

The history of workers' education

Richard Ross

Introduction

The history of workers' education is rarely spoken or written about. It is in danger of being lost from view. We need to reclaim this history so we know where we have come from and that other possibilities are available. Shedding a light on the past might help us to illuminate the future.

Workers' education before the Second World War

Two organisations, two rivals, provided the bulk of workers' education before the Second World War. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) had been founded in 1903. Its rival, the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), was established following a strike by students at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1909 (1). The WEA and Ruskin had similar aims, to bring the benefits of education to workers, but the question arose as to who should determine and control that education. Was it to be the middle class, bringing enlightenment to the working class, or was it to be workers themselves and their institutions, such as trade unions? Was the purpose of education to fit workers into a capitalist society or to question and help to change that society?

This question came into sharp focus at Ruskin College. The College had been founded in 1899 by two Americans, Walter Vrooman and Charles Beard. Vrooman and Beard returned to America and by 1909 Ruskin was influenced very much by Oxford University and received donations from, amongst others, a couple of Dukes and some nine Lords (2). Oxford University had started to run tutorial classes for workers as part of the Extension movement. In 1908 they set up a permanent

committee, made up of University representatives and working people, to run these classes (3).

Many of the Ruskin students, who were mainly trade unionists, were aghast at these developments. They now felt that the purpose of the College was to transmit ruling class ideas, particularly in the field of economics. They organised their own classes, formed the Plebs League to put pressure on the College authorities and in 1909 went on strike, following the dismissal of the Principal, Dennis Hird, who had sided with the students.. The Plebs League established the Central Labour College, in opposition to Ruskin, as 'a declaration of Working Class Independence in Education' (4). Many of the strikers were from the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS, a forerunner of the RMT) which, after much internal debate, resolved at its AGM in October 1909 to transfer its support from Ruskin College to the Central Labour College (5). An editorial in the ASRS journal, *Railway Review*, had supported the students, saying that, 'They could see (Ruskin) drifting into the enervating influence of (Oxford) University, being divorced from the intentions of the founders, and instead of training working-class leaders and tutors capable of holding their own with the opposite classes, becoming a patronized pulpit for the production of semi-political prigs' (6).

The ASRS and, following its mergers with two other unions in 1913, its successor, the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), were strong supporters of the Central Labour College. The College struggled to fund itself and in 1915 ownership and control passed to its two greatest funders, the South Wales Miners Federation and the NUR. It finally closed in 1929, but by then the baton of independent working class education had been handed to the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC).

The Plebs League had organised classes around the UK, classes run in halls and meetings rooms by former Ruskin and then Central Labour College students. In 1921 these classes came together to form the NCLC and from then until 1964 the NCLC was one of the two main providers of workers' education in the UK.

The NCLC versus the WEA

The NCLC had many supporters in the trade union movement. This was a threat to the WEA which, in 1919, set up the Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC). On the ground workers attended classes provided by both organisations, and some tutors taught for both. However, ideologically the two organisations were poles apart. The NCLC stood for independent working class education, by which they meant education independent of the state and those that controlled it. They refused to take state money, unlike the WEA. The NCLC stood for education aimed at meeting the needs of 'workers as a class, and undertaken by the workers themselves independently of, and even in opposition to the ordinary existing educational channels' (7). The WEA was part of the extension movement, extending the benefits of education and culture to a class that had been denied them. For the NCLC the WEA was a tool of the state, designed to integrate the working class into a common national culture. They ridiculed the WEA's claim to be 'impartial'. From the WEA's point of view NCLC education was 'propaganda'. In sum, whilst the NCLC stood for revolutionary change in society, the WEA stood for reformism, a divide that continues to run through education, trade unionism and politics today. In fact the State recognised this divide. It saw the adult education movement and especially the WEA as 'a bulwark against revolutionism, a moderating influence and a form of social control' (8). Lord Eustace Percy, the president of the Board of Trade in 1925 understood the importance to the ruling class of supporting the WEA. '£100,000 spent annually on this kind of work, properly controlled, would be about the best police expenditure we could indulge in . . .' (9).

