

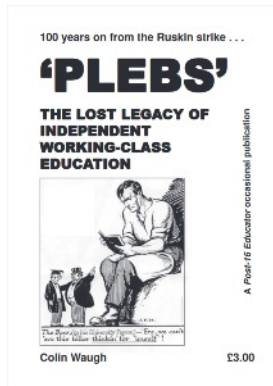
The Plebs News

daveberrygmb@yahoo.co.uk August 2023



Special Holiday Political Education Issue

At a time when free speech is under threat Plebs News says : Why we need political education.



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Harold Wilson's speech at the 1963 Labour conference included the observation ... "Every bird needs a left wing and a right wing and it can't fly on one. The same is true of the Labour Party". His words best describe the "broad church" that has made the party successful over the years, both in power and in opposition. This month's Plebs News looks at how the many members of the Labour movement have come to join the Party and how those differing routes, political experience and education has shaped the achievements over the year. Wilson and Atlee, probably Labour's most successful prime ministers came to the Party from middle class families and the gleaming spires of Oxford whilst others like Bevan and Bevin came from the mines and the docks with little formal education. Others came via religion and the famous mix of Methodism and Marxism that blended the thoughts and actions of the Party and Governments. Others came from the colonial struggles and others from feminist and suffragette struggles.

Some of the political education routes have been formal and within existing structures but many have been informal and created by the working class to suit their social and political settings. Ernest Bevin honed his reading skills reading newspapers aloud to older members of his family, still illiterate and lacking any education and Will Thorne, founder of the Gasworkers Union and a later MP was tutored by Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl and Jenny Marx. The Socialist Sunday Schools and Clarion Cycling Club were the beginning of many political thoughts for workers first experiencing alternative thoughts of political freedom and free speech. This Plebs News will celebrate some of the organisations and people who have championed the cause of political education and the working class. Technical schools and apprenticeships, too included general and liberal studies teaching politics and democracy on top of bricklaying and gas fitting. Teaching those on the "Friday afternoon" slot was probably the toughest job in education but helped to shape many shop stewards and representatives in public life. The trade unions and Workers Educational Association played a big role for many as shop steward training included much more than procedural and organisational skills but also the history of the Labour movement and the political aspirations of the working class.

Many of the avenues described in this edition are now closed to workers or operate in a shrunken state. Even the citizenship introduced into the formal education system by New Labour has dwindled into obscurity. The lack of political education leaves the door open to extremists and populists but also robs us of our history and dreams of a different future. One of Wilson's greatest achievements was the Open University allowing distance and part time Higher Education for many. Wilson boasted of being a pragmatist but claimed that Labour will be remembered not for its pragmatism but for its moral purpose summed up in the phrase **"The Labour party is a moral crusade, or it is nothing."**

Political education in “dangerous times”.

These are dangerous days

To say what you feel is to dig your own grave-

Sinead O'Connor (Black Boys on Mopeds)

For some voting is the essence of democracy but what is it that gives our vote meaning or effectiveness. For voting to change anything it must be an informed vote and within a system that holds the ultimate power to change the systems of government and economics. Some are scathing about our system of democracy, from all sides of the the political spectrum. Emma Goldman, the anarchist famously said “ if voting changed anything they would make it illegal” and Edward De Bernays , the father of public relations, even wrote a thesis on it stating that “ "invisible" people who create knowledge and propaganda rule over the masses, with a monopoly on the power to shape thoughts, values, and citizen response. "Engineering consent" of the masses would be vital for the survival of democracy”. Noam Chomsky was more forgiving claiming that m “a nation is only democratic to the degree that government policy reflects informed public opinion.” He also wrote on his jaded view of US democracy in “Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media” in which he derided mainstream media as “effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion”. This view reflects the mainstream media in the UK with all, if not most, owned by oligarchs or reflective of the political orthodoxy. The present Government policy is reflective of this manufacturing consent with restrictive legislation on demonstrations and harsh legal penalties on those that disagree with their views.

But what of the “informed public opinion” Chomsky spoke of. Equally damaging is the “self censorship” and restriction of views exercised today that seeks to exclude views that differ from the accepted orthodoxy. The idea of “no platforming” or restrictions on “free Speech” are even more damaging than legal ones when policed by social acceptance. Most of the major changes in our political and economic systems would not have come about without voices from outside our formal political and social systems. Smearing and labelling has become weaponised in today’s politics.

