

Independent Working-Class Education: An Idea Whose Time Has Come Again?

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There was a time when the British labour movement's devotion to books was well-nigh fanatical. On the assumption that knowledge is power, the trade unions, the left parties and the co-operative movement encouraged their members to acquire a sophisticated understanding of economics, politics, history and philosophy. Many activists enrolled on formal courses organised by the Plebs League, the Central Labour College and other purveyors of what came to be called 'independent working-class education'. The touchstone of this form of education was a fierce commitment to Marxism. Activists such as Aneurin Bevan toned their intellectual muscle in classes on the labour theory of value or the Marxist theory of history and went on to change the world.

Most of us look back on this extraordinary tradition of radical education in an elegiac spirit. We assume that it has passed irrevocably into history and can never be resuscitated, not least because contemporary culture is too hedonistic, too frivolous, too committed to the idea of individual self-advancement. But not everyone is so pessimistic. Over the last few years a small but energetic group of activists have set themselves the task of recreating the tradition from scratch. Known collectively as the Independent Working Class Education Network (ICWEN) and convened by Keith Venables, they aspire to 'develop a diverse range of education materials and approaches for trade union and other working class and progressive movement groups'.

How much progress has ICWEN made so far? I got some sense of the answer to that question when I attended a fascinating ICWEN seminar at the South Wales Miners' Library in Swansea on October the 12th 2013. Held in conjunction with Llafur (the Welsh People's History Society), the seminar was a day-long affair featuring five stimulating presentations. The historian Richard Lewis spoke about the development of independent working-class education in South Wales. The indefatigable Hywel Francis, currently the Labour MP for Aberavon, complemented Lewis's contribution with a talk on the history of the Miners' Library. England was dragged into the frame with Colin Waugh's presentation on the famous students' strike at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1909. The other contributions focused on Mark Starr and Noah Ablett, two legendary pioneers of independent working-class education who both worked in the coalfields of South Wales. (Rob Turnbull spoke about Ablett and Dave Chapple spoke about Starr.) The day's proceedings were neatly summed up by Martin Wright from Cardiff University.

The most invigorating aspect of the day was its emphasis on the contemporary importance of history. All the speakers held uncompromisingly to the view that independent working-class education cannot be rebuilt in the present unless we have a thorough understanding of its past. They also understood that radically different forms of historical work will be necessary in the early days of the Network. Francis, Chapple and Turnbull were all engaged in a species of what Eric Hobsbawm might have called historical preaching, eschewing scholarly ambiguity in favour of an inspiring celebration of the history of workers' education. Although their styles were very different - Francis was smoothly anecdotal, Turnbull was genially avuncular and Chapple was impassioned and angry - they left us in no doubt that the example of men like Ablett and Starr is worth emulating. By contrast, Lewis and Waugh opted for a nuanced consideration of the complex circumstances in which workers'

education took shape more than a century ago. At no time did the speakers give the impression that they were talking at cross purposes. Together they made it clear that celebration and analysis, scholarly objectivity and soaring rhetoric will all be required if ICWEN is to get off the ground.

ICWEN's attitude towards education could scarcely be more different to the one prevailing in our schools, colleges and universities. Its members know that working people are capable of far more than is dreamed of in Michael Gove's philosophy. Their goal is nothing less than the creation of a nationwide network of what Antonio Gramsci would have called organic intellectuals. They foresee a time at which every workplace in the country will contain men and women who are steeped in the lessons of history, able to analyse contemporary trends in economics, politics and culture and link the day-to-day struggles of ordinary people to the long-term objective of establishing a socialist society. There is no denying that their project is a highly appealing one, but - as one would expect from something so ambitious - it also has a few weaknesses. There were certain political reflexes on display at the Swansea seminar which may cause trouble if they are left unchecked. Perhaps they are worth enumerating.

