

Proletcult: IWCE and the Russian Revolution

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This article is a continuation of a previous one, 'The IWW and the Plebs League', which appeared in *PSE* 87. That article discussed links between the development of the Plebs League and the IWW. Here we continue the theme of developing an international perspective in our understanding of Independent Working-Class Education by looking at the work of Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928) and the Proletcult movement which emerged following the February 1917 Revolution. We will then examine how Eden and Cedar Paul used the term Proletcult in their 1921 publication simply called *Proletcult*. They borrowed a definition from the Plebs League when they described the purpose of pre-revolutionary Proletcult: 'to further the interests of Independent Working-Class Education as a partisan effort to improve the position of labour in the present, and ultimately to assist in the abolition of wage-slavery'.

It is worth briefly tracing the origins of the Russian Proletcult movement back to a split within the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Socialist Democratic Labour Party which occurred in 1908-1910. Following the failure of the 1905 Revolution in Russia the differences between the two most prominent theorists in the Bolshevik faction became more intense. Alexander Bogdanov became an advocate of an empiricist approach to Marxism which, although owing much to the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach, actually deserves to be understood in its own right. I won't discuss the full range of his prolific writing, but just focus on *The*

Philosophy of Living Experience as a new translation has just come out in paperback. It was originally published in Russian in 1913. The book, however, related to a previous period in Bogdanov's life when he was developing his ideas of workers education with Russian exiles in Italy in 1908-09.

In this book Bogdanov outlines what he calls Empiriomonism. Here he argues that 'the practice of machine production contains a new point of view' (p202), and that this is the product of a fourth stage of social evolution whereby the collective activity of the working class would overcome the exchange-based individualistic basis of capitalist society. A new social-labour world view would emerge (p210). This would be socialist and would be based upon the living experience of the masses - and industrialisation brought more and more workers into industrial production. This experience, he argued, based on comradely social collaboration, primarily in the actual production process, would result in the development of a 'proletarian culture' which would overcome the individualistic limitations characteristic of the market relations of bourgeois society, and so become generalised, breaking down the separation of knowledge into different disciplines. It would be this seizure of the industrial apparatus of society which would enable the political transformation of society, rather than the seizure of the state. Proletarian science would truly become a general science of organisation.

One characteristic of this approach was Bogdanov's monism, the view that the world is a

single whole rather than being composed separately of the psychical and the physical. He views this empiriomanism as a development of the monism of Joseph Dietzgen (1828-88), who had become so popular as a working-class philosopher across the world - and had indeed been taken up by the Plebs League as presenting a powerful working-class approach to philosophy. And it was precisely upon his philosophical outlook that Lenin took Bogdanov to task, writing *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* as an attack on these ideas in 1909. The split between Lenin and Bogdanov was bitter and neither had much to do with the other after Bogdanov was expelled from the editorial board of the Bolshevik magazine *Proletary* in June of that year.

Following the overthrow of the tsar in the February Revolution of 1917, 120 delegates of the Petrograd Soviet - the unifying body of the workers in that city - set in motion the establishment of Proletkult. Its first real conference occurred on the eve of the Bolshevik seizure of power, popularly known as the October Revolution. Although many of the key figures were members of the Bolshevik Party, Bogdanov was never reconciled with the Party. Proletkult maintained a separate existence from the Party, and Lenin always treated it with particular scorn.

By 1920 Proletkult claimed a total of 84,000 members in 300 local groups, with an additional 500,000 more casual followers. There were fifteen Proletkult publications, most notably *Proletarskaia Kultura* (Proletarian Culture; 1918 to 1921) and *Gorn* (Furnace; 1918 to 1923). Although there was a side session of the 2nd Congress of the Third International at which Kultintern was established, very little came of this. (However, Tom Quelch and William McLaine from the UK were elected to the International Bureau - McLaine was active in the Plebs League and the National Council of Labour Colleges). Proletkult was wound down after December 1920 with all cultural activity being more tightly overseen by the Commissariat of Enlightenment or by the Party itself.