Even the operation of our political system is expected to appear through osmosis rather than through any formal education. Labour has always championed political education through its federated system of political and trade union wings and societies such as the Fabians and more recently Momentum. New Labour, influenced by the [Crick Report](#) introduced citizenship in schools for 5-16 year olds. But in 2017 Tom Franklin was forced to write in the [Guardian](#) of Government neglect of the subject. Even the Uk All Party Parliamentary Group published a critical report through its Secretariat ShoutOutUK entitled [The Missing Link](#) in 2021.

Voices in the Labour Party have attempted to maintain our radical voice. John McDonnell helped to launch “ [The World Transformed](#)” as a fringe at the Labour Party Conference with the view

"We can't just be a bunch of politicians who take ministerial positions, the beating heart of Labour in power will be a movement of ordinary people who understand our history as the working class and what socialism can achieve.

The Labour movement has a rich history of working class self education and because of new platform technologies we're able to revive and expand on that tradition like never before. This work is at the cutting edge of the movement, and I look forward to its radical expansion over the coming years."

Some of the institutions cited in this month's Plebs News are those that have sought to buck those trends of orthodoxy quoted above and to give both voice and meaning to our democratic system and make political education a priority for our party and our country. We need to recapture education as a radical expression of much needed change if our piece of paper at the ballot box is to mean anything.

The Plebs League

Many have asked me of the origin of the name “Plebs News” and others imagine it as some sort of derogatory title but it is a celebration of one of the routes of political education achieved through the struggle of working people to forge a different route to knowledge despite the wishes of their masters. The story of the Plebs League and the Ruskin Strike is told in the pamphlet authored by Colin Waugh and published in 2009 and printed here in Sheffield. The introduction is published here by permission of the author and a copy of the pamphlet can be downloaded at the [Independent Working Class Education Website](#)

In October 1908 students and former students at Ruskin College in Oxford founded the League of the “Plebs”. From 26th March to 6th April 1909 they took strike action in the college.

The Plebs League eventually became a national movement, providing what was called IWCE (independent working-class education). Through this movement, which was still functioning in 1964, tens of thousands of working-class people both taught and learnt. The basic aim behind IWCE was that the working class should produce its own thinkers and organisers.

The autobiographies and reminiscences of many labour movement leaders in the 1930s, 40s and 50s refer to the Plebs League and Ruskin strike. In contrast, few academic historians have paid attention to these initiatives. Most histories of adult education, for example, assume that what counts is the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). They either ignore IWCE altogether or see it as an obstacle that briefly hampered the WEA. This pamphlet, in contrast, assumes that we need to find out what IWCE was really about and build on it now.

The history of IWCE went through three phases. In the first phase, beginning around 1907, the movement was driven by the aims and actions of (mostly quite young) working-class men - mainly miners, railway workers, textile workers and engineering workers. In the second phase, beginning around 1914, a group of middle class intellectuals influenced how the IWCE movement was run.

Thirdly, from 1926 to 1964, two people - J. P. M. Millar and Christine Millar - worked doggedly to make IWCE, now called the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), the education arm of the mainstream labour movement.

This pamphlet marks the centenary of the 1909 strike at Ruskin. It aims to present a truthful picture of what happened then. This involves looking into the background to the strike, both on the students’ side and on the ruling class side as represented by the WEA and University Extension movement. It does not attempt to deal with what happened later.

In 1968, having investigated the IWCE classes in the North West, the historian Ruth Frow wrote: ‘The question that arises is, has the social change for which the stalwarts of the Oldham class and the Hyde class, the Liverpool Labour College and the Manchester Labour College, the Number 8 Division of the National Council of Labour Colleges and the Trades Unions which supported them, been achieved?’

