

# New Brookwood Labor College: a key initiative

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**T**he original Brookwood Labor College was set up in 1921 in Katonah, a town in New York State, by a group that included prominent labour organisers like Fannia Cohn of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), Rose Schneiderman of the National Women's Trade Union League, and Abraham Muste, later associated with the Conference for Progressive Labour Action (CPLA) and American Workers Party (AWP). Its tutors included David Saposs, Josephine 'Polly' Colby and the former UK mineworker and Plebs League activist, Mark Starr. It closed in 1937, mainly because the leadership of the American Federation of Labour (AFL) had withdrawn its financial support.

This year, however, in what looks like a very promising initiative, a group of activists in Minneapolis, have, with the support of at least thirteen local union branches, set up a New Brookwood Labor College (<https://newbrookwood.org/>, [newbrookwood@gmail.com](mailto:newbrookwood@gmail.com)), with the broad intention of 'educating workers into the working class'. Despite this support, however, the college declares itself to be 'necessarily independent of any particular union or trade'.

The first cohort of students started at the new institution in April 2019. Ten-week sessions for these students have been run each Friday by a faculty group of six, which includes one woman and two black men. The aim is for each class to be co-taught by an academic and a labor leader. Between 9.00 and 12.00 there has been a session on 'People's Leadership', and between 1.00 and 4.00 one on 'Working-Class History'. In Autumn 2019, the plan is to add two further sessions - on 'Economics as if Workers Mattered' and on 'Organising and Campaign Strategies'. Two 'textbooks' are recommended: Elizabeth Faue (2017), *Rethinking the American Labor Movement*, and Michael Yates (2018), *Can*

*the Working Class Change the World?* The tuition fee per term is \$1,000, covering both classes and both books. People not sponsored by unions are eligible for scholarships offsetting \$900 of this cost. All classes are wheelchair accessible.

In terms of 'admission criteria', the college 'seeks to enroll 30-50 new students every year . . . who are passionate and committed - who know that another world is possible and want to work to create it'. This and an interest in 'engaging in deep thought and debate' are said to be more important than 'previous academic achievements'. Applicants must be supported by 'one letter of recommendation from a bonafide labor union and one . . . from someone else who can speak to their commitment to the movement'. However, although everybody in the college community is strongly encouraged to join a union as a dues-paying member, it's not necessary to be a union member to apply; on the contrary, 'we strive to have representatives in each cohort from unionized and non-unionized worksites as well as from social justice and community organizations'.

Another key policy is that, although the 'curriculum is rigorous [and] expectations are high', 'like the original Brookwood, New Brookwood Labor College is non-accredited and offers no grades or diplomas'. The college 'exists to engage students in deep thought and discussion about the labor movement and the working class', and 'anticipate(s) offering some classes that will engage students in specific organizing, bargaining and enforcement tactics . . . but this is not our primary purpose' - in other words it deliberately does not provide a 'training program'.

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