

IWCE: how can we rebuild the tradition?

This article is based on a talk given by Colin Waugh at a meeting with the same title held in Sheffield on 13/11/10

I will be speaking about Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE). I will say why I think this is important now, and suggest a course of action that people who agree might take.

(I wrote and brought out the pamphlet *'Plebs': The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education* for January 2009, to mark the centenary of the 'strike' by students at Ruskin College in March and April 1909. I have been surprised by the level of interest there has been in this pamphlet.) I think this interest is right, for the following reasons.

First, there is literally nothing more important now than working-class education. Some things are as important, but none more so, because it is only working-class people who can - if they decide to do so - act collectively to solve the big problems in the world now. For example, only the working-class has the potential to create a lasting solution to the problem of climate change. However, for sections of working-class people to do this would require the right sort and level of consciousness amongst them, and hence, would also require, among other things, a valid form of education.

Secondly, IWCE is primarily about the future, not the past. I hope people will agree that we investigate the past (for example the 1909 'strike') so as to be able to act in the present, in such a way as to open up the possibility of a decent future.

Thirdly, so far as I have been able to find out up to now, what the Ruskin strikers did was unique. Therefore I view their activity, not as a footnote to history, but as a key event

So what did the Ruskin strikers do? Basically, these were core industrial workers - mineworkers, railway workers, textile workers - who took on what was then arguably the world's poshest university - Oxford. The 'strike' was a collision between, on the one hand, a ruling class project of using adult education to create a compliant layer within the working class, and, on the other, a from-below drive for working-class collective self-education. In this struggle, the strikers and their successors created the IWCE movement, which included the following elements: a network of local classes in many of the working-class heartlands; the Central Labour

College (in effect a teacher training institution to prepare tutors for these classes); a correspondence structure (ie what would now be called a distance learning set-up); a publishing house which produced textbooks and teaching/learning materials; a periodical (*The 'Plebs' Magazine*); and a democratic organisational structure linked to a number of unions. Many aspects of this movement survived till 1964. I believe that we need to build a modern-day equivalent embracing as many of these functions as we can.

It can also be argued that the Browne Review of higher education funding makes it even more urgent that we should try to do this. Just as the ruling class in 1870 took on part of the Chartists' education programme - in particular William Lovett's concept of directly elected school boards - as part of its response to rising militancy, so the expansion of HE from the early 1960s can be seen, amongst other things, as the ruling class, in a period where there was a tight labour market, again taking on part of the working class's educational programme - that is, the Plebs League's demand for higher education. And in turn, then, the Browne review means that those in power now are dropping this 1960s strategy, and expelling working-class people from non-STEM [science, technology, maths and engineering-related] higher education.

So what, then, can and should a revived IWCE be like now and in the foreseeable future? I feel that in order to answer this question we need to think about two others: first, what did the Ruskin strikers mean by 'independent', by 'working-class', and by 'education'?, and secondly, what should we mean now by these same words?

By 'working-class' they meant people like themselves (ie mineworkers, railway workers, textile workers, engineering workers and so on). 'Independent' they explained by saying: you don't willingly join a company union or send a member of the ruling class to represent you in parliament, and therefore you should not entrust your education to them. (This is something like what Bob Marley said in his Redemption Song, in the line 'None but ourselves can free our minds'.) However, by

'independent' the Ruskin strikers also meant independent of state and charitable funding - in other words, they believed that the education they had in mind should be paid for by unions, especially union branches. (None of this, though, means that they thought they could educate themselves without any input from those who had undergone formal education.) And by 'education', they meant adult education other than scientific and technical, and other than that which is purely to do with the enjoyment of leisure. Positively, they focused on what they saw as the three key working-class educational needs: economics; 'industrial history'; and 'philosophy' (which they understood as the capacity to reason for oneself, represented for them by the writings of Josef Dietzgen).

In addition to these conceptions, they had a distinctive teaching and learning method derived from the practice of the Socialist Labour Party group in Scotland, and a critique of mainstream higher education as enslaving.

Moving on, then, to the question of what IWCE can and should mean for us now, I would say, first, that 'education' should mean same for us as for them, a point I would spell out in this way. Class (ie and not just capitalist) society rests on a 'division of labour' between those who decide and those who only execute. The former monopolise access to knowledge. Hence education is the process that tries to undo that division. As such, it includes (but is distinct from) training, and is opposed to mis-education (because, unlike this, it involves the whole truth and nothing but the truth).