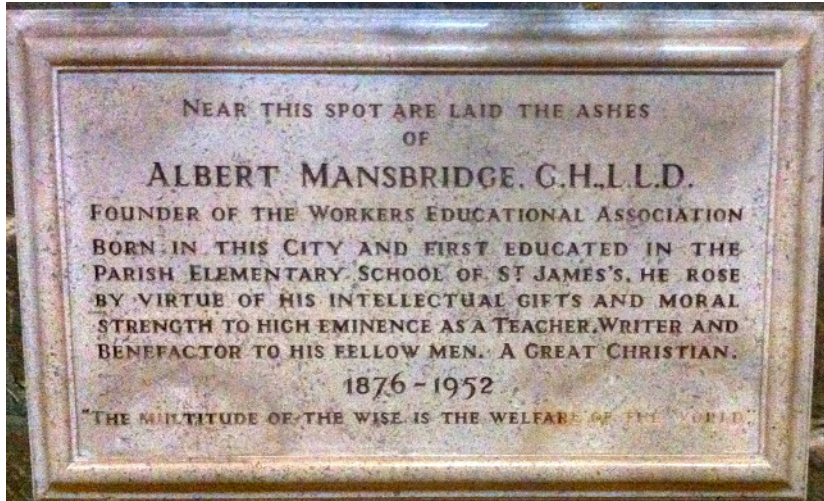
Or will the dying flame of Independent Working Class Education need to flare again to guide the workers along the path to emancipation?’

This pamphlet assumes that the answer to this question is ‘yes’.



Students at Ruskin-1909 Spartacus Education

The Workers Educational Association- WEA



Wikimedia



Issuu website - readable

In 1902 Albert Mansbridge published the article, Co-operation, Trade Unionism and University Extension. He argued that he was concerned about the "lack of thinking power in the rank and file" of the labour movement. Mansbridge went on to say that higher education for future working-class leaders would result in "right and sound action" in public affairs.

At that time most trade unions were debarred by their own rules from spending money on education. Mansbridge therefore decided to take responsibility for this idea by forming the Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men. The group was joined by trade unionists and co-operators and Mansbridge held its inaugural conference in Oxford on 22nd August 1903.

Mansbridge was appointed as secretary of the organisation that after October 1905 was known as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). The main reason for this because some women claimed that the original name of the organization was sexist. By June 1906 the WEA had 47 branches. The autonomy of these branches was reflected in the wide variety of activities which they promoted. This included lectures and classes in the arts and social sciences, reading groups and nature-study rambles.

But not all agreed with the Mansbridge approach to liberal education and he came into conflict with Denis Hird and the Plebs league as well as from within the ranks of the WEA. John Mactavish, a Portsmouth shipwright and a Labour Party activist, took a more militant view. He wanted a socialist rather than a liberal education. "I claim for my class all the best that Oxford has to give. I claim it as a right, wrongfully withheld". Mactavish believed that the WEA should train "missionaries... for the great task of lifting their class." For this purpose they needed new interpretations of history and economics. "You cannot expect the people to enthuse over a science which promises no more than a life of precarious toil." Philip Snowden agreed with Mactavish: "I would rather have better education given to the masses of the working classes than the best for a few. O God, make no more saints; elevate the race." A WEA report published the following year made a similar point: "In obtaining a university education... it must not be necessary for working people to leave the class in which they were born... What they desire is not that men should escape from their class, but that they should remain in it and raise its whole level."

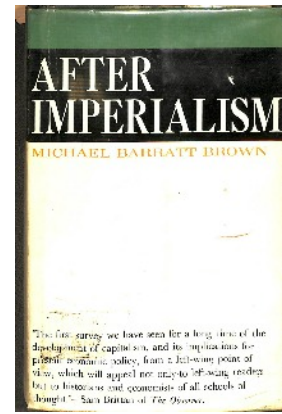
This debate has continued for the whole lifetime of the WEA, some would say stronger because of it, and it remains the largest voluntary Adult Education provider in the country maintaining its mix of community, trade union and liberal education, despite attacks from Government.

Some extracts from Wikipedia

Northern College, Barnsley



Flickr



Founded in 1978, the college is for the education and training of men and women who are without formal qualifications and are seeking to return to learning. It also offers training for those who are active in community and voluntary groups as well as in trade unions. It accepts students without any previous qualifications and survived the hostile political environment of the Thatcher 1980's.

For many trade unionists and community activists the opportunity to return to learning in a residential setting alongside other working class learners opened the door to serving in politics and public service. In an unlikely setting of an old stately home, now owned by the National Trust, miners, council workers found learning to be enjoyable and enriching as well as discovering the untold story of the working class. Many went on to provide the Labour Party with MP's, Councillors as well as a knowledgeable base of party members and activists.

