

Introducing the Ella Baker School of Transformative Organising

Jane Holgate

'In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning - getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.' Ella Baker, 1969

Ella Baker was perhaps the greatest organiser of the African American freedom movement - a giant of the NAACP, the SCLC and SNCC (the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee). But her work, her learning, and her strategies have been almost totally overshadowed by other organisers (usually men), or those described as 'charismatic' leaders. The idea of School evolved from discussions that a number of organisers and educators were having in the UK, in particular, about organising strategies that failed to recognise the centrality of working-class agency, and strategies that 'did for', rather than 'worked with', working-class people and communities.

We have drawn upon insights from Jane McAlevey's critique of what has become known as 'the Alinsky model' of organising - a model that has been criticised both for failing to give agency to those being organised, and for insufficiently addressing the political context within which oppression and exploitation arise.

While we do not dismiss the many contributions of Alinsky (not least his sense of fun), we do not view his writing as the final word on organising theory. We are interested in exploring other histories; these include the African American Freedom Movement, militant trade unionism, feminism, migrant struggles and the working-class community struggles in the UK - particularly from the inter-war years.

The School decided to develop educational materials based on real examples of successful organising in the UK - training materials that tell the story of these campaigns and which ask: 'What can we learn from these examples that will enrich our understanding of organising today?'

In the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, we are proud to have produced an educational module on Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of Suffragettes. Soon to be launched are education modules on the 1963 Bristol Bus Boycott, and the 1922 election of Indian Communist Shapurji Saklatvala as MP for Battersea. Others in development include a contrast between the victory at Saltley Gates and the defeat at Orgreave, and an exploration of the Black People's Day of Action in 1983 following the New Cross Fire.

The School has held a succession of ongoing 'retreats' where we have explored the above issues in more depth. In July 2018, we will be hosting (alongside Critical Labour Studies, and supported by Unite the Union), a conference on the topic of 'working-class political education', and from that we hope to start local study groups across the country.

To find out more, email: ellabakerschooloforganising@gmail.com
or visit our Facebook page: Ella Baker School of Transformative Organising.