

Next steps

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We print here section 9 of the recent PSE pamphlet Class-Struggle Adult Education for the 21st Century. Why we need it and how we can move towards it.

The pamphlet is a contribution to discussion within the Independent Working-Class Education Network (IWCEN) of a proposed manifesto.

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We need to ask ourselves: what approach to teaching and learning would attract and hold the support of serious activists?

People sometimes tend to assume that they already know everything it's necessary to know. They can be unwilling to question their existing beliefs. They frequently assume that anyone advocating workers' education is basically saying that workers are thick, and/or trying to substitute education for action. Above all, they don't want arrogant outsiders ramming ideas down their throats. And all of these attitudes can go hand in hand with an exaggerated respect for knowledge acquired through formal education.

People are right to distrust highly educated people who approach the labour movement with offers to educate the workers. Some of this distrust almost certainly stems from a recognition that the ruling class has repeatedly used mis-education, including in various leftwing disguises, as a class struggle instrument. To convince people that together we can bring valid forms of adult education into being we need, then, to think carefully about the content of the education we offer to provide.

Many of those who we seek to draw into IWCE will be working long hours in stressful jobs, sometimes for more than one employer. In many cases, the jobs they do will also expose them to pressure from service users. At the same time, they are the people to whom others in their workplaces turn when management puts pressure on them. Therefore they will often be subject to this management pressure both as workers themselves and as shop-stewards,

reps and the like. Others will be active in community campaigns. Some will be both. On top of this they will frequently have children and/or dependent parents. Many will be juggling a variety of demands and pressures.

People in that kind of situation may often see education as worthwhile only if it helps them to learn techniques that will make them more effective as activists. They may see content that does not facilitate this as arbitrary and postponable, if not dispensable. For example, they may initially reject history as irrelevant to the present, and they may resist being asked to think about abstract questions.

On the other hand, if we want to base what we do on the themes which the Ruskin strikers and Plebs League believed should be central to IWCE, our teaching strategies and materials would be focused on three areas. One of these areas would be socialist economics, where we want to help people equip themselves with concepts with which they can make sense of the economic dimension of class struggle from a workers' as opposed to a capitalist standpoint. Another would be 'industrial history' (by which the Plebs League meant history that included the actions and ideas of working-class people). Here, our emphasis needs to be on history as something that we as workers make, but also as something that we can and should 'write' - that is, investigate and publicise. And the third area would be 'philosophy'.

In this last case, the Plebs League focused especially on the writings of the 19th century German tanner Josef Dietzgen, who developed for

himself a dialectical way of thinking independently of intellectuals like Hegel or Marx. But essentially they were looking for a way in which working people who hadn't gone through higher education could strengthen their capacity to think out complex issues for themselves so that they could argue against ruling-class spokespersons, both in their own heads and in speech and writing. In this area, our emphasis needs also to be on helping people develop the capacity to think through their own insights. Lastly, we need to integrate each of these themes with the others.

Content

How, then, can we generate content which activists like those we have described will recognise as necessary and urgent but which at the same time allows us to put these themes on the agenda?

At the very least we must convince people that the process we offer them is relevant to the problems they are trying to solve – in other words, that it will be more than just a chance to have enjoyable discussions and air cherished ideas. People must go away from IWCE sessions thinking differently from how they did before, and they must want to come back because they recognise that IWCE gives them access to learning processes which strengthen their capacity to be socially and politically pro-active.

This requires, first, that we work out ways to teach techniques (for example public speaking), procedures (for example, chairing) and conceptual moves (for example, testing generalisations) through the knowledge areas we aim to address. In other words we must be confident that there is a proper balance between skills, knowledge and understanding in any teaching and learning process we organise. And, secondly, it requires that, where classes form a series, we conduct them in such a way that the focus moves steadily towards issues that students themselves put on the 'agenda'.

In discussion about the aims of IWCE, IWCEN supporters have argued that workers' education for today must help people to take an active part in discussion, debate, argument and research, to challenge dominant views, to identify unstated assumptions, to question their own assumptions, to formulate and express reasoned judgements on complex issues, to pose fundamental questions about dominant ideas, to develop and evaluate new ideas and approaches to contemporary problems, to perceive their own experience as part of the raw material of history, to engage critically with issues that they are unfamiliar with and ideas they disagree with, to investigate critically the history of working-

class and socialist movements in terms both of events and ideas, and to relate past events and ideas to their historical context.

Activists

An IWCE movement that intends to meet these requirements will probably need to discuss both in advance of organising classes and regularly thereafter what kind of teaching and learning strategies would work with busy activists. Many people, including many teachers and lecturers, have not had a chance to reflect on the importance of posing open-ended questions rather than asking students to guess what they're thinking, while people from academic backgrounds without experience in adult or further education may sometimes equate teaching with lecturing or reading academic papers. Whatever happens, then, it seems likely that a revived IWCE movement will need to evolve collective methods for developing teaching strategies and materials.

Strategies are needed as well as materials, because experience suggests that materials on their own aren't useful without an overall conception of the intended direction. And in terms of materials, it is probably better to invite intending tutors to discuss materials that have been used in the past and then encourage them to improve on these, rather than to offer them ready-made materials that they're expected to use.

Busy activists who come to an IWCE class are likely to expect an element of authoritative input from tutors. They are likely to think that, since they've made the effort to attend, the tutors should possess some knowledge or expertise that would be relevant to them, and should have devised a procedure for communicating this to them. Some of them may also be anxious that what they perceive as their own ignorance should not be exposed in the class. Subject to these provisos, however, they are likely also to want tutors to allow for relevant knowledge and/or experience that students do possess, and will expect genuinely open-ended discussion, so long as it does not leave them with a feeling of inconclusiveness.

