

What is IWCE?

Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at an Independent Working-Class Education Network zoom event on 8th September 2022.

The phrase 'Independent Working-Class Education' (IWCE) was probably first used by Noah Ablett in the Oxford University Extension Delegacy summer meeting of 1907. (It was at this meeting too that the Christian Socialist Robert Morant, formerly chief civil servant at the Board of Education, famously talked about 'the golden stream'. We shall see later what this meant. So who was Ablett?)

He was a South Wales coalminer and checkweighman who played a central role in the struggle organised by 54 trade union-sponsored students at Ruskin College in Oxford that came to head in the March 1909 'strike'. These students were mainly miners and railway workers. Their 'strike' aimed at defeating a push by the Oxford Extension Delegacy - especially its upper class Christian Socialist adherents and their front organisation, the so-called Workers' Education Association - to take control of the college. (This take-over was initiated at the 1907 meeting.)

The Ruskin students, supported by the college principal Dennis Hird, aimed, in contrast, 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 working-class activists themselves. They produced the pamphlet titled *The Burning Question of Education*, organised local classes in, for example, South Wales, the Durham coalfield and the North West, and set up the Plebs League and the Central Labour College. We shall see that in the terms used by many on the Left at that time, this movement was led by people known as 'impossibilists'.

However, the concept behind IWCE (as distinct from phrase itself) goes back further. The aim here is to look at what IWCE meant for the Ruskin strikers and other contemporary activists. So first, then, how did they see 'education'?

Most of them would have gone through as children the schooling system set up by the ruling class via the 1870 Education Act. This Act allowed existing Church of England schools to continue, but also set up in parallel with them a nationwide

system of 'elementary schools'. There was big pressure on working-class parents to send their children to these elementary schools, most of which for most of the period were characterised by narrow 3rs and religion-dominated curricula (plus compulsory sewing lessons for girls), payment by results, underfunding and ferocious physical punishment. (Board school discipline was described by D. H. Lawrence in his 1915 novel *The Rainbow*, and in Stephen Humphries's 1981 study *Hooligans or Rebels?*)

These elementary schools were administered via local school boards set up as directly-elected single-purpose authorities. The Church of England viewed them as a threat to its power and to the funding of its own schools. It constantly lobbied to starve them of cash. However, by 1900 the London School Board alone was responsible for well over half a million children.

As time went by, socialists and 'liberals', including women, won some seats on school boards. For example, starting in 1897, a key figure in the London School Board was the leftwing socialist and working-class former teacher Mary Bridges Adams, who was elected to it by voters in its Woolwich division.

By the 1890s, some school boards, including the London one, were organising classes beyond elementary level, that were open to any working-class children who wanted them. But from 1898 the top Board of Education civil servant Morant and the Fabian 'socialist' Sidney Webb worked together to stop school boards organising these classes. The same two people went on to shape the Tory government's 1902 Education Act. This Act replaced School Boards by unelected local education authorities (LEAs) which were dominated by Anglican church interests (in other words there were now to be 'church schools on the rates'), and brought in a selective scholarship system that gave a thin layer of lower middle class children access to fee-paying post-elementary schooling.

Morant also wrote into the 1902 Act a clause authorising LEAs to fund university tutorial classes

(iwhich from 1908 would include WEA classes) for adults. (This was the 'golden stream' that Morant referred to at the 1907 Oxford Extension Delegacy meeting. It meant that public money could be used to pay WEA tutors.) Mary Bridges Adams and others organised a big movement against the 1902 Act, but lost.

However, out of these struggles Bridges Adams developed a vision of what later came to be called IWCE. From 1903 onwards she and people round her, for example the cotton factory worker Ethel Carnie, carried this vision to broader layers of working-class activists, and from the summer of 1909, Bridges Adams became a key propagandist for the Plebs League and Central Labour College.

To sum up, then, the founders of the Plebs League saw that the schooling they themselves underwent had from 1902 been replaced by another bad system that was being inflicted on their children, and, on top of this, they now saw a drive by a section of the ruling class to impose miseducation on the adult education that workers were organising for themselves. Now, what did the founders of the Plebs League understand by 'working-class'?

From the late 1890s onwards, there were high levels of working-class self-organisation and class struggle pro-activity both in Germany, France, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Poland, Italy, the USA and Russia, and in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The ruling class attempted to counter this, not by repression alone, but also by ideological and educational interventions into workers' movements. Here this interference was channeled mainly through the Fabian Society, the Guild Socialism movement and the Christian Social Union that stood behind the WEA. Meanwhile in the 1880s there had developed in France a reformist socialist current who called themselves 'possibilists', and those involved in this called the Marxists who opposed them 'impossibilists'.