The TUC's role in education

THE NCLC's aim of working class education by and for the working class had led to it calling for the TUC to be responsible for trade union education. Attempts had been made in the 1920s and 30s for the TUC to take over workers' education, but these

had ended in failure. One such attempt was in 1925. The Countess of Warwick offered her home, Eaton Lodge, to the TUC. The aim was for both Ruskin and the Central Labour College to move to Eaton Lodge. This scheme was defeated at the 1926 TUC Congress, on the grounds that, following the General Strike, there was little money around for a College that would cater to just a few. A Jack Jones 'talked about men who had gone up to Ruskin dressed as workmen who have come back with haloes, dressed in plus fours, and immediately wanting to be general secretary of their union' (10).

However, in 1944, and at the instigation of the NUR, the TUC examined again the possibility of a residential college. This became the plan for a full-time college as a war memorial to trade unionists and resulted in what became Congress House, the TUC Memorial Building, containing its non-residential training college. The TUC was also sponsoring students on a three-year evening course at the London School of Economics (11).

Maritime House houses the TUC Training College

The TUC plans were for a training college running courses on technical industrial relations skills, such as negotiating, trade union administration, accounting and national insurance, together with background studies on trade union history and structures (12).

While the Memorial Building, now known as Congress House, was being built, the TUC courses were run at Maritime House in Clapham, South London. This had been opened as the headquarters of the National Union of Seamen (NUS) 70 years ago, on July 23rd 1940 (13). TUC courses began there in April 1947 and continued until 1957. The courses were full-time and at first they lasted for three or four weeks but over time the TUC moved towards shorter courses of one to two weeks.

Most of the teaching was undertaken by TUC staff with some outside lecturers. The students were full-time officials and lay representatives, together with officers of what were then called 'Colonial Trade unions', some sponsored by the Colonial Office (14).

The TUC Education Scheme

Financial difficulties that unions faced after the Second World War led to further calls for the rationalisation of trade union education under the

auspices of the TUC. The educational work of unions themselves, as well as the TUC, was growing and the duplication of providers was costly. Following an NUR motion at the TUC in 1957 a plan was devised to set up a TUC Educational Council to take over the running of trade union education from the existing organisations (15). In 1964 the TUC Education scheme came into being, taking over the NCLC and the WETUC (16).

Conclusion

Although workers' education was rationalised in 1964 the questions that were raised in 1909 with the Ruskin strike are still relevant. What is the purpose of workers' education? Who should control it? Who should provide it? How can Independent Working-Class Education be achieved? The Plebs League wanted 'neither crumbs nor condescension' (17), but control of their own destiny. We must not forget this history.

1. For information about the origins of the WEA and the NCLC see Brian Simon (1965), *Education and the Labour Movement*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London)
2. Simon op. cit. p319
3. Thomas Kelly (1992), *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool University Press)
4. Quoted in Simon op. cit. p324. For more on the Ruskin strike and the Plebs League, see Colin Waugh (2009) *'Plebs': The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*, (Post-16 Educator)
5. Frank Moxley, 'Railwaymen and Working-Class Education', Appendix A in Philip S. Bagwell (1963), *The Railwaymen*, (Allen and Unwin, Woking and London)
6. Quoted in Moxley, op. cit. p675
7. J. F. and Winifred Horrabin (1924), *Working Class Education* (The Labour Publishing Company)
8. Roger Fieldhouse, 'Conformity and Contradiction in English Responsible Body Adult Education, 1925-1950' in S. Westward and J. E. Thomas (1991) *The Politics of Adult Education* (NIACE) p139
9. Ibid.
10. Moxley, op. cit. p687
11. Moxley, op. cit. p692
12. A. J. Corfield (1969), *Epoch in Workers' Education* (WEA) p89
13. NUS (1940), Maritime House, Brochure for Official Opening
14. TUC Annual Reports for 1950 to 1957
15. Moxley, op. cit. p695
16. John Holford (1994) *Union Education in Britain* (Department of Adult Education, University of Nottingham)
17. *The Burning Question of Education* (undated) (The 'Plebs' League, Oxford).