As things stand at the moment, the IWCEN as such does not have a shared practice from which theory can be collectively developed. But once some classes are running it will be possible – and probably necessary – to hold regular workshops for tutors – in short, to develop our own form of ongoing tutor education.

One area that this tutor education would need to address is the question of dialogue. This would almost certainly involve us in thinking more systematically about the relation between socialist traditions

of class-struggle workers' education and popular education traditions.

Popular education' refers to the adult education movements, often focused on literacy and/or on agricultural techniques, which have been developed over the last two centuries or so with small peasant proprietors, initially in parts of Europe, and later worldwide across agricultural zones. In much of southern Europe in the 19th century you had the development of Popular Universities, while in rural northern Europe you had Folk High Schools. In the 20th century both of these spread to North America, for example the Antigonish movement in the maritime provinces of Canada and the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which began as a labour college but later took on a crucial role in the Civil Rights struggle, especially through the literacy work of Septima Clark in the islands off the coast of South Carolina. As well as this, the ideas of Paulo Freire originate from a popular education initiative developed in the 1950s by Catholic radicals in Brazil. Within a framework derived from liberation theology, Freire's thinking includes borrowings from Marx and from existentialism.

Freire

Freire's thought has three central features: 'conscientisation' (ie the idea that, to be valid, education for oppressed adults must enable them to develop a consciousness that they are oppressed and a desire to fight back); skills training integrated with this (for example literacy training which uses words and images reflecting their oppressed situation); and dialogue (genuine engagement and interaction between and amongst teachers and learners. However, a conception of dialogue also runs through the tradition of IWCE.

Thus it is clear both from the *Communist Manifesto* itself and from earlier and later writings that Marx and Engels thought that a necessary condition for the formation of the working-class movement as a movement consciously setting its own direction was a dialogue within it between workers and a group who were not – or at least did not start out as – industrial proletarians, and who had undergone mainstream higher education. As early as 1843, for example, Marx argued that 'the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy; philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat'. (By philosophy here Marx meant the group of left-Hegelian philosophy students and lecturers to which both he and, by a different route, Engels belonged. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1844, Engels also maintained that a dialogue was taking place, in what was then the

industrial centre of the world, between Chartists (ie industrial workers who were radical democrats and who he thought had already gone a long way towards 'attaining independent education') and followers of Robert Owen (that is, of a thinker who he and Marx would in 1848 characterise as a 'critical utopian socialist') and who were not themselves industrial workers. Four years later, he and Marx devoted a section of the *Communist Manifesto* to identifying three routes through which people from other classes, and specifically people with higher levels of mainstream education than those available to the mass of working-class people, would necessarily contribute aspects of that education to the proletarian movement in ways which would strengthen it. Then, looking back in 1892, Engels wrote that: 'The German socialist movement had its origin in events that occurred long before 1848. It began with two independent movements. The first was a purely working class movement which derived its inspiration from the early communist agitation of the French workers. One aspect of this movement was [Wilhelm] Weitling's utopian communism. The second was a purely intellectual movement which developed as a result of the collapse of Hegel's philosophical system and this type of socialism was from the first dominated by Karl Marx. The *Communist Manifesto* of January 1848 represented the fusion of these two early German socialist movements'.

Properly understood, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* was a development of this conception, centred on the proposal that, under the circumstances of illegality and violent repression that existed in Russia in 1903, a dialogue should be conducted on a sustainable basis through a newspaper which would contain, on the one hand, reports by workers on their own conditions, activities etc, and, on the other, political 'indictments' of all aspects of tsarist rule written by a dedicated group of intellectuals, some of them traditionally educated people who had thrown in their lot with the workers' movement, some working-class autodidacts.

Italy

Finally, looking back from prison in the early 1930s on the pre-revolutionary situation that existed in Italy in 1919-1920 and ended in Mussolini's rise to power, Antonio Gramsci proposed for the Italian Communist Party a structure in which it would become 'a philosophical movement properly so called', and in which, through the involvement of 'intellectuals' who were 'organically the intellectuals of [those] masses', it would 'in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to commonsense and

coherent on a scientific plane . . . never forget . . . to remain in contact with 'the simple' and indeed find in this contact the source of the problems which it [would] set[s] out to study and to resolve'.

Dialogue

As part of the self-development of IWCE tutors, sustained discussion needs to take place with people from the popular education tradition who base themselves mainly on the class-struggle – as opposed to the ethical – side of Freire's thought. By this means it would hopefully be possible to arrive at a conception of dialogue that would underpin IWCE teaching and learning and make it coherent. As well as this, our tutor education would need to address what we have called 'the lost legacy' of IWCE.

The majority of the people we want to attract as 'students' will not know that workers have built class-struggle adult education movements in the past. So at the start they may not see this as something that they could do now. For this reason alone, then, we need to get to know this history well enough to explain it to other people.

In addition, the lack of a proper history means that the legacy of IWCE and similar initiatives is in danger of being lost altogether. But we can't let this happen, because to build a modern-day equivalent we need to know what was right and what was wrong about earlier movements. Without this, we would have to learn what to do entirely by trial and error, and we could easily repeat mistakes made in the past.

So it seems likely IWCEN supporters will need to get involved in researching past class-struggle workers' education movements, including the Plebs League itself. And the history they dig out needs to be truthful, because there is always a risk of bending the past in the direction that suits what you want to do in the present.

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