

Towards an IWCE Network manifesto

The Independent Working-Class Education Network aims to produce collectively over the next few months a manifesto that could be published in pamphlet form and used to build the Network. Possible section headings as provisionally agreed at the London meeting on 21 September are printed below, plus written contributions so far received. Discussion has also taken place as part of the agenda at our meetings in Swansea on 12th October and Wallsend on 30th November, and will continue at our next meeting, in Brighton on 24th May. The headings are not set in stone so please let us have your comments on this framework and on the contributions so far, as well as for the other sections below. (Please send to iwceducation@yahoo.co.uk)

1. Why do we need IWCE?

Contribution below by Hugo Radice:

Post-school educational opportunities for working people have become almost exclusively focused on skills provision, following the disappearance of most non-vocational adult education formerly provided by universities and LEAs. Studying the humanities and social sciences is now therefore restricted to degree programmes that are extremely costly, and often incompatible with the need to earn a living. Within this broader picture, the study of the history and politics of the labour movement has been even more hard-hit, as a result of the parallel re-orientation of trade union educational resources towards career progression and the practical training of lay officials. If we want to maintain and revive our rich tradition of collective self-education, we have no choice but to develop this outside state-run or state-financed bodies.

2. What have we done?

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3. What does the history of IWCE tell us?

Contribution below by Colin Waugh:

We need to distinguish the history of IWCE in the strict sense - that is, the classes set up by the

Ruskin students in 1908-09 - from, among other things, (a) what happened to that tradition later on (for example the NCLC), (b) movements started by other people around the same time that had similar aims (for example the Movement for a Scottish Labour College), (c) contemporary or earlier initiatives in the tradition stemming from Proudhon (for example the education side of the *bourses de travail* or Rudolf Rocker's classes in the East End of London around 1912), (d) provision that is more widely known about on the left (for example the SPD school in which Rosa Luxemburg was a lecturer), (e) initiatives based on somewhat different politics (for example Brookwood College or the Highlander Folk School in the US), (f) initiatives that can reasonably be regarded as precursors of IWCE (for example, Thomas Hodgskin's lectures at the London Mechanics Institute in the early 1820s or the Chartist 'really useful knowledge' demand), (g) the attempts, associated with Ralph Miliband, Ken Coates, Tony Topham and Michael Barratt Brown, to build a form of provision, especially for mineworkers, in the UK in the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

We should investigate all of these areas, but if we do so without making these distinctions we will end up with an ahistorical 'tradition' which is really a mythology that we will have invented and which will be at best unhelpful as a guide to what we should try to do now.

The history of IWCE in the strict sense has been explored by, among others, Ruth Frow in her unpublished dissertation, John McIlroy in a number of articles and, most importantly, Richard Lewis in his book *Leaders and Teachers*. One thing that emerges clearly from the work of both McIlroy and Lewis is that, although the original conception of IWCE lived on in a number of different ways at least

up to the victory of Thatcherism in the 1980s, working-class control over the national movement set up in 1909 was soon compromised. Examples of this include the role that began to be played, and the control that began to be exercised, even before 1914, by the group of middle-class sympathisers which included Raymond Postgate, the Horrabin and the Pauls, and from 1921 the administrative dominance exercised by J.P.M. Millar and Christine Millar. We need to find out everything we can about the efforts to counter this that were made by working-class activists such as Noah Ablett and Mark Starr, and to explore further the related field of attempts by workers to pursue IWCE-style objectives through WEA provision.

4. How ought we to relate to the Labour Movement?

Contribution below by Edd Mustill:

The IWCE Network aims to be open and inclusive of a variety of labour movement political traditions.

We want a democratic working-class movement which promotes free education and open debate, exchanging ideas and perspectives from a diversity of standpoints and traditions.

We believe that all activists are potential educators – everyone has knowledge which is useful to their comrades, whether this is knowledge of working-class history, general knowledge or of organising in the present, and we intend to develop ways for this knowledge to be shared and extended.

We will reach out to union branches, trades councils, socialist parties and working-class political organisations and community groups, and single issue campaigns, to broaden and renew independent working-class education in all its forms. This will include, as a first step, seeking to hold joint events with any of these organisations and groups who share our views, or who want to learn more about independent working-class education.

