

What is IWCE?

Talk at IWCEN zoom event 8/9/22

Phrase 'Independent Working-Class Education' (IWCE) probably first used by Noah Ablett in Oxford University Extension Delegacy summer meeting 1907.

(It was at this meeting too that Xtian Socialist Robert Morant, former chief civil servant at the Board of Education, famously talked about 'the golden stream'. Shall see later what this meant.)

* * * * *

So who was Ablett?

S. Wales coalminer/checkweighman.

Played central role in struggle organised by 54 TU-sponsored students at Ruskin College in Oxford that came to head in March 1909 'strike'.

These students mainly miners and railway workers.

'Strike' aimed at defeating push by Oxford Extension Delegacy - especially its upper class Xtian Socialist adherents and their front organisation, the so-called WEA - to take control of the college.

(This take-over initiated at 1907 meeting.)

Ruskin students, supported by principal Dennis Hird, aimed to bring about 'a more satisfactory relation between Ruskin and the labour movement'.

They advocated and organised participatory collective self-education run by and for w/c activists themselves.

- Produced pamphlet titled *The Burning Question of Education*.

- Organised local classes in, eg, South Wales, Durham coalfield and NW.
- set up Plebs League and Central Labour College.
- in contemporary terms, this movement led by people known as **impossibilists**.

* * * * *

However, **concept behind IWCE** (as distinct from phrase itself) goes back further.

Will look here at **what IWCE meant for Ruskin strikers** and other contemporary activists.

* * * * *

So first, then, how did they see 'education'?

Most would have gone through schooling system set up by r/c via 1870 Education Act.

1870 Act allowed existing C. of E. schools to continue, but also set up in parallel with them a nationwide system of 'elementary schools',

Big pressure on w/c parents to send children to these.

Characterised by:

- narrow 3rs and religion-dominated curricula (plus compulsory sewing lessons for girls),
- payment by results,

- underfunding
- ferocious physical punishment.

(Board school discipline described by D. H. Lawrence in 1915 novel *The Rainbow*, and in Stephen Humphries's 1981 study *Hooligans or Rebels?*)

* * * * *

These elementary schools administered via local **school boards** set up as directly-elected single-purpose authorities.

C. of E. viewed school boards as threat to its power and funding of its own schools. Constantly lobbied to starve them of cash.

By 1900 the London SB alone responsible for well over half a million children.

* * * * *

As time went by, socialists and 'liberals', including women, won some seats on school boards.

Eg starting in 1897, key figure in London SB was leftwing socialist and w/c former teacher Mary Bridges Adams, elected for Woolwich.

* * * * *

By 1890s some school boards, including in London, were **organising classes beyond elementary level** open to any w/c children who wanted them.

From 1898 top Board of Education civil servant Morant and Fabian

'socialist' Sidney Webb to stop school boards organising these classes.

These two went on to shape Tory government's 1902 Education Act.

This Act:

- replaced SBs by unelected local education authorities
- these LEAs dominated by Anglican church interests (ie 'church schools on the rates')
- brought in scholarship system giving thin layer of lower middle class children access to fee-paying post-elementary schooling.

Morant also wrote into 1902 Act clause authorising LEAs to fund university tutorial classes (ie WEA classes) for adults.

(This was 'golden stream' he referred to at 1907 Oxford meeting. It meant public money could be used to pay WEA tutors.)

Bridges Adams and others organised big movement against 1902 Act, but lost.

* * * * *

But out of these struggles Bridges Adams developed vision of IWCE (although did not call it that.)

From 1903 onwards she and people round her, eg cotton factory worker Ethel Carnie, carried this vision to broader layers of w/c activists.

From summer 1909, Bridges Adams became propagandist for Plebs League and CLC.

* * * * *

To sum up, then, Plebs League founders saw that schooling they themselves underwent had from 1902 been replaced by another bad system inflicted on their children,

- and on top of this, now saw drive by section of r/c to impose miseducation on adult education that workers were organising for themselves.

* * * * *

Now, what did founders of Plebs League understand by 'working-class'?

From late 1890s onwards, **high levels of w/c self-organisation** and class struggle pro-activity both in Germany, France, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Poland, Italy, USA and Russia, **and** in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

R/c attempted to counter this, not only by repression but also by ideological and educational interventions into workers' movements.

Here, this interference channeled through Fabian Society, Guild Socialism and Christian Social Union that stood behind the WEA..

