

# Toward a General Theory and Global History of Workers' Education

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## *Abstract*

Workers' education, understood to mean the education of workers by workers for purposes they themselves determine, has always been highly contested terrain, just like work itself. If there is to be an adequate global history of workers' education, it will need to be guided by a suitable general theory. Hegel most expansively and Durkheim most persuasively argued that societies are cognitive and moral projects, of which education is constitutive: knowing and social being are inextricably bound up with one another. In the global democratic revolutions of the last 250 years, the labor movement distinguished itself as simultaneously a social movement, an education in democracy, and a struggle for a democratic education. The history of workers' education is a history of workers striving to remake their communities into democracies and themselves into democrats. This brief essay introduces a collection of essays representative of a new generation of scholarship on the history of workers' education, which we hope will help both traditional and emerging labor movements understand their past and think more clearly about their future.

The labor movement has always understood “workers' education” to mean the education of workers by workers for purposes that they themselves determine. As such, it has always been a highly contested terrain, just like work itself. Its curricular content has varied. It has been concerned with a wide range of subjects, according to circumstance. But workers' education is not to be confused with the education of workers that is supposedly conducted for their benefit (call it what we might), which is controlled by other interests. Some measure of worker control is essential, if it is to be truly *workers'* education.<sup>1</sup> As such, the education of workers by workers and for workers has also long been inseparable from and even constitutive of democracy—that is, government by “the people,” including those “vulgar mechanics” and other members of the lower sort whom Aristotle, in his venerable and influential *Politics*, did not consider good candidates for citizenship. The struggle for democracy, in other words, is also a struggle for a democratic education. Wherever the labor movement has agitated for expanded democracy, it has agitated as well for the right to an education adequate to the needs of democratic citizens. Among the first demands of the early nineteenth-century modern labor movement were universal

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suffrage and compulsory, publicly supported primary (and later secondary) education. One of the greatest victories of the nineteenth-century US labor movement was the Morrill Act of 1862, which established the land grant college system, the mission of which was to provide a college education at public expense to “the agricultural and industrial classes.”

This tradition of worker-controlled education and its transformative effects is what we have aimed to capture in this special issue of *ILWCH*. In it, the reader will find articles, addresses, reports, interviews, and reviews covering a wide variety of workers’ education institutions and aspirations during the last 200 years. It is by no means comprehensive or complete. Still, the range is impressive. There are contributions from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas by scholars whose native tongues include Swedish, Norwegian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, and Gujarati—not to mention English! The collection is representative of a new generation of scholarship, which we hope will help emerging labor movements understand their past and think as clearly as possible about their future.

The articles themselves are concerned with the pedagogy and practice of workers’ education, its role in the labor movement, and the politics of its institutionalization. On the pedagogy of workers’ education, we draw your attention in particular to the essays by Petros Gougoulakis on the origins of the Swedish study circle, Jonathan Grossman on the South African Workers History Collective, and Namrata Bali on the leadership training offered by the SEWA Academy, which she directs. With regard to the practice of workers’ education, especially in the twentieth century, we are pleased to publish Dorothy Sue Cobble’s keynote address in Lima, Peru, to the 2016 convention of the International Federation of Workers’ Education Associations (IFWEA) on the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions’ (ICFTU) first International Women’s Summer School, held in 1953. We are also fortunate to have received stimulating, original essays from Andrew Jackson on the educational programs of Lincolnshire, England, cooperators in the late nineteenth century; John Grayson on later English trade union militants and Communists in mid- twentieth century Yorkshire; Donald Roberts and Lauren Marsh on Caribbean trade unionists from the same period in the newly independent West Indies; and Gabriela Scodeller on the innovative educational activities of the transnational, Liberation Theology-inspired Latin American Central of Workers (CLAT) in the 1960s and 70s. In addition, long-time *ILWCH* board member Michael Hannagan has contributed a review of George Duveau’s classic study of French artisan educational reformers in mid- nineteenth century France, *La pensée ouvrière sur l’éducation pendant la Seconde République et le Second Empire*; and Marcel van der Linden brought to our notice an interview with German sociologist and worker educator Oskar Negt on the importance of political education in the workers’ education movement, an excerpt from which we are happy to offer here. Finally, with respect to the role of workers’ education in the labor movement and the politics of its institutionalization, we have included a comparative essay by Jenny Jansson on the contrasting trajectories of workers’