5. How should we relate to TU Education?

Contribution below by Hugo Radice:

Trade unions at present are struggling to maintain numbers, finances and morale. Against this

background it is unrealistic to expect unions to commit their stretched resources to reviving their former non-vocational study programmes. The IWCE [Network] has links with unions, political parties and communities on the one hand, and further and higher education on the other. We can offer our ideas and resources to trade union educators, with the aim of improving the labour movement's ability to resist the Coalition's austerity policies and develop an alternative politics based on the needs of working people.

6. What stance should we take towards the WEA?

Contribution below by Hugo Radice:

The WEA remains by far the largest and most influential voice in adult education. As in the case of the trade unions, the WEA's work now takes place solely with public funding, and is required to promote employability rather than education as such.

However, for the most part its officials, educators and students share our view of the importance of maintaining the traditions of working-class education, and their recent community-based initiatives bear this out. The IWCE [Network] will seek to develop a positive relationship with the WEA by contributing to such initiatives.

7. The mainstream education system: what do we think?/how should we respond?

Contribution below by Dave Berry:

[How does the IWCE relate to the formal education system?]

Historically the relationship between working-class education and the formal education system has been at best one of tolerance and co-existence with liberal educationalists to the majority of time one of hostility by Government and designers and administrators of our education system. In "The German Ideology" Marx and Engels considered that "the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class" and increasingly our education system

reflects the control of a capitalist system and its economic needs to the exclusion of all others. As challengers to religious education in the Middle Ages were viewed and condemned as heretics, so working class alternatives to the formal education system have been viewed as dissent or even revolutionary. Even the inclusion of alternative social political ideas in the curriculum has become difficult as our education system becomes increasingly centralised and marketised with a National Curriculum, academies, student loans and private universities.

A style of teaching and learning based on elitism, competition with your peers, continual testing, 'education for earning rather than learning' and individual achievement leaves many working-class children and students alienated from their class and communities, even when achieving success. For those not achieving that success, [lack of?] opportunities to rejoin education or to find alternatives leaves them unable to play a full part in society and stuck in low-pay / low-respect employment or unemployment, and ignorant of their heritage and cultural roots.

Yet ideas of egalitarianism, collectivism and working-class culture remain, very often promoted by teachers, lecturers and students within the system itself, guided by their own experience or historical models of working-class education. The choice for organisations such as the IWCE Network is whether to develop practice and structures independent of the formal education system or to work with practitioners, students and supporters within the existing school and higher education system, upholding our tradition of dissent. This may be done by providing materials and resources alongside our own meetings and structures for introduction into a formal education system. It will also be important to lobby and campaign for change within the existing system to incorporate working-class history and culture, alternative economic and philosophical discourse into the existing system.

As collectivists we welcome co-operation with the existing formal system and seek to

- Develop accessible resources on working-class education, history and economics
- Welcome individual and collective membership from members of the existing formal education system
- Promote new materials on working-class education
- Promote a collectivist approach to education and teaching and learning within the existing system
- Use our website and electronic media to promote the IWCE to members of the existing formal education system.

8. Do we need a theory of IWCE?

(a) Contribution below by Joyce Canaan:

[How do popular education insights guide the work of the IWCE?]

1. What is popular education?

- 'Popular education' is a translation of the Portuguese concept of 'educacao popular' – education created by and for working-class people (employed, underemployed, unemployed and no longer employed).
- For popular education, the way the world is currently organised serves the interests of the powerful and wealthy. It is not the case that, as we have been told since Thatcher, 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) to the current world order.
- As popular educators know from Marx, we can make history differently, working within and against the circumstances into which we have been born.
- Making history differently requires that working-class people work collectively to do so; the elite won't give up their power and influence easily. Building a better world for all that rests on radically different assumptions is an enormous task. Popular educators believe that education can play a central role in this process, but not if it continues to be organised as it is at present.
- Popular educators question the idea that learning requires that teachers deposit their knowledge into the heads of students who passively receive it. Freire called this the 'banking model of education'. For popular education, in contrast, learning requires active engagement by and of all. Freire suggested that education should entail 'problem-posing', helping students articulate their concerns and explore how these concerns are caused not by personal failings, as our neo-liberal system encourages us to believe, but by structural inequalities built into this system.
- Dialogue, collective exploration of the underlying causes of issues that matter, is at the core of popular education.
- This dialogue should serve not just to understand the causes of current injustices, oppressions and exploitations; dialogue should move to practice, to working to lessen and eliminate inequalities in order to help build a better world for us all.

