

Working-class education

We print here a paper drafted by Rosie Huzzard, in collaboration with Chris Marks, as a contribution to discussion amongst activists in the PCS union

In a climate for trade unionists where our facility time agreements and access to trade union time are being squeezed and slashed up, we have to look more carefully at the ways in which we do our labour movement work.

Part of the attack is on trade union education, and it seems likely that learning agreements in the civil service (which currently allows us union learning rep [ULR] facilities) will be demolished in the near future.

While these should be defended, and we should argue for an increase in funding to these resources, it will take a while for them to include the ideological arguments that we need to equip our colleagues for the fight ahead.

Presently, the TUC- and PCS-accredited training schemes offer useful information in training reps and members on workplace, legal and campaigning skills. However, these training schemes are a far throw from the ideological training and political education that was afforded to working-class activists and workers in the days of the emerging trade union movement.

New Unionist movements such as the Plebs League advocated the arming of workers with ideas about their situation in the world to offer a different consciousness to the one that they were brought up with as part of the capitalist system. It was their fundamental belief that it was trade unions' role to not only organise but educate, and educate on their own terms.

The trade union studies we have now is in large part funded through the Government and this partnership has both benefited the ability of trade unions to offer learning, and hindered the independence of trade unions to provide 'political' education.

The potential withdrawal of government funding brings the question of how we educate, and what we

educate about, within the labour movement to the fore. Whether we continue to receive funding or not, we should evaluate the education we provide.

Training reps, and training committee members maintains a two tier position within our movement of 'activists' and 'workers'. This serves the bosses quite well. For one, it means that the pool of people who are educated is very slim. Secondly, it entrenches a hierarchy within our own movement. Lastly, it contributes to the false dichotomy of 'service / organising model' (as presented by TUC training) of trade unionism, ie 'I pay my subs, you do the political work'.

I would like this paper to open up a discussion within Independent Left on how we relate to Union Learning. I have clearly set down my own views here, but this is not a motion, it is a discussion paper which will hopefully lead to perhaps taking something to conference, or implementing things in IL branches.

Rank and file groups like Independent Left are built on the premise that successful industrial struggle is played out by the active involvement, participation and mobilisation of *all members*, and that ideas, strategy and organising are done at the grassroots. This means attempting to educate every member up to the standard we would expect to educate ourselves - not necessarily in bureaucratic manoeuvring or knowledge of HSE law (which is important to do our work, but should not be the be all and end all of education), but in understanding why groups like IL exist and why they should participate. This isn't about recruitment to IL, this is about implanting our consciousness as political actors into the consciousness of our fellow workers. What is capitalism? Why are we as workers important? How do we get rid of it?

Some people might say that it is strange to talk about education without accreditation or qualifications, but this comes down to a question of

'what is education?' Despite living in a society which measures education by tests and qualifications, radical educators from the New Unionism movement and Plebs League understood education as being far more than that. For a start, people learn in different ways, people come to conclusions through different methods (and come to different conclusions). From my experience, the best educational experience is a discussion, debate or argument, and coming to conclusions on your own terms, not on those of a curriculum or course outline.

The only way this can be achieved is through political education as opposed to /in addition to whatever formal education the TUC / PCS requires or encourages us to take part in.

Some of this work can be achieved under the existing ULR framework (though whether this continues to be the case remains to be seen), which can encompass informal education as well as accreditation. It also allows education for ordinary workers, not just reps. We should use this where we can but also be aware that the very fact that the ULR framework exists as a partnership agreement between management and the trade unions does compromise what we can 'get away with'.

There is no 'getting around' the fact that anything we pursue in this vein won't be under the same accessibility constraints as *any meeting* that we put on in work time. For example, women workers, carers, people with second jobs, students and Disabled people. But for the same reason we don't cancel other meetings (eg on strike days, IL Conference, big demos in London and socials), we wouldn't not put on such education out of work time. That said, obviously there is a case to be made for demanding funding for childcare, facility time and creche facilities during political education, and that is ultimately what we want. Secondly, we want a society where constraints such as childcare, inadequate disability support and horrendous working conditions are a thing of the past. As working class activists we know the only way to achieve this society is to educate our class towards another consciousness.

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