
Independent Working-Class Education

Based on a talk given by Colin Waugh at an IWCEN meeting on 30/3/19 in York

Independent working-class education (IWCE) properly understood is a process by which working-class people, especially of working age, organise themselves to deepen and widen their conceptual capacity, in the collective interests of the working class as a whole, as opposed to the interests of those who own the means of production. As such it is a necessary condition of working-class ideological struggle more generally, which in turn needs to be restored to a position where it has equal weight with economic and political struggle. Further, because of the extent to which access to relevant knowledge has come to be monopolised by universities, IWCE can advance only if it draws support from amongst workers employed there.

The working class in the UK today includes all those who have to work for somebody else in order to live, regardless of the class they were born into, and of whether the work they do is mainly manual or mental, plus their partners or other family members who are looking after children, acting as carers etc, plus people who are on benefits because there is no work for them, people to whom benefits have been denied and people whose migration status disbars them both from working and from benefits. It does not include people whose 'earnings' are large enough to constitute a share of profits, but does include most sole traders, 'knowledge workers', and people doing 'middle class jobs'. (For example, because of the expansion of higher education over the last thirty years, the UK working class now includes a sizeable group of people employed by universities on precarious contracts to teach and research, amongst many other subject areas, material essential to revived IWCE.) The working class includes also many who are working illegally, and some at least of those whose work itself is at or beyond the margins of legality, for example some sex-workers. Lastly, it includes all those indicated above whether or not they define themselves as working-class. In short, it means those by whom anything that matters in countries like UK, and in the industrialised zones of countries, for example China (Freeman, 2019, pp. 287-288), where a class of peasant proprietors still exists, is done.

Both globally and nationally, the class that owns the means of production can - and repeatedly does - drive sections of workers out of the labour market, but

cannot dispense with the working class as a whole without abolishing itself as a class. Further, no matter how much workers' skills are built into machines, and no matter how sophisticated those machines become, they are designed, made, assembled, installed, powered, fed, operated and maintained by workers. Again, however much work processes are divided into narrowly specialised tasks, knowledge of society's overall production process still resides within that class as a whole. Lastly, knowledge in a still broader sense, including all science, has as its necessary condition the insights that people acquire through intervening and acting on their environment - in essence, through work. The question is, then, are the processes by which these insights are turned into ideas - that is, transferable concepts - to be performed in their own interests by the workers who have those insights - that is, in the interests of the overwhelming majority - or by a restricted layer operating exclusively in the interests of those who own the means of production.

Workers alone collectively possess in potential the capacity to solve - as opposed to temporarily ameliorating - issues like climate change, resource depletion, disease, famine, racism, misogyny and war. But to do so they must first reappropriate from the ruling class the power to elaborate into intellectual tools the insights they acquire through their experience of work. This in turn requires both that they develop to the highest possible level their capacity for reflection on work, and that they put themselves in a position to give effect to the results of this reflection. In each of these spheres, then, they must produce from amongst their own ranks people who start the process of organisation.

The position of workers in the capitalist labour process means that a minority of them always are - or are becoming - organisers of activity, for example as shop stewards. However, if such activity is to be integrated with the development of class consciousness some of these activists must involve themselves in education as well. Therefore any IWCE movement must convince some shop stewards and the like to become also IWCE tutors. History shows that this has been done before, and that it inescapably involves workers in struggles with ruling class initiatives that purport to be educational.

Around 1830, a section of the ruling class decided that people like farm labourers, textile workers and domestic servants should have access to instruction. In doing so, they were motivated, first, by fear of a revolution like those in France, and especially of the role played there by artisans, secondly, by a desire to get workers to support moves by industrial capitalists to win political power from the land-owning class, and, thirdly, by concern about the uprisings of agricultural workers then spreading across southern England under the banner of Captain Swing (Griffin, 2012, pp. 87-114). Against this background, the poet and philosopher Samuel Coleridge argued that Anglican clergy could justify the tithes by which country dwellers were forced to support them if they became a 'clerisy' - that is, provided education, especially moral instruction, to workers (Leavis, 1967, pp. 142-143).

In 1848, motivated by a fear that revolution in France was reinvigorating the Chartist movement here, a group of Anglican clergy and upper class lawyers formed the first Christian Socialist group (Christensen, 1962, pp. 70-71). In 1854, one section of this group founded the London Workingmen's College (LWMC). They aimed to shape through adult education a compliant layer amongst actual and potential working-class activists by giving declassed artisans access to a pretend Oxford college run by people from Oxford University itself (Harrison, 1954, p. 29; Christensen, 1962, pp. 340-351).

In the early 1880s, motivated by fear that working-class self-organisation was rising again, Oxford University tutors and students influenced by the philosophy professor T. H. Green (Richter, 1964, pp. 360-361) carried this approach a step further. In an attempt to reinvigorate the workingmen's college movement by providing 'tutorial' classes for workers, they founded in the East End of London Toynbee Hall, the first of many such 'settlements'.