The first was a tendency to skew the historical record in favour of the early years of independent working-class education. With the exception of Francis, who spoke briefly and evocatively about a number of Welsh autodidacts from the inter-war period, all the speakers focused on the generation of self-taught Marxists who came to political consciousness in the two decades before the October Revolution. This obscured the fact that the truly heroic period of workers' education in Britain occurred in the thirty or so years after the establishment of the Communist Party in 1920. Although men like Starr, Ablett and William Paul were highly gifted and utterly singleminded in their devotion to working people, their Marxism was usually a bit derivative. Books like Starr's *A Worker Looks at History* and Paul's *The State: Its Origins and Function* were accomplished attempts to popularise an existing body of knowledge. The achievement of the Communist Party was to carve a space in workers' education for thinkers of an altogether more creative kind. The gurus of independent working-class education in the 1930s and 1940s were men like T.A. Jackson, Alick West and Ralph Fox, each of whom made original contributions to the Marxist canon and spoke openly about them in their classes. Their goal was not merely to inculcate an understanding of the basic principles of Marxism but to encourage their students to think creatively in their own right. This sense of independent working-class education as a creative, enabling and non-hierarchical exchange between teachers and students needs to be recovered.

A related problem at the Swansea seminar was a preoccupation with what might be called intellectual heroism. The emphasis throughout the day was on the extraordinary courage of the innumerable working-class intellectuals who endured immense poverty, worked in back-breaking jobs and still managed to devote themselves to the life of the mind. In itself there is nothing wrong in celebrating heroism of this kind. The sheer intellectual gumption of an Ablett or a Starr can serve as a salutary example to all of us. The problems only begin when we fail to recognise the enormous historical gap between their experience and ours. The descendants of the first working-class intellectuals have a much bigger stake in society than their forebears. Capitalism has lost none of its capacity to oppress but the modern working-class is better off and enjoys far more leisure time than ever before. If the tradition of workers' education is ever to be revived, it has to take account of these changed historical circumstances. Its educational programme must seek an accommodation with the distinctive outlook of the consumer age, paying due respect to existing forms of popular culture and recognising that there is only so much time that a vibrant, hedonistic and culturally sophisticated working class is going to devote to educational endeavour. There is no going back to the asceticism or the obsessive bookishness of an earlier age.

The other problem with some of the presentations was a tendency to overlook the drawbacks of independent working-class education. We can all agree that organisations like

the Plebs League and the Communist Party empowered thousands of men and women whose intellectual development might otherwise have been neglected. We can also agree that the socialist principles explored in study classes up and down the country enabled the labour movement to play a huge role in humanising Britain. But we must also recognise that independent working-class education sometimes brought a counterproductive dogmatism in its wake. As the writer Julian Tudor Hart pointed out in a stimulating contribution from the floor, workers' education has too often involved an emphasis on cast-iron certainties. Students were encouraged to regard socialist theory as a body of finished, unimpeachable truths and to dismiss all other intellectual traditions as the work of the devil. The result was that self-appointed intellectual hucksters - the sort of people who thought they knew everything because they had once read *Das Kapital* or *The State and Revolution* - often rose to wholly undeserved positions of influence. It goes without saying that ICWEN must guard against dogmatism at all costs. The truths it seeks to disseminate must be portrayed as provisional and open to enrichment by other traditions of thought. My own feeling is that there is a particular need to sponsor a dialogue between Marxism and radical liberalism. The socialist tradition has yet to recover from the authoritarian excesses of the twentieth century. Perhaps the best way of immunising it against further bouts of Stalinism is to drench it in liberalism's luminous faith in the possibilities of individual liberty.

In the first presentation of the day, Richard Lewis argued that our understanding of workers' education has often been distorted by a species of dualism. Drawing on the research for his fine book *Leaders and Teachers* (1993), he pointed out that independent working-class education is usually seen as the antithesis of the more "mainstream" forms of adult education offered by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and other bodies in the early twentieth century. His point was that this sort of thinking is no longer tenable. Although the WEA was very different from the Plebs League or the Labour colleges - not least because its educational ideology was shaped by the neo-Hegelianism of T.H. Green and his co-thinkers - its suspicion of free-market ideology rendered it susceptible to the influence of Marxism. Indeed, there were many areas in which the WEA was dominated by Marxists and their allies. This stands out as the most important point of the day. The influence of Marxism in British society is currently negligible. If ICWEN is to succeed, it must avoid the educational ghetto and move out into all the places where working people can be reached. One hopes that its humane and ambitious project will soon bear fruit.

ICWEN's website can be found at <http://iwceducation.co.uk/>.