

# The ‘really useful knowledge’ and IWCE movements: why we need an equivalent now

*We print here an article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a meeting of the Independent Working-Class Network (IWCEN) in Cambridge on 5th August 2017.*

I will focus here on the collective self-education of working-class activists. Up to now this has gone through two main phases, the first of which I will call the ‘really useful knowledge’ movement.

The Society for the Diffusion of Really Useful Knowledge was set up in London in the mid 1830s around William Hassell. Hassell worked for the journalist and publisher Richard Carlile. Carlile was at the centre of the ‘war of the unstamped’ - the struggle against attempts by the government to suppress oppositional publications by a tax on newspapers. The ‘war of the unstamped’ involved the production and sale of illegal newspapers. Many of those involved in this struggle, including Carlile himself, were imprisoned. (Carlile could not have done what he did without the activity of his wife, Jane Carlile, his common law wife, Eliza Sharples, and his sister, Mary Carlile.)

Why was the group around Hassell called the ‘Society for Diffusion of Really Useful Knowledge’?

The unstamped struggle was about what the radical papers said as well as the fact that they were produced at all. They sought among other things to counter the influence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK).

The SDUK was set up by sections of the rising industrial capitalist class in an attempt to get working-class activists on their side in the struggle for political power that they were waging against the big landowners and commercial capitalists who up to that point had monopolised it. It published pamphlets offering purportedly ‘useful knowledge’ to working-class readers. In the early 1830s it began to emphasise more than hitherto material about economics, especially the ideas of Thomas

Malthus, James Mill and others who, unlike earlier bourgeois economists such as David Ricardo and, earlier, Adam Smith, downplayed the role of labour in creating value.

The group around Hassell sought to contest such doctrines with knowledge that was ‘really useful’. On its economic side, it was sympathetic to leftwing versions of the labour theory of value, for example those put forward by Thomas Hodgskin or, within the Owenite movement, by William Thompson and his collaborator Anna Wheeler. A contemporary definition of ‘really useful knowledge’ was ‘the knowledge of how to get out of our present troubles’.

Also involved in the unstamped struggle were people who, in the later 1830s and through to 1848, would lead the Chartist movement, for example Feargus O’Connor, James (‘Bronterre’) O’Brien and George Julian Harney. Chartism was a very large national movement for the radical democratisation of the electoral system, with strong roots among industrial workers.

O’Connor, O’Brien and Harney carried the ‘really useful knowledge’ tradition into the Chartist movement, for example, through the *Northern Star*, which for much of that period was the main Chartist weekly paper. In 1839 this paper, run by O’Connor, had a circulation of 50,000 copies a week. It was read aloud in Chartist groups across the country, and regularly included local contributions, from-below argument and the like, thereby making possible participatory, democratic, collective self-education by and for working-class activists. (Karl Marx’s economic ideas arose at least partly from the ‘really useful knowledge’ struggle, for example via the influence on his collaborator Frederick

Engels of Engels's partner, the Chartist textile worker Mary Burns.)

Let us now look at the Christian Socialist tradition, focusing on the idea of 'clerisy'.

When revolution began in France in 1789, a section of ruling class intellectuals in England at first supported it. These intellectuals included the poets William Wordsworth, Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But as the French revolution developed, and especially from 1793, all three of these writers turned against it.

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, UK agriculture was in crisis. Uprisings took place amongst farm workers, culminating in the Swing movement, in which, during the last three months of 1830, threshing machines were broken across much of England, especially in the southeast. The Swing movement was directed primarily against large landholders, but also against Anglican priests who were seen as their agents, and condemned as 'tithe eaters' - that is, people living off a tax on the incomes of tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. We need to bear in mind also that at this time all lecturers at Oxford and Cambridge had to be in holy orders, and only those declaring allegiance to the Anglican Church could graduate.

Against this background, Coleridge put forward in 1830 his idea for an Anglican 'clerisy'. According to this tithes could remain justifiable if Anglican intellectuals were to provide educational leadership across the whole society, thereby helping to transform potential leaders of working-class revolt into advocates of reform. This idea inspired the main architect of the original Christian Socialist group, Frederick Denison Maurice.

After the period of intense struggle between 1839 and 1842, when events like the Newport rising and the embryonic general strike known as the Plug Plot Riots took place, Chartism declined. In 1848, however, it seemed to be reviving, and ruling-class fear of 'the mob' - that is, of agricultural workers, declassed artisans, and recently urbanised factory workers - came to a head. The Chartist decision to present a third petition to parliament on 10th April, preceded by a mass meeting on Kennington Common, was greeted with the deployment of artillery, armed police and special constables. On that same evening, a small group of upper class people met at Maurice's house and set up the original Christian Socialist group with the aim of diverting Chartists into less threatening strategies - at the start focused mainly on producer cooperatives.

In 1854 a section of this group made a decisive change of emphasis - towards sponsoring adult education, in the first instance through setting up the London Workingmen's College. Their aim was to

produce a compliant layer amongst working-class activists, who would be taught by people like themselves in line with Coleridge's 'clerisy' concept. In so doing, they set a pattern for Christian Socialist influence over adult education - and much of higher education - that persisted for at least 100 years, providing the ruling class with an ideological weapon it has used to this day.

In the early 1900s this development of the 'clerisy' model took on a new form - that of the so-called Workers' Education Association (WEA). It did so in response to the growth of a second phase of collective self-education amongst working-class activists, that of 'independent working-class education' (IWCE), the background to which can be understood as follows.

