

Labour - past, present and future

Patrick Ainley and Martin Allen

Labour's pedagogic project

Like other social democratic parties, Labour was established in opposition to revolutionary communist parties. Backed by the trades unions seeking a better deal for their members, it sought to reform society in the interests of working people through governments that socialised the means of production and exchange to gradually and legally expropriate the employing class.

This *Parliamentary Socialism* was neither revolutionary nor necessarily socialist since it did not give workers control. Instead, it relied upon an alliance across the then-main division of knowledge and labour in the employed population by which middle-class professionals administered the expanding welfare state introduced after 1945 on behalf of the industrial manually working class. The administration of state education for instance, was largely delegated to Local Education Authorities and the content of the curriculum and its delivery left to teachers.

For nearly thirty years after 1945, the reconstruction of the economy, using Keynesian demand management and subsidised by the remnants of Empire, enabled virtually full employment with progressive taxation to finance the introduction of the Welfare State. With economic growth the expansion of white-collar, managerial and professional employment allowed limited upward social mobility from the largely skilled sections of the traditional manual working class; first through the grammar schools introduced in 1944 and then the comprehensives from 1965, augmented by expanded further, higher and adult education.

Comprehensive reform was structural rather than curricular, leaving the new schools in academic competition with remaining grammars and private schools, the latter linked by the exam boards to the antique universities. Academic education remained dominant as successive governments failed to establish technical training comparable with other

European countries, notably Germany. Compared to its competitors, Britain's apprenticeship system, though extensive, remained both ad hoc and inferior.

Education assumed a new significance for Labour at the end of the long boom. James Callaghan's 1976 'Ruskin speech' called for greater accountability and more emphasis on 'vocational skills'. Meanwhile youth training schemes were hastily cobbled together to mop up rising youth unemployment - the school-leaving age already raised to 16 in 1972/3. Yet, further and then higher education continued to expand with Labour's 1965-92 polytechnic experiment doubling the number of HE students.

Young women particularly progressed from school and college to gain higher qualifications, whilst many young men joined a resurrected reserve army of the permanently unemployed. This reflected further erosion of the manual-mental divide amongst employees as new technology was applied to increasingly automate and deskill industry, at the same time generalising office and service work.

Simultaneously, as nationalised industries were privatised and state spending on services rolled back by the Thatcher government, a New-Market State was improvised in which responsibility for delivery contracts out while power contracts to the centre. This was also a new form of the mixed economy now indiscriminately mingling the previously distinct and mutually sustaining public and private sectors of post-war corporatism. This will not easily be reversed since control over the national economy has been ceded to global capital, to which the now largely service-based and financialised UK plc remains indebted.

Education without jobs

New Labour attempted to accommodate the national to the global economy, obscuring the abandonment of gradual social democratic reform by espousing

'modernisation'. This meant adopting Thatcherism but with some redistribution. Much of this redistribution was funded on debt, both personal (as with university fees) and institutional, for example through private-public partnerships. So, when the bubble burst in 2008, there was nowhere for New Labour to go.

Nevertheless, investment in 'human capital' continues to substitute for economic investment in desperate hopes that more 'skills' (actually qualifications) will somehow produce jobs and advance individual careers, despite general downward social mobility replacing the previous limited upward social mobility. Meanwhile, the reserve army of labour has again been recast - from permanently unemployed into low wage, precarious employment.

New middle-working class youth, desperate for secure semi-professional employment, pay tripled university fees to run up a down-escalator of devaluing qualifications. They are spurred on by top-down policies for 'raising standards' in schools, supposedly creating equal opportunities to be unequal. This has significantly altered the culture of primary and secondary schooling, even before austerity ransacked school services, whilst Further and Adult Education faces potential collapse and several universities near bankruptcy.

The May government, supported by financial and largely US-based capital against pro-European remnants of UK's productive capital, now seeks to institutionalise this race to the bottom with its Brexit strategy. This is another desperate move towards a third new form of the state that can be called the Consolidation State, since it would consolidate debt through continuing austerity, accompanied by the privatisation of remaining services, reducing those who can't pay for them to penury.

Back to 1945?

In reaction to this austerity and against ferocious resistance within his own party, Jeremy Corbyn has restored Labour's electoral chances - and in a 'progressive alliance' with Nationalist parties and Greens may well have been in government! Evoking the spirit of the 1944 Act and the comprehensive reforms that followed, Corbyn's Labour has promised a 'cradle to grave' National Education Service. More specifically, the 2017 manifesto presented policies for reversing spending cuts, improving pay for teachers and other education workers by ending the cap on public sector pay, restoring accountability and encouraging co-operation rather than competition between schools, a major review of

primary school assessment, better technical education and apprenticeships and, perhaps, most notable of all, the ending of university tuition fees.

Nobody would dispute the significance of these commitments but 2017 is not 1945. However, Labour thinking on education assumes that education reform takes place against a background of an expanding economy, rather than a declining one; also, one that requires a more highly skilled and highly educated workforce. Another variant of this is that improvements in education help grow the economy which then contributes to upward social mobility seen as 'social justice'.

This ignores the fact that in the polarised and redivided labour market sketched above, the only social mobility is downward. Labour does not recognise the changed occupational structure following the latest application of new technology in employment - the Manifesto brushes away any possibility that robotics and AI may worsen employment prospects. Instead, following repeated failed efforts to modernise apprenticeships, it joins the cross-party and professional consensus on 'rebuilding the vocational route' along the lines suggested in the Sainsbury Review, not understanding that Cameron's promised three million apprenticeships are mostly low-grade, low-skilled, and temporary placements in low-value service sectors because there is insufficient demand from employers for anything else.

Therefore, far from being caused by easier exams, or being the result of deliberately dumbing down standards, the increased level of performance (Gove's 'grade inflation') follows from teachers at all levels teaching a competence curriculum to young people who study harder but learn less. More jobs demand degrees but more graduates end up 'overqualified but underemployed', pushing those without degrees further down the jobs queue.

Conclusions

As globalisation stutters, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonald have countered with an economic strategy based on intervention rather than the free market. Whether, without an international stimulus, this can 'take back control' to more than temporarily delay the changes in employment outlined above is doubtful. This threatens a prolonged crisis of legitimacy for education and for Labour. Failure to confront it will lead to disillusion amongst the student and various other young and service-sector unionised enthusiasts who with many others coalesced around the Party in June 2017 in hopes of ending austerity.