 54 eventually took part, continued until 6th April. It consisted of a boycott of official lectures and their replacement by classes run by the students themselves.

The 26th March meeting passed this resolution: '1. That all lectures in the Institution be boycotted, with the exception of Mr Hird's.

2. That all house duties be carried on as usual.

3. That the Committee be instructed to form classes among the students in accordance with the present curriculum.

4. That should any student, or number of students, be victimised by any Member of the Faculty, or by the Executive Council, all the students, now in residence at Ruskin College, will leave in a body.

5. That Mr. Dennis Hird's resignation be withdrawn, and the resignations of Messrs. Buxton and Wilson be tendered instead.

6. That no student shall allow himself to be interviewed by any Member of the Faculty or the Executive Council. All matters between the students and the staff [to] be carried on by correspondence.

7. That the Working Committee be instructed to draw up a circular re present situation, and send copies to Trade unions, Labour and Socialist organisations, the Press and past students.' (The students signed this as a round robin.)

A special supplement on Hird's resignation was added to the third (April 1909) issue of '*The Plebs*'

Magazine, which had been due to go to press on 23/3/09. The anonymous author of this supplement commented that: 'As a matter of fact the Principal of Ruskin College is the only individual in the institution capable of maintaining order. Only he does not carry about with him a pocket edition of the Czar of Russia. He realizes that he has to deal with men, and not undergraduates or schoolboys, and therefore he acts accordingly. It is the people with schoolboy minds that want schoolboy order . . . He is as far removed from the other members of the lecturing staff as a mountain is from a mole hill . . .' A little further on, the writer adds in italics: 'And the only man who can secure order is he who has been compelled to resign, because he is said to have failed to maintain order'.

Moving on to speak of the students' response to Hird's sacking, the supplement's author wrote: 'The students stand united to a man, and they look for the same united support from the Labour Movement . . . The clock has struck for finality of action, and every man is at his post filled with a chronic enthusiasm which goes up as a sheet of flame. Fellow-workers, we are looking to you! Do not fail us! The next few days will be of moment and of memory. Let it be a memory of triumph.'

Finally, the students moved from resistance to the setting up of an independent working-class adult education system. This had two aspects: the formation of local classes and the foundation of the Central Labour College. Although they had taken some steps towards the first of these aspects in January 1909, they took the final decision about the second during the strike itself.

The strike was given national press coverage from 31st March, some of it fairly sympathetic. However, almost immediately after this, the secretary of the college council (ie the governors), the Rev. A. J. Carlyle, called the students together and told them that the council had confirmed the executive's decision to demand Hird's resignation. The 'strike' continued till 6pm on 6th March. The students called it off after the executive, having decided to close the college for two weeks, agreed to pay boarding expenses and/or fares back to their home areas.

During the two-weeks when the college was closed, the students who returned to their local areas used the time to build support for classes there, both by strengthening study circles which already existed and by organising new ones. The classes in each area were known collectively as its 'labour college'. The editorial in '*The Plebs*' Magazine issue 3 explained the thinking behind this drive as follows: 'The establishment of working-class Colleges throughout the country, owned and controlled by the workers themselves, will do more

to hasten the hour of economic deliverance than anything else we know of'.

At the start the main centre of such classes was South Wales, followed by the North East. However, classes quickly took root in many other areas. For example, one of the Ruskin strikers organised so effectively in the WEA stronghold of Rochdale that, between October 1910 and April 1911, IWCE classes were being held there seven times a week, and 150 people were taking part in them. This was not something temporary. By the end of 1917, for example, about 50 trade union branches were affiliated to the Plebs League's northeast region, where 16 classes were running, while a newly established Plebs League branch in the Glasgow area already had 20 classes. By 1926-27, across England, Wales and Scotland, 1,201 classes were in operation (now under the title of the National Council of Labour Colleges), with 31,635 students. Even in 1936-37 there were 764 classes with 15,018 students.

Writing in 1967 the historian Michael Woodhouse concluded: '... there is little doubt, from an examination of the reports in *Plebs Magazine* over the period 1910-1920, that the [IWCE] movement established itself firmly in a number of important industrial areas, London, Lancashire, North-East England and West of Scotland included, and exercised considerable influence in forming the outlook of some thousands of militants. The widespread influence of the Labour College movement is worth emphasising, for it meant that... it acted as the main institution for the propagation of Marxism among advanced workers'.

The decision to set up the Central Labour College was taken in a 'referendum' held amongst Plebs League members at Ruskin in the period between Carlyle's announcement and the calling-off of the strike. In this referendum, a majority decided to put their energies into preparing the ground for a separate Central Labour College.

We can work out what arguments were put for this during the strike from what Sims and Ablett had already said, and also from what was written in *The Plebs' Magazine* after the decision had been taken.

