

# Roots of Ruskin 1909: Durham miners in the Great Unrest

Colin Waugh

Lewis H. Mates, *The Great Labour Unrest. Rank-and-file movements and political change in the Durham coalfield*, Manchester University Press, 2016, 311 pages, ISBN 978 0 7190 9068 4 hardback

**T**he Independent Working-Class Education Network (IWCE) is trying to build a modern equivalent to the Plebs League - that is, the workers' education movement started by students, mainly mineworkers and railwayworkers, at Ruskin College in 1908. One requirement for doing this is that we understand what happened then, which in turn entails finding out about the situation in the two main areas that these mineworkers came from - South Wales and the North East, and also what they and people like them did in 'the Great Unrest' - that is, the period from about 1911 to 1914. This book helps us to do this for the Durham coalfield, and also has some relevance to the rather different situation in South Wales, because leftwing miners

there sent 'missionaries', including Noah Ablett, to Durham in the period dealt with.

The two Durham mineworkers who were most prominent in the Plebs League were George Harvey and Will Lawther. Harvey was a member of the Independent Labour Party when he went to Ruskin but while there joined the De Leonite Socialist Labour Party, probably as a result of contact with the former Ruskin student Len Cotton. Lawther became an anarchist.

Lewis's book is focused on two main issues: the struggle by a section of rank-and-file Durham mineworkers to get their union to transfer its political support from the Liberal Party to the Labour Party, and their parallel struggle to build a from-below movement at the level of economic struggle with the employers. It looks at the interaction between these two struggles, including some of the ideological dimensions of this interaction, such as the relation between key activists' religious affiliations and their politics. In this latter respect, then, and without saying so explicitly, it

touches helpfully on the question of how far people may operate with two contradictory consciousnesses at once, a question which it is arguably crucial for people involved in the IWCE project to address.

Lewis draws on a very large body of primary source material, especially from union records (including, for example, interesting details of which nationally or internationally prominent figures were invited to speak at successive Durham miners' galas) and from local newspaper coverage of union developments. He grounds his study also in detailed analysis of relationships between different sections within the mining workforce, in particular between hewers (ie the workers who actually cut the coal), and the younger and frequently more militant putters (ie the workers who moved the coal from the face to the point from which it was raised to the surface). He investigates closely and scrupulously how a succession of rank-and-file movements, including the Minimum Wage

Movement and the Durham Forward Movement, took on both the employers and the union's established power brokers.

His central conclusion could probably be summed up as follows: that in the period studied there was widespread support amongst Durham mineworkers for forms of direct action which we can for shorthand purposes refer to as 'syndicalist', but that, at the level of politics, and despite the big influence exerted both by Harvey and by Lawther, those who were most active - ie in many cases the same people - gave their allegiance to the ILP, the most prominent single figure in this regard being Jack Lawson. He says, '... the ideological heterogeneity of the Durham ILP meant it was very capable of keeping many within its ranks who were to varying degrees sympathetic towards syndicalism' but, 'While the ILP followed the syndicalists' example in using an aggressive class-based rhetoric and many specific proposals, at the same time it broadly rejected syndicalism's longer-term goals in favour of its ongoing faith in parliamentary politics and the ameliorative capacities of the State.'

*PSE* readers should be aware that, although the author obviously wouldn't have chosen to investigate this topic unless he was committed to the cause of working-class collective self-emancipation, and although the language used is never obscure, this is, as far as this reviewer can judge, a very rigorous academic study. This means that where conclusions are drawn they are formulated cautiously, with provisos and reservations carefully weighed up.

This does not detract from the value of the book. However, it does raise another question that the IWCE will sooner or later need to address, namely how those preparing educational

sessions for people who are primarily union or community activists, often with limited time for study, can use insights from historical studies like this. There are several reasons why it's important that we encourage present day activists to think about past struggles, especially in their own employment field, geographical area or the like. One of these reasons is that we want to help those activists equip themselves to reflect analytically on the struggles they themselves are engaged in. Therefore we

need to draw on material and approaches from studies like this book, presenting them primarily as examples of how historians pose and seek to clarify problems. We need to do this without crudifying the reasoning processes of the historians involved, but to do it, at the same time, in such a way as so far as possible to convince activists who are not academically trained that they too can think historically.

It is to be hoped that a paperback edition of Lewis's book will be available soon.

## Independent Working-Class Education Network

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***'Plebs': the lost legacy of Independent working-Class Education***

and:

***Class-struggle Adult Education for the 21st Century: Why we need it and how we can move towards it***

are now on the website under News etc.

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