Its first Principal, Michael Barratt Brown, had studied at Oxford and was a renowned economist. He helped to found the Institute for Workers Control, the Conference for Socialist Economists and the Institute of Industrial Tutors. He wrote numerous books and his work *After Imperialism* charting the rise of corporate power was described "as one of the most important post colonialism economic books published". In retirement he worked for the GLC and founded the Fair Trade and Divine Chocolate brands.

Several S.Yorkshire MP's and Councillors studied at Northern College and ex- MP Helen Jackson charts the connections between the College, the Deputy Principal Keith Jackson was her husband, and Sheffield Council's attempt to promote local employment, gender equality and anti-racism as well as municipal enterprise. In the book *The People's Republic of S. Yorkshire* Helen also lauds the involvement of the Workers Education Association and other Adult Education initiatives that challenged gender stereotyping. The college also received students from the Council's Take Ten initiative, run by Graham Birkin, which allowed Council workers ten days paid educational leave to return to study.

The College is now used by many as Access Courses to Higher Education but still offers courses on Community and Social Action including units on Living in the UK, Prejudice and Stereotypes and Peer Mentoring.

Ellen Moran- Acorn Organiser

Engage with people in their dialect with their informal political educations. At the end of the day that is enough. We all know what is happening is wrong. We can't expect people to engage in politics if they can't follow the conversation.

Wortley Hall



Wikimedia

Wortley Hall is a former stately home in the small South Yorkshire village of Wortley, located south of Barnsley, England. For more than six decades the hall has been owned by individual members and organisations associated with the British trade union and wider labour movement. It is currently used by several trades unions and other organisations as a venue for residential training courses and other meetings, as well as for purely social gatherings and is run as a non profit co-operative which is also open to the public. Regular venue for labour movement education and cultural events as well as home for trade union banners

The public rooms of the building are named after campaigning bodies like the FBU dining room and the National Assembly of Women residents lounge. These rooms are decorated with socialist and Trade Union paraphernalia including a bust of Lenin and vases from the Czech Republic, while the corridors are filled with posters from the movement. Home to the South Yorkshire Festival celebrating the labour and trade union movement.

Formerly owned by a family who made their money from the slave trade the building was abandoned and dilapidated during the 20th century before being revived by volunteers from the trade union movement.

Extract from Wikipedia

Aizelwood Mill



Wikimedia

Aizlewood's mill is a grade two listed building and is a former six storey flour mill built in 1861 and it is on Nursery Street, close to the city centre. The building is the home of Sheffield Co-operative Development Group and operates as a business centre as well as housing SCDG. Originally bought for £1 by Mike Bower who was employed by SCDG the building renovated for its current usage and to help develop the co-operative movement in Sheffield and S. Yorkshire

Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre

The Mill is also home to Principle 5 the Co-operative Resource Centre. The archive houses thousands of original documents charting the co-operative movement in Sheffield. The library also contains contemporary reading material on co-ops and the labour movement.

In the 1920's Sheffield Co-operative Society published a weekly newspaper and commemorative editions have been published over the last few years promoting co-operation and co-operative enterprise. The library has also produced educational pamphlets on famous co-operators such as Edward Carpenter and these can be accessed online at the [website](#).

The Resource Centre is named Principle 5 after the fifth principle of co-operation which is Education, Training and Information.

**Principle
FIVE** **P5**



Ruskin College- Oxford



Ghandhi with Lincs mill workers- Get Archive

Wikimedia

Ruskin College was founded in 1899 by two Americans who studied at Oxford University and decided that the same level of education should be available to everyone, not just the elite. The College is not part of Oxford University but has been the home for socialist studies for both UK and foreign students.

The College is named after John Ruskin, a radical pioneer of socialist thought. Ruskin has enjoyed some remarkable episodes in its history.

Its first Principal was Denis Hird who was later dismissed for supporting working class students who went on strike and formed the Plebs League. *See earlier article.*

The school was envisioned as a mechanism by which "working-class reformers" could "educate themselves efficiently at nominal cost." Tuition, lodging, and board was priced at 12s 6d (£0.625) per week, with a parallel correspondence course alternatively offered for 1 shilling (£0.05) per week plus a 1 shilling entrance fee.[Courses were offered in political economy, sociology, the history of the labour movement, principles of politics, English literature, psychology, and other related aspects of the social sciences.

