

# SOCIALIST EDUCATION – A BRIEF HISTORY

In Britain there is a long and proud tradition of working class education. Workers fought to establish the state education system, free comprehensive education and accessible primary and secondary schools in all parts of the country. But in addition to this there are various strands of thinking about teaching and learning methods that are linked closely to the socialist struggle for change. People have developed learning to liberate themselves from exploitation, oppression and class division.

Prior to the industrial period, the struggle to ensure that the Bible was translated into English and to get Church Services conducted in English was part of a progressive reforming movement which sought to inspire 'the poorest plough boy' with the egalitarian interpretations of the scriptures. 'When Adam delves/And Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?' was the revolutionary question that the radical peasantry asked.

## *the importance of literacy*

The spread of literacy and printing meant that by the time of the 1649 English Revolution radical democratic movements and left wing religious groupings, and most of all the Levellers and the Diggers were able to engage in the struggle of ideas. They promoted their democratic cause in an eloquent English plain style that found expression in the mass circulation of leaflets and pamphlets.

Throughout the pre-industrial period and into the Industrial Revolution reading, study and the examination of the value of ideas became established and influenced the early socialist movements. As E.P. Thompson, the great working class historian, and others have shown, the progressive learning and thirst for knowledge inspired in the Sunday School movement radicalised many generations, including, of course, the early trade unionists. Left wing religious groups were versed in the humanist traditions of a counter culture that opposed the Church and King and the established order.

It was not surprising then that education became essential to the early trade union and socialist movements. Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* sold hundreds of thousands of copies within a short time of publication, testifying to a highly literate working class. The *Tolpuddle Martyrs* wrote eloquently of their struggle to a wide readership. Songs, and later in the Chartist period, pamphlets would communicate the news of struggles and class struggle generally from village to village and town to town.

## *the coming of mass education*

As industry and the factory system expanded, education for survival and liberation became the order of the day. Philanthropists established a tradition of providing education for the urban poor. Social reformers joined in, seeing the need to link training of the mind with questions of morality and behaviour and social direction.

Capitalism struggled with the dilemma: educated workers were important for national efficiency and competition with other countries, but would it make the workers more discontented with their lot? A series of Education Acts gradually brought about mass education.

The industrial unions began to establish their libraries and training courses. Mass left wing book clubs were established. Socialist study groups developed. Even the first scouting organisation in Britain was a socialist one, established by the Robert Blatchford. It sought to spread socialist ideals in the police, army and wider society.

## *the key role of socialism and trade unions*

Into the twentieth century there were well developed socialist and trade union learning programmes. There were also artistic forms of mass education such as socialist theatre and choir groups and a revived tradition of political songs. There was disciplined study in political parties, a vast new literature of scientific socialism and a network of socialist bookshops. Demanding trade union study programmes on the nature of capital and the extraction of surplus value were common.

There was also a strong tradition that drew on the works of many educationalists throughout the world of developing teaching and learning techniques that would engage learners and teachers in new more dynamic ways of learning. These often sought to break down the various forms of bourgeois ideology and manners developed within a hierarchical education system. The curriculum and teaching methods of an education system established to create a docile reserve army of began to be criticised.

Learning was extended beyond the classroom over the decades by socialist, working class effort: trade union education; radical adult education; community work; youth work; learning through play. These all developed from the nineteenth century socialist impulse to liberate minds and broaden the appeal of collective learning. Socialists continually established additional forms of learning for workers excluded from the full benefits of a state and university education. Trade unions encouraged a love of learning. Many of the trade union and self-educated workers that emerged were without doubt some of the most knowledgeable and learned people in the country and could outpace many who had spent their lives in academia. The age of

the self taught person with an insatiable appetite for learning, sometimes seems long gone.

## *the attack on education*

This rich history, summarised briefly here, is still in part evident in many areas of life. But like everything else of value to workers it has been attacked by a resurgent capitalism. The state has moved in more and more to neutralise trade union education for example. This has transformed the curriculum from one of understanding the workings of capitalism and organising against it to learning the technical ways of coping with decline. Community work was once associated with collective action against injustice and linked trade unionists in the work place to community groups in the neighbourhood. Now it is funded only if it has more modest aims and trade unions generally lack interest in the local community. The professional autonomy of teachers and lecturers has been threatened with the mechanistic and fragmented nature of 'competencies' and the fragmentation of learning into modules and marketable units of 'knowledge'. The whole education system now faces the workings of the market. University Departments sell bits of information to paying clients.

Education has always been the battleground where competing ideas about class interests and the future direction of society have been fought. These struggles can be about curricula matters, forms of teaching and learning, methods of delivery, funding mechanisms or levels. Such struggles are now intense with capitalism seeking to put education in its totality onto the market. New towns, such as those in Cambridge, are planned on the basis that all of their schools will be run by private companies. The student grant to higher education which enshrined the working class recognition that education, including knowledge at its highest levels, was a right not a privilege has gone. Most socialist bookshops have closed.

In this context the rich seam of radical education that has been developed in Britain should be mined again, renewed and changed, recognising that education is the key to social transformation and human equality.