- Thus thinking and doing, theory and practice – praxis, as Marx and Freire both called it – is at the core of popular education. Popular education has the revolutionary aim of building a more just and sustainable world for all by helping workers become conscientised as Freire (1996:90) put it, deepening their understandings through engaging in struggle and using insights gained from struggle to theorise the world and its underpinning power dynamics more fully for more effective future struggles.

2. How does the IWCE use popular education to organise its meetings and educational processes – its thinking and doing?

- All of our work – our meetings, pamphlets, books and educational practices can help you move towards this better world.
- There is a long history of working-class self-education – education by and for working-class people – that demonstrates workers' capacity to engage in radically different educational practices than those taught in state-controlled schools, colleges and universities. Or, to paraphrase E. P. Thompson, just as the working class was present and participated in its own making, so do we recognise the importance of developing educational practices with which working-class people can help unmake present conditions and remake them for the benefit of all.
- We want to synthesise popular education insights with those of working-class self-education traditions to help working-class people develop more effective strategies for resisting the challenging and increasingly unequal circumstances in which we now live.
- All of our thinking and doing is part of a wider transformative process; like the Zapatistas we ask questions as we walk (*'caminamos, preguntado'*); we see all that we do as taking steps in a process of more fully realising revolutionary action.

(b) Contribution below by Hilda Kean:

[Social construction of knowledge]

Recent debates on the Government's proposals for a new history curriculum in schools have concentrated on content or 'facts'. Even those opposing the Government's curriculum have tended to focus on the inclusion of radical events or the lives of black activists rather than disagreeing with the framework.

Rather than see knowledge as 'facts' we see knowledge as socially constructed. As the late

socialist historian Raphael Samuel described it, the social production of knowledge includes the 'work of a thousand different hands'. What is experienced in our everyday lives is as likely to be significant in our understanding and creation of knowledge as the reading of books or archives.

If history, for example, was understood to be a lived experience and hence 'within' all of us, then we would perceive of it as something over which we have some ownership and definition of meaning. We would then see ourselves as descended from such experience, rather than – as Gove and company would have our children believe – seeing history as an anonymously authored body of pre-ordained and transmitted incontestable 'facts'.

Conventionally, a historian is thought to know about things 'because you have been there' – 'there' being an archive. But people also 'know about things' through having lived through the past in our own lives. We can therefore choose for ourselves what is important to know, drawing on personal and public events. This may include our own understanding of the impact of previous wars in which a relative fought or died, or our perception of the nature of work or the stories we were told by grandparents or older people in the workplace. We can also draw understanding from the built environment, thinking about who made the buildings, who decided which people should be commemorated etc.

What happened is important: but it is also the questions that we ask of the past that bring the past alive in the present.

9. How should we operate?

(a) Contribution below by Malcolm Ball:

IWCE has been a useful and maybe even a valuable initiative. It has drawn together people around a clear purpose. The researching of our history will continue to be valuable. The different interpretations of those histories and their debate will also continue to be valuable. It is necessary to ask whether the importance of that practice can be measured against the importance of discussing today and tomorrow. I was at the Sheffield SDS [School of Democratic Socialism] presentation by Richard Lewis and discussion on March 2nd. This was an extremely interesting afternoon, thanks to all who participated. Towards the end of the session as we

discussed the future of adult education I realized we were actually discussing the future of a political life and the need for a political party. Our forebears who created and sustained a political voice for working people discovered that independent working-class education was intrinsic to that task to create a political space and a political voice. I have no wish to dilute the purpose or energy devoted to IWCE but is it possible that by broadening the name to, for example 'The online Labour College' that the historical purpose could be retained and that adjacent tasks could be addressed. It is just too ambitious to start building a 'new party' and it would invite too many distracting debates, and the head of this pin is not big enough! But we could contemplate a virtual place for fraternal and non-sectarian discussion. Such an initiative could even set up links with other sites? Perhaps if we could talk together we may learn to walk together.

