

Independent working-class education: which way forward?

We print here a statement drafted by Sheila Cohen in the light of discussion which took place at a meeting held at Ruskin College in Oxford on 27th March 2010. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the future of trade union education as a feature of working-class organisation and politics, and to examine the challenges which now confront us.

*Following an introductory talk by Sheila, there were presentations by Colin Waugh (editorial board, *Post-16 Educator*) on the historical background of independent working-class education, Ian Manborde (responsible for the MA in International Labour and Trade Union Studies at Ruskin College) on key themes of trade union education, and Kim Moody (formerly director of Labor Notes) on lessons from activist education in the US.*

Points raised in discussion included: the need to relate to the changing working class, and in particular to its internationalisation; the need to tackle anti-theoretical prejudices; the question of how to multiply opportunities for the politicisation of working-class activists; the need to see union organising as something more than a part of the industrial relations machinery and to adopt a changed model for it.

It was agreed that a statement about the issues involved in reviving IWCE be drafted and circulated to a wider audience of activists. Please send comments to post16educator@runbox.com

The history of working-class and trade union education is almost as old as that of the working class itself. Yet, like the working class in its relationship to capitalism, it has always been divided between two major tendencies, resistance and accommodation. The 1909 Plebs' League strike against attempts by Ruskin College to 'neutralise' what had initially been an unambiguously class-based approach to the education of working-class students illustrates this divide (see Colin Waugh's history).

After the rank and file-based upsurges of the late 1960s and early '70s, the 1974 Labour government set out to placate and incorporate the trade union movement with a 'Social Contract' which included a number of new rights including improved trade union educational provision and the right to time off for trade union courses. However, the late 1990s began to see a move away from comparatively independent and open forms of trade union education to a 'partnership'-

oriented approach consonant with the managerialist approach of the New Labour government. TUC education, at least, has become dominated by an overall 'skill-based' agenda within which courses and qualifications became part of the government's National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) scheme.

While this placed TUC education in a much more secure political and financial position (currently threatened by a possible Tory victory in May) the employer-led and increasingly legalistic content of TUC courses, even outside 'UnionLearn', has undermined much of the implicitly class-based content and process of TUC education. While 'Stage One' courses on basic issues such as recruitment, negotiation skills etc still leave room for discussion and analysis of workplace experience, this now tends to be dominated by a highly procedural 'disciplinary' and 'rights'-based approach. Broader courses such as 'Contemporary Trade Unionism', which might be expected to provide room for historical and political argument, are not surprisingly unpopular with employers and therefore, given the institutional context of fees, class numbers etc, increasingly unlikely to run.

For all these reasons, the class content of trade union education can be argued to have been, if not neutralised, then fundamentally threatened - a conclusion reached by a large body of trade union tutors whose interest lies in promoting independent working-class theory rooted in labour history rather than in teaching the correct way to conduct a 'disciplinary'.

The disillusionment of many such tutors - and no doubt students - with this 'skills'- and procedures-based agenda in trade union education provides one set of reasons for attempting to provide, in however small a way, some alternative in terms of a form of trade union education rooted in the concerns of workers rather than employers. This would, essentially, include labour and trade union history as a basic component. It would encourage an understanding of political and economic issues based in a critical - ie Marxist - analysis of the capitalist system. It would avoid what the Plebs' League students so wonderfully called the 'sandpapering' of their class instincts. It would be rooted in and consciously develop from working-class

students' everyday working-class experience. Most of all, it would bring theory and practice together to shed light on the everyday concerns faced by workplace trade union activists, including the crucial question of internal trade union democracy and class independence from the employer.

Who would be our audience? While independent working-class education is open to all, the emphasis in trying to develop such a programme must, I would argue, be on committed workplace activists who come equipped with a lively interest in political, historical and industrial issues. Should we be able to gain commitment from such already-existing activists in the stronger sections of the movement, it may be possible to 'build out' and bring in less experienced workers.

However, none of this is immediately accessible. While a project to develop Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE) could possibly be rooted in some of the more active trade union education institutions, such as Northern College and Ruskin, any institutional support contains dangers, as it compromises precisely the political independence crucial to this project. How to square the circle? The experience of the US project Labor Notes suggests one answer, though not an easy one in the British political environment. The activity and practice of Labor Notes has been precisely to 'build out' from a grass-roots network of workplace-based activists who have found its conferences, publications and day or weekend schools concretely valuable in building their own organisation and strength in the workplace.

My own view, though others may differ, is that it is only through building up a similar network of contacts who can be more or less relied on to take an interest in this project that we can move forward. These contacts should include both trade union tutors and workplace activists. Without such a network, and with the problems surrounding institutional support cited above, we would be wise to recognise the very real practical problems surrounding the setting up of an IWCE project - highly desirable though such a project would be. If we can build up a reasonably reliable base of this kind, however, we may be able to move forward to another IWCE-building conference, perhaps at Northern College in the autumn.