As regards what we should mean now by 'working-class', I think we should mean everyone who

depends on a wage or salary, including a deferred wage (ie retired people), plus those on benefits, plus children and other dependents - in short, everyone who does not own the means of production. We cannot mean just manual, let alone just unskilled, and not even just routine workers. We must include basic grade professionals and para-professionals. We must also have a definition that takes account of globalisation, ie that includes the global working-class now being constructed here and elsewhere. At the same time, however, we must be aiming to fuse the insights of the working class as it has existed hitherto (for example, say, in Sheffield in 1980) with the needs of the restructured working class now emerging (for example in an area like Brent today).

Lastly, as regards what we ought to mean now by 'independent', I think we should mean: financed only from the pockets of rank and file workers. That is, the education to be developed needs to be independent of state funding, of charity, of commercial funding (eg advertising), of left groups and of any money, including from labour movement sources, which is not under our direct, democratic control.

To underline this last point, non governmental agencies (including NIACE, the WEA, NATECLA, and the TUC - as in unionlearn) have come to play an extremely problematic role in providing adult ed, and getting state funding to do it. It is one thing for would-be IWCE to accept union funding that is agreed democratically in a branch or conference, and quite another to accept state funding, even if this is channelled via the TUC. So we need to have a clear distinction between mainstream state-funded education, as in schools, colleges, universities etc, and IWCE.

Nevertheless, mainstream education, including post-compulsory education, has grown enormously since 1909. So IWCE strategy now must, even more than in 1909, seek support from education workers like university lecturers (because they monopolise knowledge eg in history, economics etc) - but it must also work out ways of making sure that their contributions remain under rank and file control.

On this basis, I feel it may be possible to outline a broad strategy for now: First, we need to involve everyone who can go along with what I've just outlined, and wants to work on this. Hence we should put together, starting now, a link-up between people that is as loose and informal, as minimally bureaucratised, as possible, subject to being democratic. So long as we can agree on broad aims directly relevant to rebuilding IWCE, and on democracy, we don't have to agree on anything else, for example we don't need some set of

Appeal:

An attempt is being made to reconstruct the 1938 Follonsby Miners Lodge banner, which famously included the portraits of A.J. Cook, James Keir Hardy, Lenin and George Harvey, one of the leaders of the 1909 Ruskin College 'strike'. Union branches are asked to consider donating towards this. Please make cheques payable to 'Follonsby Lodge Banner, Community and Heritage Society' and send to: D. Douglass, 193 Osborne Avenue, SOUTH SHIELDS, Tyne & Wear NE33 3BY. Or for details email djdouglass@hotmail.co.uk

shibboleths governing who is and who is not allowed to participate.

Next, there are several broad areas we can work in. These include: existing working-class history organisations, including local ones; discussion groups linked to political organisations, including the Labour Party, and other organisations (for example, the Alliance for Green Socialism); community organisations including those seeking to defend /organise amongst migrant workers etc; informal groups in unions (for example, the National Shop Stewards Network); formal trades union education in cases where tutors are sympathetic and have some choice about what they do; those areas of formal, mainstream, publicly provided education where teachers/lecturers have some discretion (including some areas of work in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, FE colleges, higher education, adult education and offender education). Taken together, these areas arguably constitute the broad field across which we can try to organise a revived IWCE.

Lastly, there are some specific steps that can be taken in the near future.

First, we could circulate to the people who were notified of this meeting a version of this talk, plus a draft 'Where We Stand' statement for comment. People who support this could go round and speak about the idea to individuals and groups with a potential interest. Secondly, we could then circulate a firmed-up version of the 'Where We Stand' statement and invite people who agree with it to become involved. (It would be important to do this in a secure fashion.) Thirdly, we should try to dig out and put in circulation further information about the history of IWCE, including of comparable initiatives outside the UK. Fourthly, we could try to set up interest groups that think up teaching and learning strategies, and devise specimen materials in specific areas (for example, economics, history, democracy and philosophy/reasoning). Fifth, we could disseminate these ideas and materials using email, electronic discussion forums and the like. Sixth, we could, while avoiding too much fanfare, agree on sensible mechanisms for enlarging the circle of people involved. And lastly, we could try to have a few months from now a larger get-together to review progress.

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