(b) Contribution below by Grant Banfield:

For what it is worth, my initial response to the draft is to reinforce the point it makes so well that working class education is, must be, and can only be, self-education. The vital task that confronts us is, as Marx and Engels noted over 150 years ago in the *Communist Manifesto*, "to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class". This remains a crucial element of the class struggle today. Marx and Engels saw at least part of this struggle residing in the establishment of free public education. Now, history has shown that the working class seemingly having won this battle is seeing it slip from its grasp. Public education, like so many other aspects of our commons, is being stolen for private gain and profit. A reinvention and a reclamation of the public is needed. And this may well occur - and need to occur - outside of what now are, in reality, the mere shells of true public schools and the public higher education institutions. This, of course, is not to deny the important and often courageous work done by teachers who, armed with critical class-consciousness and transformative pedagogy, push against the weight of capitalist interests that confront them and their students on a daily basis. Their work needs to be recognised, celebrated and encouraged. It can be the inspiration for both the envisioning and the realization of alternative spaces - both inside and outside the old shells - for radical working-class self-education.

A further point I would make is that the mobilization of collective energies for a movement in transformative working-class education will require

engaging with a range of leftist educators [and] the building of broad alliances. However, for a true working-class education, the issue of class and class analysis must be central. Again, Marx and Engels knew this well i.e. in the *Communist Manifesto* they stress that while it is vital to "support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things" it is a necessity that radicals "bring to the front, as the leading question . . . the property question". In short, working-class education is class education.

(c) Contribution below by Derek Tatton:

Several in this discussion have stressed that it is important to read and understand the history of the movements in the 20th century to move on positively now in the second decade of the 21st century.

As has been said above, that history shows 'working-class control over the national movement from 1909 was soon compromised . . . (through, for example) . . . 'the administrative dominance by J. P. M. and Christine Millar'.

It was difficult for the Labour Colleges to be completely independent because as the Plebs League slogan (against the WEA) put it 'He who pays the piper calls the tune'. When a small number of unions funded the NCLC, trade union bureaucrats could later call the tune so that by the second half of the 20th century IWCE courses had lost any distinctive radical content and momentum.

Hence, learning from both the NCLC and WEA history, a revived 21st century independent working-class education should support, as recommended in this discussion: 'free education and open debate . . . exchanging perspectives from a diversity of standpoints and traditions'; and as Hugo Radice argues 'seek to develop a positive relationship with the WEA'. Dave Berry's emphasis is forward looking also when he writes: 'We welcome co-operation with the existing formal system'. A radical popular education today, working outside the formal funding and organisational structures, can benefit from the experience of earlier activists and writers, such as those quoted: Paulo Freire, E. P. Thompson and Raphael Samuel. And the 'virtual place for fraternal and non-sectarian discussion' should also, crucially, embrace engagement with the work of Raymond Williams.

I write as an Administrator for www.raymondwilliamsfoundation.org.uk (RWF) and our website well illustrates the continued relevance of Williams's prescient writings on adult education.

He spent fifteen formative years teaching mainly WEA students from the 1940s to the 1960s establishing his reputation as a major writer, theorist and socialist. For 25 years since his death RWF has organised and supported courses and projects rooted in his concept of the Long Revolution - 'the creation of an educated and participating democracy' leading to the transformation of society in order that inequality and oppression would cease to exist. Williams, like Tawney and G. D. H. Cole, could commit himself to work for the WEA, whilst recognising the important radically stimulating role played by the Labour College movement.

(d) Contribution below by Peter Reed

In my view, IWCE has to be an essential component of any effective revival of the socialist movement. I wish you all success and hope that you can manage to develop an effective and widespread network.

However, it's important to learn the lessons of past experience and I don't think the various remarks about the history of the Labour College movement paint a very accurate picture.

The immensely powerful forces facing socialists can surely only be countered by organisation with a capital O. That means proper administrative structures, professional organisers and plenty of finance. Spontaneity can only go so far. That inevitably means turning towards the unions - the only potential effective countervailing force to a rampant capitalism. I can't envisage another source.

Although some of the events you refer to are well before my time, I had long discussions about the movement's history with such impeccably proletarian NCLC organisers as Joe Crispin, George Phippen and Teddy Redfern. Accordingly I'm really puzzled by your reference to the early days of the Plebs League - you make it sound as if there was a Blairite putsch. Without people like the Horrains, I doubt that the movement could ever have successfully established itself. JFH was a leading national paper strip cartoonist and had nothing whatever to gain from "controlling" the Plebs League. Their wives, who included Mrs Starr, who was, I believe, Horrabin's sister, did all the correspondence - unsung but essential work.