education in Sweden and the United Kingdom; Aslak Leesland's survey of the role of the Norwegian workers' education association in shaping the history and relative success of the Norwegian labor movement; Dimitra Lampropoulou's discussion of the role of night schools in the education and politicization of working-class youth in postwar Athens; and an overview of the educational programs and achievements of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), by Célia Regina Vendrami, Jainina Stronzake, Judite Stronzake, and Sergio Paulo Morais.

It is very clear from these essays that workers' education has been and continues to be an indispensable component of working-class struggles, even though it is all too often treated as an afterthought or a luxury by militants and activists. From a long-term strategic point of view, this neglect is a great loss. People usually do what they know. If they are going to live differently, they must first learn to do so. There is a reason why soldiers, first responders, emergency room personnel, police officers, and others go through continuous training exercises, just as there is a reason why dancers, actors, and musicians are constantly rehearsing. The reason is that in either a crisis or a creative reverie, most people have more confidence in their assiduously acquired patterns of response—which, once mastered, become tacit—than in their ability to extemporize. If we don't have an occasion to learn new ways of thinking and doing, we will naturally rely on the old. To consistently perform at the highest levels is hard work and requires practice and preparation. As an occasion for practice and preparation, education is essential to personal growth and development.

What is true for individuals and small groups is true for societies and social movements. Knowing and social being are inextricably bound up with one another, as Hegel most expansively and Durkheim most convincingly long ago pointed out. To function effectively and efficiently, societies and social movements, too, require practice and preparation—that is, they require continuing education. To put the point another way, societies and social movements are cognitive and moral projects as much as they are functional and selfish ones. We act as we do not only because we think that doing so is good for us, but also because we think it is good for others. Of course, self-interest is important, and altruism is always to some degree a mask. But it is simply not possible, at least not for very long, to organize a society on the basis of notions that its members believe to be false or untruthful. Like an actor who fills a role so convincingly that we believe her to be the character she creates, societies only exist if we believe in them. As soon as we cease to do so, the society we had been taking for granted no longer exists, even if it continues to shamble on, zombie-like, for some time to come.

In the creation of the modern world, marked during the last 200 years by an unprecedented wave of global democratic revolutions, the labor movement has played a determining part. Since 1815, it has been witness to and participant in three periods of innovative, educative, and rapid growth. It is arguably in the midst of a fourth. Each of these periods of expansion and consolidation has been accompanied by an extensive and intensive upsurge of workers' education.

The first occurred between 1820 and 1850, roughly the end of the Napoleonic wars through the revolutions of 1848. A particularly innovative period of popular education, the impact of these effervescent activities were felt primarily in western Europe, though its global aftershocks also extended to Europe's far-flung settler societies. The second upsurge occurred between 1890 and 1920, during three decades of a global democratic and anti-imperialist socialist movement, the most electrifying result of which was the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent rise of the Communist International in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe. This was followed by a third period of experimentation between roughly 1950 and 1980, or the end of World War Two and the triumph of Thatcherism, which saw the consolidation of social democracy in Europe, and of national liberation and nation-building in the regions that Europe had colonized. We are now apparently experiencing a fourth moment of growth, with global trade union membership more than doubling in the last generation throughout the world, even as it has been falling in those nations where it has long had the most influence.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the first three periods of expansion, however, this upsurge is not only being felt in the global South: It is being led by it.