In 1900 a Possibilist, Alexandre Millerand, accepted a post in a bourgeois French government. The Socialist International discussed this in 1900 at its 5th congress, held in Paris, where a motion to condemn Millerand was defeated. Delegates representing the main UK Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), were among those voting against this motion. This triggered two splits to the left from the grassroots of the SDF, one in London and one in Scotland, both of which had strong traditions of collective self-education.

The Scottish group was shaped by the engineering worker and laboratory technician George Yates, the foundry worker Tom Bell, the factory worker Arthur MacManus, and the former carter and refuse-collector James Connolly. It was heavily influenced by the US socialist Daniel De Leon, who

by this time was in control of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) there. The Scottish group eventually became the UK SLP.

Education in Marxism as they then understood it was central to this group. They developed a teaching and learning approach centred on intense, detailed, small group participatory reading of such texts as Marx's *Wage Labour and Capital*, integrated with experience of - and collective reflection on - public speaking. They also initiated the UK-wide British Advocates of Industrial Unionism (BAIU) organisation, which stood for the formation in each industrial sector of an all-grades union aiming to be independent of traditional trades unions that in their eyes were restricted to skilled workers and dominated by bureaucrats.

A similar movement to the Scottish one developed round Noah Ablett in South Wales, and, a little later, in the Durham coalfield round the mineworker George Harvey. (Harvey joined the SLP at Ruskin College 1908.) In 1908-09, all such activists of course knew about the mass struggles in Russia in 1906-1907, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the US.

Meanwhile, in the lead-up to the 1906 general election, James Ramsay MacDonald, now effectively the leader of the Independent Labour Party's electoral activity, had made a deal between the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), initiated in 1900, and the Liberal Party. In 1906 this resulted in 29 people from working-class backgrounds being elected to parliament, where the incoming Liberal government gave many of them lucrative sinecures. The Ruskin strikers knew about MacDonald's deal, and also about attempts by the SDF leadership to cooperate with the ILP. They saw these MPs, most of whom were TU leaders, as betraying working-class interests. So their use of the term 'independent' also included an implicit rejection of claims by the ILP, LRC and SDF leaders' claims to be politically independent of the capitalist class. So what, lastly, did the Ruskin strikers and similar 'impossibilists' mean - and not mean - by 'independence' in adult education?

As indicated earlier on, they saw themselves as participants in an international from-below movement of workers seeking to replace corrupt reformist 'leaders' and betrayers with valid revolutionary self-organisation. This involved them in organising in three key spheres: politics, economics, and ideology. What, then, was their approach in the ideological sphere specifically?

They saw adult education, properly understood, as central to ideological struggle. They knew also that, in class society, self-educating workers had no choice but to draw on ideas produced by (in terms later used by Antonio

Gramsci) 'traditional intellectuals'. For them, such intellectuals included Marx, Engels, De Leon and the Ruskin principal, Dennis Hird, who gave lectures on sociology, but they also drew on the work of non-socialist intellectuals, for example James Thorold Rogers's 1884 book *Six Centuries of Life and Labour*, and writings by the left-leaning US sociologist Lester Ward. So 'independent' as in the phrase 'IWCE' expressed something they were organising for, not something they thought they had already achieved.

Their model of adult education content focused on three main areas: Marxist understanding of the contemporary economic order; 'industrial history' - that is, the history of struggles by workers in a broad sense, for example slaves, serfs, peasants, artisans and industrial workers; and - equally important in their eyes - 'philosophy.' What, then, did they understand by 'philosophy'?

They knew some of Marx's philosophical writings (for example, his 1845 'theses' on Feuerbach, his 1847 book *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and the philosophical sections in early chapters of *Capital Vol. 1* (1867). But other such writings were not then available at all, let alone in English, for example the 1844 Paris manuscripts, *The German Ideology*, *The Holy Family* and the *Grundrisse*). One effect of this was that 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* were available to them from the early 1900s via the US publisher Charles Kerr.) They saw Dietzgen as a working-class philosopher, whose writings on thought processes could equip them to keep the participation in their movement of sympathising leftwing intellectuals under working-class control. They rightly saw that the possibility of working-class 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?

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