All my relatives were miners and I would never say anything in the least derogatory about workers. But the movement needed people who could organise, write, edit, understand accounts etc. At that time, I suspect few industrial workers had even seen a typewriter. (My parents certainly hadn't.)

The Labour College movement was always highly democratic and there were plenty of vigorous debates particularly at the annual "meets". Research workers of today whose knowledge comes merely from documents (or partisan works like that of Will Craik) might thus well get hold of the wrong end of the stick.

It's difficult to see how the movement could have developed any differently from what it did. Millar saw the need to secure trade union affiliations, and I don't know how the NCLC could ever have expanded without finance from that source. It was also a good way of getting into contact with workers through union branches, postal courses etc.

I know of only two major pre-war issues (1) the financial scandal that led to the demise of the Central Labour College and (2) the attempt by the Communist Party to take over the movement. When that failed, they tried to neutralise it (though individuals like Maurice Dobb and Tommy Jackson stayed in touch.)

It's nonsensical to claim that "trade union bureaucrats" ever held back the NCLC. In fact, they took little interest and even those on the NCLC EC rarely bothered to show up. The hostile ones simply didn't affiliate their unions.

When I first came into contact with the NCLC in 1951, I was plied with "Introduction to Dialectical Materialism", "Anti-Duhring", "What is Marxism?" and Pannekoek's "Marxism and Darwinism". I would stress that these were *official* publications from Tillicoultry and pushed by the organisers.

Millar himself gave a standard lecture on the MCH [materialist conception of history] - it would have been sneered at as "crude" by New Left types but it was wonderfully well geared to a working-class audience.

The Labour Party was suspicious and I attended one meeting where a Regional Organiser, no less, strongly advised members to have nothing to do with the NCLC.

J. P. M. [Millar] appointed ex-Trotskyists like Ray Fletcher, Jock Haston and Frank Ward to organiser posts. He even took on John Archer who was still an openly active Trotskyist, and pleaded with John not to resign when he was later going through a rough health patch.

But then came disaster - events I witnessed from close up. (1) The Leeds NCLC-ers tried to seize control of the Leeds Labour Party (stronghold of Gaitskell, Healey, Bacon) with predictable, devastating blowback. (2) John involved the NCLC in a major inter-union dispute.

At least one commentator has argued that these were noble and constructive campaigns; actually they were stupid and led to the utter destruction of the Labour College movement in the West Riding.

Hardly any wreckage was left behind.

Archer was a pleasant bloke and very able organiser who could have become a major influence upon the wider movement. But everything he built up went to waste due to these irrational actions. I supported John's efforts to avoid the sack, to the irritation of Millar and Woodburn, but he really hadn't a leg to stand on. What he did was ill-judged in the extreme, and I don't see what else the NCLC EC could have done. It had nothing to do with "union bureaucrats".

However, events like these no doubt turned the mind of [TUC general secretary George] Woodcock and company in a certain direction. The Marxist content would also have rankled with a devout Catholic. JPM fought like a tiger to save the NCLC but he was outmanoeuvred in a really underhand way. I was present at the winding-up conference in 1964 when the whole shabby process came to a climax.

The organisers were not allowed to lecture and the postal courses [were] scrapped and there were various other petty actions.

If the NCLC had already been under the control of union bureaucrats, why on earth did Woodcock have to go to such lengths to destroy it?

The Millars were not everybody's cup of tea and I wouldn't have wanted to see too much of them. But they were a dynamic force and, as I've emphasised, very tolerant. (Unless organisers were late with their monthly reports or got their figures wrong!)

The plain truth is that the socialist content never went away - workers simply didn't want to hear of it. I lost count of the number of times I went to, say, Croydon or Brighton to find only two or three people at the union branch. Too many summer school attenders went there for a free holiday.

It was disheartening but it was the spirit of the times - the workers were no longer interested in thinking about social problems. It was the exact opposite of the leftist myth that the workers were straining at the leash only to be held back by reactionary bureaucrats (though some of the latter certainly did exist!).

I'm sorry if any of this sounds negative. It's not intended to be. But it's essential to start with a realistic appreciation of the movement's history and to avoid any illusions about the nature of the task you are taking on.

With very best wishes for the success of your project.

***The IWCE Network welcomes
contributions to this draft
manifesto. Please send to
iwceducation@yahoo.co.uk***