

# Recollections of an ex-TUC tutor

Dave Welsh\*

I got into TUC education in the early 1990s. Like many other tutors, I was a refugee from industrial work, in this case on the railways. Most of the tutors I met at that time had come, at one point or another, from the shop floor. This meant that they had either been sacked, victimised or simply lost their job due to redundancy in the 1980s - a common enough event in that decade. This seemed to me to be one of the great strengths of trade union teaching: its tutors came from the shop-floor not from some 'academy' or academic background. It gave them two things: a familiarity with the day-to-day world of the workplace that TU representatives (their students) were coming from, and secondly, they usually had a political outlook which had been honed over years of struggle. In other words, they had a firm view of what unions and reps should be doing in the workplace.

I had never done any trade union courses myself because I was never around at the right time or place to get onto them and I confess that I was arrogant enough to believe that I knew it all anyway - what could a TUC course tell me that I didn't already know? I had worked in enough places to have a knowledge of what shop stewards/ reps did and I had been for many years in NUPE, NALGO, ASLE&F and the NUR. But I was persuaded to do a two-year course on trade union/labour relations at Middlesex Poly in north London (who remembers that course?) and I was stunned by how much I didn't know about things like labour law. More importantly, I realised how useful it was to distance myself from day-to-day struggles (I was on British Rail at Stratford depot in London) and to have time to reflect. I gave my grudging respect to the tutors and found the students to be (mostly) staunch rank and file activists - needless to say many hours were spent in the bar discussing the issues of the day.

This was not, however, a TUC course, and it was only some years later that I 'discovered' these courses during my teacher training for FE. On my

teaching practice, I wanted to combine teaching in an FE college (Tower Hamlets) with some trade union teaching at South Bank Poly, where they did many TUC ten-week and shorter courses for reps. This split practice caused chaos at my teaching course and a lot of running around but it gave me an entry into both the FE sector just being 'incorporated' by the Tories and the mainstream TUC teaching I had never personally experienced. So I went to teach part-time in a number of FE colleges until I got a fractional post, and on TUC ten-week courses, mainly for railway reps who were branch officers or Local Departmental Committee (LDC) reps on British Rail.

## Traffic lights

The TUC Stage One railway courses were dominated by the machinery of negotiation, the British Rail conciliation system that had existed since the early 20th century. They were delivered, like all TUC ten-week courses, through the 'traffic light' books: the red, green and blue manuals that all tutors had to use. The students were from the NUR, ASLE&F and TSSA (I later taught tube reps from the same unions for the WEA). As a tutor, I didn't feel the gap between tutor and student that was often present in FE, and this was because the reps were older and more engaged with the course. It was more like Access teaching. It was all about skills: recruitment, grievance and disciplinary procedures, local negotiation: skills that most of the reps needed just as they needed the opportunity to meet other reps and compare notes - the number of reps who made lasting contacts must be one of the best things to come out of these courses. There was also an emphasis on group work in the classroom - something that was still not fully accepted in FE colleges. Participation was key, and most students needed little encouragement to take part.

The TUC courses (and there are many non-TUC courses run by individual unions themselves) had, I discovered, been developed with state funding after 1964, a period of union growth and confidence, although there had been TUC provision as far back as the 1940s. There was a lot of writing about unions from the 1960s, for example Tony Lane's *The Union Makes Us Strong*, the Marxist work of Richard Hyman on industrial relations, and Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford*. Many TUC tutors of that period were thoroughly schooled in these texts and must have brought a sophisticated understanding of labour relations to their teaching. By the time I started teaching, the amount of accessible new writing on unions was virtually zero and 'labour' correspondents on national daily papers had disappeared. This meant that tutors had to fall back on their experience and ideas in order to augment the traffic lights! I can remember typing out endless worksheets aimed at widening our classroom discussions. Tutors tried to focus on the issues facing the unions and how reps could build durable and effective organisation in the workplace. Inevitably, this raised politics, a reminder of the tension between the shop steward as a 'lubricant' or an 'irritant' in industrial relations as highlighted by the Bullock Report. That report had suggested the steward was more of a lubricant, but most tutors hoped they were an irritant.

There were other frustrations. I was astonished that there was no course content about economics or the structure of the rail industry. There was no organising agenda and no sense of building on relevant issues. The machinery of negotiation had become a millstone, with LDC reps who were complacent and utterly unaccountable to their local union branches. This, of course, was before privatisation destroyed the whole structure and the unions had to develop a strategy within each rail company. This was reflected on the TUC courses, which were all about *taking part* in the industrial relations machinery rather than developing a counterweight to it. The course content was entirely skills-based and prescriptive: it was a standing joke amongst tutors that you could go into any classroom, on any day, at any time, and the students would be doing exactly the same page in the traffic light books. One tutor went out and bought some comics to use in class as he claimed they were more useful. Group work could easily become a fetish, conveniently steering away from any 'controversial' input by the tutor.

It was difficult to bring any trade union history into these courses. I managed to find an old Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) trade union history slide show (with old-fashioned slides) which I used for one afternoon of the course. I was

observed by a TUC officer who seemed utterly bemused. I was told that a tutor who took her class to the TUC Library was asked what this had to do with TUC teaching! TUC courses were quite separate from the mainstream curriculum even when they were based in FE colleges. As I taught across the whole curriculum this seemed odd. TUC courses were becoming more integrated due to accreditation, but this was a bureaucratic change. Trade union centres were frequently under attack from vicious college managements in the 90s, with Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT)'s course being abolished. But such courses were rarely discussed at college union meetings and most tutors were part-time.

## Isolation

This isolation from the mainstream was also clear in relation to the wider trade union movement. For most students the courses were the only contact they had ever had with the TUC. Such courses were advertised at local trades council meetings but rarely discussed. There was no forum for discussion for tutors, thus limiting debate about TU education; the only material I found was by Raymond Williams, who had himself been a WEA tutor. The debate around the Plebs League/Labour Colleges/WEA was dead as far as tutors were concerned, because most tutors knew nothing about it. But the old hands of the Plebs League would have been turning in their graves had they known of the depoliticisation of these courses.

I left TUC teaching in 2004. The ten years of teaching on TUC courses were spent side by side with battles to defend jobs, conditions and the quality of teaching in FE and adult colleges. I hope that these personal recollections will contribute to a discussion of trade union courses as well as trade union studies as a whole (including archiving, resources and links to the wider movement). With the inherent dangers of a future Tory government out of sympathy with trade union education, we are likely to be defending the current provision in the near future. In defending the provision we will also be defending jobs in FE and the WEA and, in doing so, giving support to tutors. For most of the students who attend, these courses are often their only link with post-16 education, and their experiences and learning must surely be a key link in any rebuilding of the trade union movement.

**\* This article has benefitted from discussions with Roger Kline and Jan Pollock**