Although it is in many ways remembered for its influence on the arts - the Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein was greatly influenced by it - for Bogdanov its educational and scientific role was perhaps more important. He viewed it as functioning alongside the Proletarian University established in this same period as a means to place the working class at the centre of the production and distribution of scientific knowledge and education.

I shall now pick up the story in the British Isles during the period of revolutionary struggle which took off following the end of the fighting in the First World War but which went into decline after Black Friday - 15th April 1921. It was during this period that Eden and Cedar Paul were active as advocates of

Independent Working Class Education and also in the Workers Socialist Federation, which briefly was a part of the emergent Communist Party of Great Britain, but ultimately never accepted the Leninist basis of the party.

Eden Paul (1865-1944) came from a middle class background, his father being the publisher Charles Kegan Paul. Cedar Paul (1880-1972) was the daughter of the composer/musical professor Francis William Davenport. They were married around 1915 and became prolific translators of socialist and Marxist literature. They wrote a series of articles for *Workers Dreadnought* and in 1918 these were summarised in the pamphlet *Independent Working Class Education - Thoughts and Suggestions*. Here they advocate an experimental approach to the education of children using the Montessori system. This was a new approach to education which had an emphasis on the free development of the child through a constructivist approach where children learn through discovery and practical activity rather than through instruction. They opposed teaching socialism by rote, but rather argued that the New School should be 'a *laboratory of practical pedagogy*'. They suggested their ideas were more revolutionary than what was commonly advocated for the Plebs League and they discuss the activities of Emmy Freundlich (1878-1948) in Austria very positively.

In a subsequent book *Creative Revolution* (1920) they develop their idea of 'ergatocracy', a term which never caught on. They defined it as 'the administration of the workers, for the workers, by the workers'. They very much saw this as replacing the representative democracy of parliament by the direct democracy of the Soviets or Workers Councils. The book is dedicated to Lenin, but in reality the ideas expressed are much more those of Council Communism - which Lenin denounced in *Left-Wing Communism An Infantile Disorder* (1920). Reading contemporary accounts of the support for Lenin at this period, it is clear that this was before Lenin's prescriptions for the political activities of Communist Parties in Western Europe had become widely understood, or perhaps even properly formulated. The Pauls were aligned with anti-parliamentarism of the Workers Socialist Federation, its leader, Sylvia Pankhurst, being directly criticised by Lenin in his booklet.

In *Creative Revolution* the Pauls argue that it is the struggle against slavery which is more important than the struggle against poverty. After critically discussing Bertrand Russell's views as being aristocratic they argue:

Had Russell been more in touch with the real working-class movement, he would have known that everywhere, and pre-eminently in Britain, that

movement is throwing up its own intellectuals; that syndicalism has a proletarian intellectual side as well as a semi-bourgeois intellectual side; that the Plebs League and the Labour Colleges are the working-class counter-blast to the middle-class National Guilds League and the Workers' Educational Association; and that the proletarian movement, not the semi-bourgeois movement, is the true inheritor of the liberty-ensuing energies of syndicalism. He would have known further that on the industrial side, with constructive political possibilities of the widest scope, there has now developed the shop stewards' and workers' committees' movement, a spontaneous British development, and simultaneously the British counterpart of the soviet evolution and revolution in Bolshevik Russia.

Just as their book was coming out, the Workers' Socialist Federation was organising the founding conference of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). The Pauls both joined the Central Committee which was set up. The party was at odds with orthodox Leninists who advocated close links with the Labour Party and the use of parliament. Pankhurst attended the second Congress of the Third International (19 July - 7 August 1920). Not only did this see the ephemeral establishment of Kultintern (a proposed international version of Proletcult), but it was also the point at which the Council Communists like Pankhurst and the Communist Workers Party of Germany were told to toe the Leninist line or get out - they refused. Pankhurst was thrown in jail after she had returned to London. This certainly made it easier for the Leninist faction to ensure the new Communist Party of Great Britain toed Lenin's line. John MacLean, the prominent Scottish Marxist, rejected the Leninist approach, though his claim that they were colluding with the British State was more indicative of his growing paranoia. Indeed there was great concern in the communist movement about police infiltration at this time.