Workers' education and workers' education movements have been important to all these periods, though there is much we still do not know about them. Worse, there is much that we have not yet even attempted to discover. Workers' education is not only consistently neglected by many leaders and hard-pressed organizations within the workers' movement, it is also generally overlooked by labor and working-class historians.<sup>3</sup> There is among scholars and practitioners alike a widely held, generally unexamined notion that whatever workers need to know, they can and will learn from their daily experience, without the benefit of sociological reflection. In our view, this is a leap too far.<sup>4</sup> There is certainly much to be learned from struggle. But everyone will not draw the same conclusions from the same experiences. As E.P. Thompson persuasively argued more than fifty years ago, while there may be a similar logic in the responses of similar groups to the same situation, there is no single, structurally determined class consciousness deducible from a given circumstance. Class consciousness is the way in which the experience of class is "handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms," which obviously vary from person to person and place to place.<sup>5</sup> What Thompson did not explicitly say but his magisterial *Making of the English Working Class* demonstrated *in extenso* is that these cultural terms are the results of an educative process. In a phrase, they are learned. There is no guarantee that a given conclusion will be reached in a given situation. The lessons learned will depend not only on the lessons taken but also on the lessons available: the "traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms" into which the experience is assimilated.

We thus might say that education is to movements (and societies) what mobilization and training are to armies. There is no army without mobilization and little effective fighting without training. The same is true for societies and

movements. Education is of their essence. Their “making,” their development, their *Bildung*, is an educative process without which they neither would nor could exist, at least not in the particular manner they do. In this way, education is the dark matter of societies and social movements. It is indispensable to their integrity and continuity, even though its presence and indispensable function are rarely acknowledged and usually taken for granted. The labor movement is no exception to this rule. Its central objectives—freedom, democracy, and justice both on the job and in the wider community—are won if, and only if, people are able to live free, democratic, and just lives. This ability does not come naturally. As Oskar Negt is quoted as saying in the interview excerpted here, “democracy is the only form of government that has to be learned.”<sup>6</sup> If people have not learned how to govern themselves in democratic ways, how to afford others the same liberties they want for themselves, or how to share the fruits of their collective labors, willingly and equitably, then democracy is only a word and not a social fact.<sup>7</sup> Helping people learn to do so is one of the most important functions we expect education to serve in the modern world. It may or may not be an institutionalized process. But whatever its character, it has been at least as important to securing and protecting the labor movement’s goals as the occasional dramatic confrontations that have punctuated its progress.

History, unfortunately, even working-class history, is still mostly told as something that largely occurs to workers rather than is made by them. One of our hopes is that paying greater attention to workers’ education will encourage us to pay greater attention to “the agency of working people,” in Thompson’s words, especially “the degree to which they contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history.”<sup>8</sup> But there are two schools of thought about how working people and the labor movement actually make history. One such school has insisted that the rights and freedoms of workers have been and can only be won through violent confrontations, up to and very often including armed struggle. Others have argued, that the best path forward is ideological struggle and moral reform. Obviously these two paths, “physical force” and “moral force,” are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as trade unionists and labor educators have appreciated.<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes necessary to defend an achieved and desired way of life from physical destruction. But defending a way of life is not the same as constituting it. As we noted above, cultures are not natural structures but mental and emotional constructs, created and sustained by conscious action and moral effort. The elaboration and diffusion of such constructs is the work of education in every movement and in every society. Leaders of the workers’ education movement have always understood this.

Indeed, it is possible to tell how committed a movement actually is to social change from its commitment to education—that is, the extent to which it invests in and works at helping people learn new ways of being and living together. A movement that says it is in favor of freedom, democracy, and justice, but does not offer an adequate opportunity for its members to learn how to conduct

themselves democratically, is deluding itself or others. A movement that aims to effect a democratic, moral revolution and puts a premium on democratic and ethical behavior, will be in a much better position to establish a functioning democratic society, even if it has violently to confront its enemies along the way. Similarly, a movement that only teaches its members how to fight and win violent confrontations is almost certainly a movement that, if it actually assumes power, will establish a state based on fighting and violence—that is, an authoritarian police state. It won't know how to do anything else. Moreover, when looking to discern a movement's intentions, it is not enough to look just at the content of the education it seeks to deliver. It is necessary also to look at the ways in which its preferred content is delivered. A truly democratic education, an education for democracy, will not just dress itself up in democratic garb. It will conduct itself democratically. That is to say, it will not just preach democracy, it will practice it. It will not only instruct others to share power. It will also share its own power with those whom it hopes to teach. Is the movement teaching more democracy? Is it doing so democratically—by sharing power, not just in the classroom but, especially, outside it? Those are the questions we need to be asking ourselves.