In the second half of the 1860s, craft unions organising through the TUC successfully campaigned to win the 1867 Reform Act, which extended the vote to sections of better-off workers living in towns, and thereby opened up a wider field than hitherto for working-class struggle in the sphere of electoral politics. In this space, Henry Hyndman in 1880 founded the Democratic Federation, which in August 1884 evolved into the nominally Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF). At the end of that year, however, a group of SDF activists that included Eleanor Marx and William Morris split off to form the Socialist League. Morris in particular rejected Hyndman's emphasis on electoral politics, focusing instead on a 'really useful knowledge'-type approach to struggle which he characterised as 'making socialists'. This centred on talks and articles that explained in plain language a from-below conception of socialism. Although Morris died in 1896 and Eleanor Marx in 1898, the roots of IWCE arguably lie in the further development by working-class socialists of the approach they pioneered.

In the early 1900s two groups, both composed mainly of working-class activists, split off to the left from the SDF. One of these, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), was based mainly in Scotland, the other, the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), mainly in London. Both groups were much more education-oriented than the SDF, and in both cases their conception of education was a Marxist equivalent to 'really useful knowledge'. Prominent figures in the SLP included the technician George Yates and the refuse collector James Connolly, in the SPGB the bricklayer and technical college lecturer Jack Fitzgerald. Both groups used from-below, participatory teaching and learning methods, and both supported an industrial - as distinct from a craft or general - model of union organisation. In 1907-08 there developed amongst union-sponsored students at Ruskin College in Oxford a similar

movement led by mineworkers such as Noah Ablett and George Harvey and railway-workers like Will Craik.

A confrontation then took place at Ruskin between this group of students and proponents of the Christian Socialist/WEA tradition organised in the Oxford Extension Delegacy. In 1908 the students founded the Plebs League to promote what they now started to call 'independent working-class education' (IWCE). This approach rejected mainstream adult and higher education as 'orthodox education', and in terms of content emphasised Marxist economics, working-class history, and philosophy derived from the ideas of the German tanner, Josef Dietzgen. The students were supported in this by the principal, Dennis Hird, and in March/April 1909 they went on strike in protest at his sacking by Ruskin governors who were seeking to assimilate the college to the WEA project. From the summer of that year, IWCE became a broader movement, promoted on a national scale by other sections of the left, including, especially, Mary Bridges Adams. This movement included the Central Labour College that existed until 1929, the National Council of Labour Colleges that survived till 1964 (and, briefly, Bebel House, a college for women). It was particularly powerful and influential up to the General Strike in 1926, and at that stage involved about 30,000 students across the country.

What relevance, if any, do the 'really useful knowledge' and IWCE movements have for us now?

There are traditionally three spheres of class struggle: economic (relating mainly to unions), political (for the present purpose relating mainly to the Labour Party), and ideological. What does ideological struggle involve, and why does it matter?

If there is no over-arching working-class body of ideas, pressure grows both on unions and the Labour Party to become specialist bureaucracies outside rank-and-file control, while, more broadly, ruling-class assumptions and definitions of the world spread without being effectively challenged. To me, education, properly understood, is the key to ideological struggle. Why?

The overwhelming bulk of human understanding of the world has come about through work, and reflection on work. The question then arises: who controls such reflection, in whose interests?

In class society, in normal times, insights from productive work have invariably been appropriated from workers themselves and elaborated by the ruling class, either through intellectuals within its own ranks or through intellectuals who are its direct agents. (This appropriation is necessarily flawed, because not based on experience). The result, for the majority of working-class people, again in normal times, is a divided or dual consciousness,

consisting, on the one hand, of what they know or work out from experience, in the sphere of their own jobs or working life, and, on the other, of overarching conceptions and assumptions imposed by - or at least borrowed from - the ruling class. There is also a further result: that the ruling class is well-placed to disrupt workers' attempts to elaborate for themselves the insights they get from experience. (Religion, the mainstream education system, and the mass media are examples of means that it uses to do this.) Therefore, as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* put it in 1848, 'the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class'. The key role of from-below, collective working-class self-education, then, is that through it workers start to rebuild their capacity to elaborate for themselves their own experience - in other words, to level up their thinking about thinking.

In periods of heightened class struggle, like the Chartist period in the late 1830s and early 1840s and the 'great unrest' that preceded World War 1, broader and broader sections of working-class people begin to challenge this ruling-class ideological dominance. And in both these periods, as we've seen, the upsurge of union and political struggle was accompanied by the growth of working-class collective self-education.

But after both those periods what also happened was that the legacy of collective self-education was largely lost, and for a time at least the ruling class was left free to re-consolidate its ideological control, including through adult - and more recently higher - education. Obviously this carries the danger that those involved in the next period of working-class struggle must either invent an educational theory and practice from scratch (in which case they may repeat mistakes made in the previous period) or, worse still, that they suffer the consequences of not having one. In the third main phase of working-class struggle to date, roughly the period 1968 to 1985, no large-scale, from-below movement equivalent to 'really useful knowledge' or IWCE emerged.

In essence, then, my argument is: no free exchange of ideas amongst workers, no mutual education; no mutual education, no development by working-class people collectively of their own conceptions of the world - in short, no theory of working-class activity. And without theory, activity eventually runs out of steam and/or goes up a blind alley.

Therefore I consider that there's an urgent need for the workers' movement now to equip itself with a contemporary form of 'really useful knowledge' or IWCE.

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