In the beginning the League's main emphasis had been on bringing about 'a more satisfactory relationship between Ruskin College and the Labour Movement'. In practice this would have meant building rank and file pressure on union leaders to fund Ruskin. However, the editorial in the May 1909 issue of *The Plebs' Magazine*, which must have been written towards the end of April, announces that: 'Ruskin College has ceased to fulfil whatever useful function it did perform for the Labour Movement. **Henceforth the object of the "Plebs" must be to assist in the establishing of**

a new educational structure definitely controlled by organized Labour' [Plebs' emphasis].

The author then combined this with the argument against bogus 'impartiality', arguing that: 'the worker is either robbed or not robbed; Labour is either paid or unpaid. To ask the workers to be neutral is both insulting, and absurd. The "impartial education" idea has its source in a very "partial" quarter, and so long as the control of education comes from that quarter the working-class movement will be poisoned and drained. In this light, Ruskin College stands condemned'. Except for a short verse quotation, this editorial eventually concludes: 'Working class education is the powerful stimulating force that alone can build up efficient working-class organisation, and to this end we must press forward'. The fact that classes were starting in local areas must also have strengthened the case for a Central College to train teachers.

Ten students left Ruskin after the 'strike' and the governors excluded some others shortly afterwards. Some of those who went back accepted what the college management had done. However, a good many actively supported the Central Labour College project. During the strike, the governors had written to Dr Salter and persuaded him to withdraw George Sims's scholarship. Sims remained in Oxford and led the activity that made the CLC possible.

By the time the editorial for the June issue of the magazine was being written, a timetable had been laid down for setting up the CLC. Referring to the date fixed for the first annual 'meet' of the League, and responding to 'those who would swing the reactionary rod over the mental life of the working class', the editorial says: 'The second day of August will witness the *Declaration of Working Class Independence in Education*, a declaration which will express the fact that the workers prefer to think for themselves... free from the spell of a servile tradition and a slave philosophy, and to look at the facts as they see them from their standpoint'.

By this stage, each issue of the magazine was carrying an advert for the League. This advert defined the League's 'object' as: 'To further the interests of the Central Labour College, for working men and women, at Oxford, and to assist in the formation of similar institutions elsewhere, all of the institutions to be controlled by the organized Labour bodies'.

On 2nd August, two hundred prominent socialist and labour movement backers came to the first annual 'meet' of the Plebs League in Oxford. They ratified the decision to establish the CLC, and approved the arrangements which Sims had put in place.

On 8th September the CLC opened in premises hired by Sims, with Hird as warden. There were 20 residential students, some of them former Ruskin strikers and some sent by unions which transferred their scholarships to the new institution. The CLC

had 15 students in 1910-11, 22 in 1911-12, 17 in 1912-13, and 9 in 1914-15. Nearly all these students were sponsored by the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF).

11. Conclusion

The line of argument in this pamphlet can be summarised as follows.

The Ruskin students saw the need for the working-class movement to produce for itself its own thinkers and organisers (Chapter 1). University extension was a movement conducted by Christian socialists which, under the guise of reforming the universities and reaching out to the poor, in fact aimed at creating a layer of compliant spokespersons amongst the working class. By 1899 this was clearly failing, because workers were rejecting it (Chapter 2). Ruskin College when founded was a mixture of socialist education centre and utopian colony. Once the founders left, it was faced with becoming either part of the extension movement or a labour college backed by the unions. The students wanted it to be a labour college, but under the control of rank and file union members rather than bureaucrats. Either way, it was attracting and retaining working class students (Chapter 3). Albert Mansbridge was a working-class product of the Christian socialist and extension movement. He saw that extension was failing to hold working class people because it was not providing dialogue between them and university tutors (Chapter 4). The class character of the dominant English universities meant that, unlike on the continent, there was not a layer of people with higher education who would throw in their lot with the working-class. This forced activists to do their own theorising (Chapter 5). Mansbridge now argued for tutorial classes. A group of young Christian socialist tutors at Oxford aligned themselves with him. In 1907 part of the establishment threw their weight behind this. *Oxford and Working-Class Education* was produced (Chapter 6). The Ruskin students had developed their own conception of education (Chapter 7). Once some tutorial classes were running, the WEA/extension alliance began to take control of Ruskin (Chapter 8). The students understood what was going on (Chapter 9). They organised against it and for their own project (Chapter 10).

By 1910 both sides in the Ruskin struggle probably thought they had won. The WEA/exten-

sion alliance had taken control of Ruskin and absorbed it within their project. They had also succeeded in setting up tutorial classes in many areas and these were, for the moment, attracting high levels of working class participation. The Plebs League had set up a big network of local classes and the Central Labour College.

Further historical research can and should throw light on which side, if either, was right. But the essential struggle between them is still going on, and in the end only we, by our actions, can settle it.

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