The history of workers' education is not only a history of workers struggling to remake themselves into democrats and their communities into democracies. It is also a history of the choices the labor movement has made as it has sought to achieve these goals. From this perspective, the history of workers' education and of workers' education movements is important to their future—and to ours. If we are to be a democracy, workers must be citizens; and if workers are citizens, they must have the opportunities and the acquired skills to understand and act upon their circumstances in ways that foster rather than retard our democratic aspirations. Too often the labor movement has been so preoccupied with seizing power or clinging to whatever power it has at whatever level—local, regional, sectoral or national—that it has neglected to provide for its exercise. The history of workers' education suggests that whenever power has become more important than its exercise, the movement becomes weaker, not stronger. A movement that neglects education is self-destructively neglecting the wellsprings of its own vitality and promise, announcing that it has nothing to learn and nothing to teach.

## NOTES

1. See Arthur Gleason, *Workers' Education in the United States, with some Foreign Examples* (New York, 1923). For other essential classic studies on the history of workers' education, see Marius Hansome, *World Workers' Educational Movements: Their Social Significance* (New York, 1931); Albert Guigui, *The Contribution of the ILO to Workers' Education, 1919–1970* (Geneva, 1972); Philip G. H. Hopkins, ed., *Workers' Education: An International Perspective* (Milton Keynes, 1985).

2. James C. Docherty and Sjaak van der Velden, eds., *Historical Dictionary of Organized Labor*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, UK, 2012).

3. There are exceptions, most notably E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963). Thompson, of course, wrote *Making* while employed as a workers' education instructor. The essays in this volume cite many of the most important contributions to this literature. Also important to consult are a few older and newer surveys of the field, including Idrian N. Resnick, ed., *Tanzania: Revolution by Education* (Arusha, TZ, 1968); Liam Kane, *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America* (London, 2001); Tom Steele, *Knowledge Is Power! The Rise and Fall of European Popular Education Movements, 1848–1939* (Bern, 2007); and Mario Novelli and Anibel Ferus-Comelo, eds., *Globalization, Knowledge and Labour: Education for Solidarity within Spaces of Resistance* (London and New York, 2010).

4. See, for example, Oskar Negt, *Soziologische Phantasie un exemplarisches Lernen: Zur Theorie und Praxis der Arbeiterbildung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), 7. John Reed's account of the "thirst for education, so long thwarted, [which] burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression," clearly places the emphasis where it belongs: on reading, not rioting. "All Russia was learning to read, and reading—politics, economics, history—because the people wanted to know. ... Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets were distributed by thousands of organizations, and poured into the armies, the villages, the factories, the streets." John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York, 1919), 14.

5. Thompson, *Making*, 10.

6. Oskar Negt, "Politische bildung ist die Befreiung der Menschen," in *Positionen der Politischen Bildung 2: Ein Interviewbuch zur ausserschulischen Jugend- und Erwachsenenbildung*, Hrsg. K-P Huffer, et al. (Schwalbach am Taurus, 2004), 197.

7. Nearly 100 years ago, John Dewey made much the same point in *The Public and Its Problems* (New York, 1927), and this decisive intervention between the two world wars of the twentieth century and on the eve of the Great Depression is still very much worth pondering.

8. Thompson, *Making*, 12.

9. See the classic 1928 formulation by the pioneering US labor educator and activist, A. J. Muste. Trade unions, he wrote, combine within themselves "two extremely divergent social structures, that of an army and that of a democratic town meeting. The union is a fighting instrument and exhibits always more or less definitely a tendency to take on the characteristics of armed forces and warfare in its structure and activities. ... [On the other hand,] the union must remain 'a purely voluntary agency' and ... conceives itself an essential organ for carrying on industry democratically in such a way that the personalities of the worker are not obliterated in the process." A. J. Muste, "Factional Fights in Trade Unions" in J.B.S. Hardman, ed., *American Labor Dynamics in the Light of Post-War Developments* (New York, 1929), 332–333.