The school was administered by a General Council, which included elected representatives from the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress and the Central Board of the Cooperative Union.[3] An auxiliary organisation of supporters of the school was launched in 1901, the Ruskin Hall Educational League, which arranged conferences and public lectures in conjunction with the activities of the school.[3]

Ruskin College became, in turn, a symbol of workers' education. It served as a model for labour colleges around the world, and Gandhi made a point of visiting during a brief stay in Oxford in 1931 because he had been so inspired by the writings of John Ruskin on workers' education, just as the college founders had been. Many other anti-colonial leaders also studied at Ruskin and went on to lead their countries to independence and end colonial rule

In 1970 Ruskin College hosted the UK's first National Women's Liberation Conference. The conference ran from 27 February to 1 March with between 500 and 600 people attending. British newspaper The Guardian called the conference the "biggest landmarks in British women's history". The conference organisers included Ruskin students Arielle Aberson and Sally Alexander, and historian Sheila Rowbotham. The organisers were associated with the History Workshop seminars held at the college and the conference was initially intended to focus on women's history.

In 2012 controversy broke out after a new Principal ordered the destruction of archives containing records of previous students work and admissions. Many of these archives contained work by students who had gone on to hold national and international political positions and a valuable source of historical material was lost.

Among its tutors was Raphael Samuel who founded the History Workshop Journal and wrote on the importance of recording working class and socialist history.

Ruskin archive: dust-up - The Guardian



The General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) is a national trade union centre in the United Kingdom. It has 35 affiliates with a membership of just over 214,000 and describes itself as the "federation for specialist unions".

History

In the 1890s, the development of socialist organisations and socialist thinking also found expression in the British trade union movement. Many of the new unions formed during that period were committed to the socialist transformation of society and were critical of the conservatism of the craft unions. The debate revolved around concept of building "one-big-union" which would have the resources to embark on a militant course of action and even change society. This thinking gained strength after the 1897 Engineering Employers Federation lockout which resulted in a defeat for engineering workers.

The view that it was necessary to develop a strong, centralised trade union organisation by forming a federation, which had been rejected only two years earlier, was now endorsed at the Trades Union Congress of September 1897. This resulted in the establishment of the General Federation of Trade Unions at a special Congress of the TUC in 1899, the principal objective of which was to set up a national organisation with a strike fund which could be drawn upon by affiliated trade unions.

Current Role

At its education centre and hotel situated at Quorn the GFTU and its Educational Trust provides specialist courses for its affiliates. The mission at GFTU Educational Trust is to provide education for the trade union movement, wider working class and young workers. Established by the General Federation of Trade Unions in 1970, our founding aims were to educate workers in "economic history and theory, industrial law, and the history and principles of industrial relations." To this day, we ensure that political economy, labour history, internationalism and the politics of industrial relations form a core part of our broad educational provision.

They provide a range of face-to-face, online and residential courses as well as, for a core programme, using an innovative blended learning approach which combines the benefits of residential and online education.

As well as representation course subjects include the Trade Union innovation and Leadership Programme, Economics and Anti-racism.

This pamphlet, produced by the [General Federation of Trade Unions](#) (GFTU) and written by Costas Lapavistas, James Meadway & Doug Nicholls, shows that the big businesses dominating production and distribution make huge profits out of high inflation, while working people lose out. It sets out factual evidence to illustrate that the source of record profits is the fall in real wages as inflation rises. A large part of the income of working people is transferred directly into the profits of big business.

**New
Publication**



The Socialist Sunday Schools



Wikimedia

Socialist Sunday Schools (SSS) were set up to replace or augment Christian Sunday Schools in the United Kingdom, and later the United States. They arose in response to the perceived inadequacy of orthodox Sunday schools as a training ground for the children of socialists and the need for an organised, systematic presentation of the socialist point of view to teach the ideals and principles of socialism to children and young people.

A national movement, the National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools Union, formed in 1909 traces its origin to a school opened in Glasgow by Caroline Martyn and Archie McArthur. It was established as a protest against, and an alternative to, the perceived middle-class bias and assumptions of the regular churches. Its aims were to help the schools in their teaching of Socialism.