Around 1900, the Oxford University Extension Delegacy adopted from Albert Mansbridge, a Cooperative Society office worker who had both studied and taught at Toynbee Hall, a suggestion that they form a national system of 'tutorial' classes. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was created in 1903 to this end. From 1907, amidst rising class struggle, moves were made to implement this project, first by a drive to annex Ruskin College, an independent institution in Oxford itself, and secondly by the start-up in 1908 of tutorial classes in Stoke on Trent and Rochdale (Simon, 1974, pp. 296-318).

At every point in this sequence, the ruling class initiatives were triggered and/or resisted by working-class activity that included self-education.

The struggle for an unstamped press that went on in the 1830s generated a movement for 'really useful knowledge' (Cole, 1943, p. 29) that was carried into the Chartist movement and especially into the role of

papers like the *Northern Star* and *Red Republican*, that were read aloud, discussed amongst and contributed to by Chartists nationwide (Thompson, 1984, pp. 37-56; Epstein, 2015, pp. 58-75; Schoyen, 1958, pp. 201-203)). The LWMC was an attempt to contain the influence of this movement.

In 1881 workers' discussion clubs came together across London to form the Democratic Federation, which in 1883, as the SDF, became the UK's first nominally Marxist party (Shipley, 1983, p. 41; Crick, 1994, p. 20). The setting-up of Toynbee Hall was triggered by the breakdown and death of T.H. Green's former student Arnold Toynbee following a confrontation with discussion club members at a lecture in which Toynbee attacked the ideas of Henry George (Kadish, 1986, pp. 208-212, 215-217).

The WEA began as an attempt to counter efforts by working-class activists to educate themselves and one another by reading socialist literature and through street-corner agitation. In 1908-09, against the background of the drive towards industrial unionism, struggle over control of Ruskin College led to mineworkers and railway-workers who were students there organising the Plebs League and Central Labour College to provide 'IWCE' (Waugh, 2009, pp. 23-25).

This history has implications for now. First, the education of working-class adults is never class neutral. Secondly, if something calls itself 'workers' education', we must always ask in whose interests it's being conducted. Thirdly, 'education' aimed at working-class activists without being under their control regularly ends up as a class-struggle instrument in the hands of the ruling class. Fourthly, for 100 years from 1830, working-class activists typically took it as given that collective self-education was a crucial part of their activity.

On this basis, what will happen if a government under Jeremy Corbyn is elected on a manifesto promising to de-restrict union activity? We must expect this to stimulate unionisation efforts by workers across many fields, and that in the process they will generate new forms of organisation and struggle, - that is, take the kinds of action which formerly triggered ruling-class experiments in workers' education. We want revived IWCE to go hand in hand with revived union activity, but we must expect those who wish to neutralise such activity to promote false forms of workers' education to help them do so. Nevertheless, starting now there are things we can do to preempt this.

First, we must develop an adequate conception of content. A basis for this should be the areas at the core of teaching and learning provided by the Plebs League: 'industrial history', 'economics', and 'philosophy'. 'Industrial history' meant history from which the actions of working-class people were not left out. (We would need to rework this in the light of from-below and globalised history written more recently,

and especially to take account of struggles by working people of colour and the role of women in building working-class movements.) 'Economics' meant the critique of 'political economy' put forward by Karl Marx. (We would need to rework this in the light of the publication and/or translation of texts that the Plebs League activists hadn't seen.) 'Philosophy' meant the approach put forward by the German tanner Joseph Dietzgen (Dietzgen, 1906; MacIntyre, 1980, p. 129; Ree, 1984, pp. 23-25). (Here we would need to develop an approach to learning logic and dialectics through which workers can generalise their own insights and out-reason ruling-class spokespersons.)

Secondly, we must develop a genuinely dialogic conception of teaching and learning. Because of the monopolisation by universities of resources that we require, there has to be interaction at the level of ideas between union activists and people drawn from amongst the 'academic proletariat' described earlier. Only through such a dialogue could a sizeable group capable of conducting IWCE sessions arise. This group would in turn enter dialogue with wider circles of workers, especially routine workers in precarious employment without paper qualifications. This dialogue would be structured by a rolling agenda to which tutors contribute material drawn from the above content areas, and other workers table issues they face.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that all the education we provide is also tutor education. This is necessary both because the model envisaged would fail unless the people drawn into IWCE from the academic proletariat learn how to share their expertise in a non-academic fashion, and because unless everyone involved in IWCE both learns and asks themselves, 'How would I teach this to someone else?' the required expansion cannot happen.

Fourthly, we must organise ourselves democratically. We need to seek the involvement of people from a wide range of causes, campaigns and viewpoints, on the basis that as long as we can agree to work together in pursuit of workers' education, we don't have to agree about everything else. Secondly, the IWCE movement should accept funding only from labour movement bodies that have taken a democratic vote to support it, and more generally should ensure that we offer activists teaching and learning that they would pay for from their own pockets. Thirdly an IWCE a group large enough to be effective would have to adopt a membership structure. Finally, such a group would need to keep on re-assessing its own assumptions and policy direction through regular get-togethers.

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