* * * * *

In 1880s France there developed a reformist socialist current who called themselves 'possibilists'. They called the Marxists who opposed them 'impossibilists'.

In 1900 a Possibilist, Alexandre Millerand, accepted a post in French bourgeois gvt.

Socialist International discussed this in 1900 at its 5th congress, held in Paris.

Motion to condemn Millerand defeated.

Delegates representing the main UK Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation, were among those voting against it.

* * * * *

This triggered two splits to left from grassroots of SDF: one in London and one in Scotland.

Both had strong traditions of collective self-education.

Scottish group shaped by engineer/lab technician George Yates, foundry worker Tom Bell, factory worker Arthur MacManus, and former carter/refuse-collector James Connolly.

Heavily influenced by US socialist Daniel De Leon, by this time in control of Socialist Labour Party there.

Scottish group eventually became UK SLP.

Education in Marxism as then understood central to this group.

Intense detailed, small group participatory reading of, eg, Marx's *Wage Labour and Capital*, integrated with public speaking.

Also initiated UK-wide British Advocates of Industrial Unionism (BAIU) organisation.

Stood for all-grades union in each industrial sector, **independent of trades** unions restricted to skilled workers and dominated by bureaucrats.

* * * * *

Similar movement to Scottish one developed round Ablett in South Wales, and - a bit later - George Harvey in Durham coalfield.

(Harvey joined SLP at Ruskin 1908)

In 1908-09, all such activists of course knew about mass struggles in Russia in 1906, and IWW in US.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in lead-up to 1906 general election, James Ramsay MacDonald, now effective leader of ILP electoral activity, had made deal between Labour Representation Committee, initiated 1900, and Liberal Party.

This resulted in 29 workers being elected to parliament, where Liberal government gave many of the lucrative sinecures.

The Ruskin strikers knew about this deal, and also about attempts by SDF leadership to cooperate with ILP.

They saw these MPs, mostly TU leaders, as betraying w/c interests.

So their use of term 'independent' **also** included implicit rejection of ILP, LRC and SDF leaders' claims to be politically independent of capitalist class.

* * * * *

So what did Ruskin strikers and similar 'impossibilists' mean - and not mean - by 'independence' in adult education?

As indicated, saw themselves as participants in international from-below movement of workers seeking to replace corrupt reformist 'leaders' and betrayers with valid revolutionary self-organisation.

This involved organising in three key spheres: politics, economics, and ideology.

* * * * *

What was situation in ideological sphere specifically?

They saw adult education, properly understood, as central to ideological struggle.

Knew also that, in class society, self-educating workers had no choice but to draw on ideas produced by (Gramsci's terms) traditional intellectuals.

For them, such intellectuals included Marx, Engels, De Leon and Ruskin principal, Dennis Hird, who gave lectures on sociology.

But also drew on non-socialist intellectuals, eg, James Thorold Rogers 1884 book *Six Centuries of Life and Labour*, and writings of left-leaning US sociologist Lester Ward.

So 'independent' as in IWCE phrase expressed something they were organising for, **not something they thought they'd already achieved.**

* * * * *

Their model of adult ed. content focused on three main areas:

- Marxist understanding of the contemporary economic order,
- 'industrial history' ie history of struggles by workers - slaves, serfs, peasants, artisans and industrial workers
- and - **equally important in their eyes** - 'philosophy'.

* * * * *

So what did they understand by 'philosophy'?

They knew some of Marx's philosophical writings

(eg 1845 'theses' on Feuerbach, 1847 *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and sections in early chapters of *Capital* Vol. 1 (1867).

But other such writings **not available at all**, let alone in English

(eg 1844 Paris manuscripts, *German Ideology*, *Holy Family*, *Grundrisse*).

One effect of this was they tended to see Marx's ideas as more narrowly economic than they actually were.

In this situation many of them turned to the 19th century writings of the German artisan Josef Dietzgen.

(Translations of Dietzgen's *The Nature of Human Brainwork* and *Excursions of a Socialist into the Domain of Epistemology* available to them via US publisher Charles Kerr from early 1900s.)

Saw Dietzgen as a w/c philosopher, whose writings on thought processes could equip them to keep participation of sympathising left intellectuals under w/c control.

Rightly saw that possibility of w/c ideological independence hinged on this.

* * * * *

So, **in conclusion**, do we think their broad approach was right, and, either way, what if anything could it mean for now?

Colin Waugh
cwaugh1@btinternet.com