The schools were grouped in District Unions and for the first ten years were affiliated to the Council. However in 1920 the Constitution was amended to allow direct school affiliation which meant there was wide representation at the Annual Conference. The manual is a very enlightening book into the teachings of the Sunday Schools and was prepared chiefly for the use of teachers. It contains specimen lessons and technique help to the teachers together with suggested reading for Socialist Education.

The Socialist Sunday Schools were organised with this theory as a basis and although there was no formulated set of rules to be followed there were three main guidelines of ethics, morality, brotherly love and social responsibility.

- That morality is the fulfilment of one's duty to one's neighbour.
- That the present social system is devoid of the elements of love or justice, since, as an organisation, it ignores the claims of the weak and distressed, and that is, therefore, immoral;
- That society can be reorganised on a basis of love and justice, and that it is every man's duty to use all available social forces in bringing about that reorganisation.'

Along with these went the Socialist Ten Commandments shown above.

The movement declined after the split in the Labour Party in 1931 and also the split with the Independent Labour Party.

Extracts from Wikipedia and the Working Class Movement Library

Clarion Cycling Club

The National Clarion Cycling Club is a British cycling club founded in 1894, and which retained strong links with the labour movement through the 20th century. At its peak, in 1936, it had 233 UK sections and 8,306 members. In 2021, it replaced its "support for the principles of socialism" with support for "fairness, equality, inclusion and diversity". Today it has some 30 member sections across Great Britain and over 1,900 members. It was named after the socialist paper, The Clarion.

Its founder Robert Blatchford published the newspaper, the Clarion, a socialist weekly, commencing in 1890. The paper first appeared in Manchester on 2nd December, 1891. Blatchford announced that the newspaper would follow a "policy of humanity; a policy not of party, sect or creed; but of justice, of reason and mercy."

Culture has always played a big role in Working Class Education and expression. Sheffield has its own cohort of poets, writers and songsters. Folk singer Roy Bailey as well as poets Chris Searle, Fay Musselwhite and Kevin Hanson among them. The poem below is from over the Penines but from an excellent collection.

Don't Tell the Children about Peterloo by Tony Kinsella

Teach them how Tommies defeated the Hun

The victorious glory of a war no one won

Despising the Kaiser

That prophet of Doom

Then get them reciting from Brooke

Not Sassoon

Dish out paper poppies

But whatever you do

Don't tell the children about Peterloo.

Don't teach how landowners, soldiers and cops

Rode into Manchester

Our protests to stop

Of Yeomanry charges on people unarmed

Of victims of violence inciting no harm

Legitimate grievances silenced by force

Battered by batons and trampled by horses

Where the Gates of Saint Peter let the Devil ride through

Don't tell the children

About Peterloo

Art is not a mirror
to reflect reality,
but a hammer with
which to shape it.

—Bertolt Brecht

Pinterest

Throughout years of history lessons in a Salford school nobody ever mentioned Peterloo, a hugely significant social and political event in the struggle for democracy and representation. This poem examines the motives of those who would steer clear of it in the classrooms of Greater Manchester.

Poetry on the Picket Line is a squad of like-minded poets putting themselves about to read their work on picket lines, in the spirit of solidarity. Invitations to rallies etc. welcome, contact facebook.com/pg/PicketLinePoets. The new Poetry on the Picketline anthology is available at culturematters.org.uk

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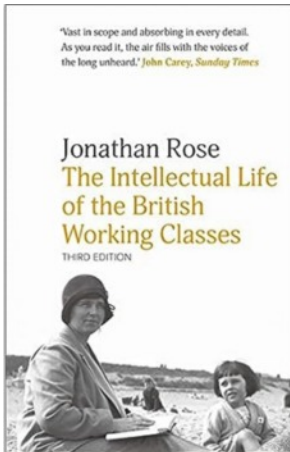


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Further Reading

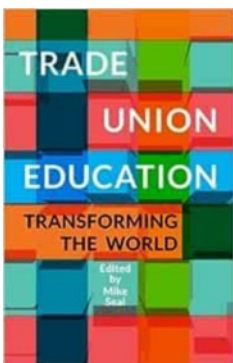
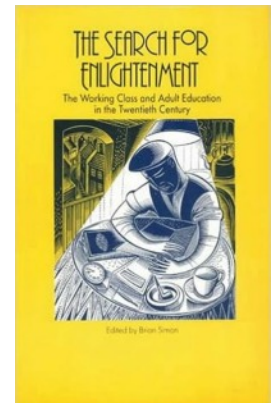


A landmark intellectual history of Britain's working classes from the preindustrial era to the twentieth century.