So these are the circumstances which surrounded the publication of the Pauls' next book, *Proletcult* (1921). It represents a high point of optimism that the contemporary revolutionary movement was on the verge of success. The impact of Black Friday, 15th April 1921, when the leaders of transport and rail unions announced a decision not to call for strike action in support of the miners, thus effectively breaking the Triple Alliance these unions had created in order to cement solidarity between their industries, was yet to be felt. The Pauls adopt the phrase Proletcult as a synonym for Independent Working-Class Education. Their appendices not only contain a magnificent bibliography but also provide a list of relevant organisations globally. Additional

material had arrived too late for inclusion. They envisaged this would be available in a second edition which never materialised.

They compare the cumbersome term 'Independent Working-Class Education' (IWCE) with the 'fire-new' term Proletcult, saying they are practically synonymous. They review the use of the term internationally, differentiating between the pre-revolutionary nature of IWCE compared to the broader aims - particularly concerning the arts and 'graces of life' - which can only properly be taken up once the capitalist state has been overthrown. They predicted a great blossoming of creativity in a post-revolutionary society, and say how this has given rise to Proletcult in Russia. However they prefer to use a broader definition encompassing both pre- and post-revolutionary circumstances. Their fifth chapter provides a history of the Plebs League and the Central Labour College. This is followed by a chapter looking at Proletcult as a worldwide movement: the Spanish Modern Schools of Francisco Ferrer Guardia (1859-1909), the activities of the French syndicalist Edouard Berth (1875-1939), the Rand School of Social Science in the USA which had been targeted by mob violence and police raids in 1919, Sociedad Luz (Light Society) of Argentina, with a longer discussion of the German developments, picking out *Die Ratebildung im Klassenkampf der Gegenwart* (Soviet Culture in the Class Struggle Today) (1920) by Fritz Fricke for particular praise. The next chapter discusses education for youth, again looking globally before the chapter on Proletcult in Russia. They do not discuss the tensions between Proletcult and the Bolsheviks - perhaps they were unaware of these. They discuss the work of Pavel Lebedev—Polianskii (1881-1948) and Bogdanov.

Then they return to discussing the 'Yeast in the British Isles', introducing the term Proletcult Councils. In contrast to the residential Labour College, these are 'concerned with mapping out Proletcultural activities in the areas with which they deal, with coordinating the work, and with assisting in the formation and running of classes'. They use the London Council for Independent Working-Class Education as an example of this. This was founded in August 1920.

By the autumn, the London area had been divided into 23 districts with local committees and branch secretaries; and 38 classes for the study of economics and industrial history had been inaugurated. Additional classes were opened at New Year, 1921, and the number of students now attending these part-time classes in the London area is about fourteen hundred.

They then discuss Bogdanov's *Science and the Working Class*, and the call for a Workers

Encyclopedia in the context of the limitations of pre-revolutionary activity. They cite the importance of the Bradford and Cardiff Conferences of the Plebs League in 1920 which discussed developing textbooks for IWCE. They then move on to discuss the 'New Psychology' with particular reference to the Swiss psychoanalyst Charles Baudouin (1893-1963) which leads them to the final paragraph of the book: 'The workers are strong. If they endure oppression, it is because they are hypnotised. The one thing needful is to awaken them from this hypnotic sleep. Sound the Reveille.'

I hope this brief account of the impact of the Proletcult movement stimulates interest in the broader global aspects of IWCE. As the Pauls' book is freely available on the internet, I would encourage those interested in further research in this area to have a look at it, especially the list of organisations in the appendices.

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