Winner of the SHARP Book History Prize, the American Philosophical Society's Jacques Barzun Prize, and the British Council Prize cowinner of the Longman-History Today Book of the Year Prize for 2001; named one of the finest books of 2001 by The Economist.

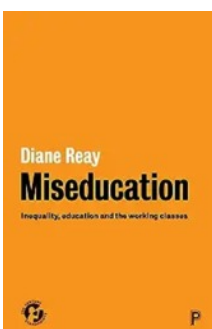
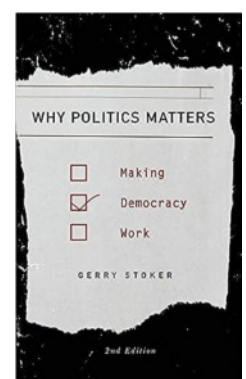
Drawing on workers' memoirs, social surveys, library registers, and more, Jonathan Rose uncovers which books people read, how they educated themselves, and what they knew. A new preface addresses the continuing relevance of the book amidst the upheavals of the present day.

This distinguished collection of essays describes and seeks to analyse the relationship between adult education and the broader process of social change. The essays focus on two periods, the period from 1919 to 1945, and the post-war years to 1988. Bodies such as the WEA, Ruskin College, the National Council of Labour Colleges and the Plebs League have all played their part in the education of working-class people. This book explores the trade unions' role in adult education, the Marxist challenge to conventional schools of thought, the role and potential of adult education in a period of rapid social change and the contemporary challenges facing adult education, as well as providing local studies.



This book demonstrates clearly that what is delivered in trade union education, and how it is delivered, have to be reformed and modernised. It successfully shows also how all trade unionists are educators in one way or another. Chapters cover the history, context and challenges in trade union education, the power of popular education techniques, trade union activism, community and social movements, practical examples of transformative new work and learning tips, learning materials and all those areas relevant to delivering impactful education.

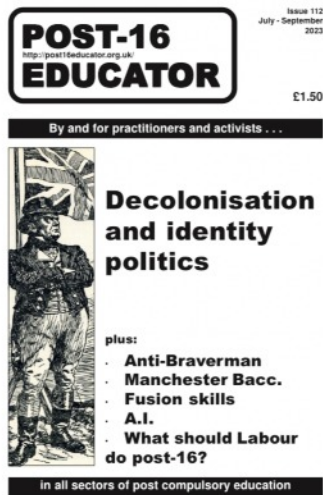
In this book, Gerry Stoker argues that politics matters to democracy and explains why it is failing. The weakness of democratic politics is not, he shows, is not the fault of politicians or public apathy. Profound shifts in our democracy such as the dominance of individualization and consumerism, the rise of specialization and professionalization and the increasing complexity and global scale of key issues. The collapse of deference and the role of the media in fostering cynicism have all made the task of governance and political leadership much harder.



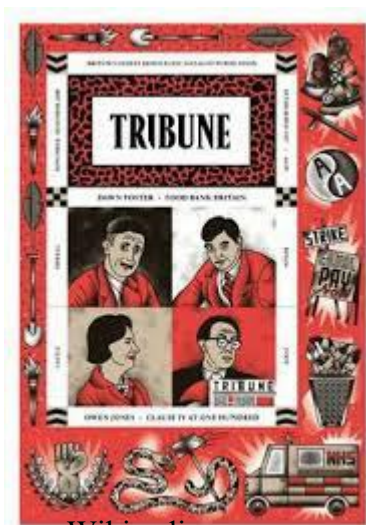
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In this book, part of the 21st Century Standpoints series published in association with the British Sociological Association, Diane Reay, herself working class turned Cambridge professor, brings Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's pioneering *Education and the Working Class* from 1962 up to date for the 21st century. The book addresses the urgent question of why the working classes are still faring so much worse than the upper and middle classes in education, and vitally - what we can do to achieve a fairer system.

Periodicals



Wikipedia



Wikipedia

Places to visit

