



WHAT IS WORKERS' EDUCATION?

Dr Stevie Nolan *Trademark*



“Trade Unions are the schools of socialism. It is in trade unions that workers educate themselves and become socialists, because under their very eyes the every day struggle with capital is taking place.” — Karl Marx

Our answer to the question “What is the purpose of workers’ education?” is of course dependent on the broader question of “What is the purpose of trade unions?” Are unions a collective defence of interests aimed at advancing the terms and conditions of members (and only members), or are they a means of challenging capitalism and providing a political vehicle for advancing towards socialism? Is it reform or revolution?

In Ireland the answer has always been fairly clear. We have never seen ourselves as being in a struggle against capital; we rarely even use the language of “capital” and “labour,” and when we do it’s largely symbolic and used with a less-than-convincing clenched fist and a poor rendition of “The International.”

The reformist approach, understood as varieties of social democracy, is in retreat, if not entirely dead. Over the last forty years we have seen the emergence of a new phase in capitalist development that has included a dominant role for finance capital, the defeat of organised labour, deregulation, low taxes, massive and continuous privatisation, and the end of the welfare compromise.

Whether we know it as neo-liberalism, the great risk shift, or the end of history, what we see is the full-spectrum domination of free-market theory. But it’s not enough to have a market economy: what we’re seeing

emerge is a free-market society. This is the kind of society where we teach entrepreneurialism to five-year-olds and where universities no longer engage in critical debate and democratic discourse but instead install derivatives trading-rooms in departments of “economic management.”

Even in cultural production, radical and oppositional voices are simply co-opted as commodities. Black urban hip-hop raging against capitalism and racism in the seventies becomes “fiddy cent” and “get rich quick or die tryin’,” the dignity of the black power salute transformed into a poster boy for rapacious capitalism. At home, the capitulation of the GAA to market logic has placed a toll-booth between our children and their native games. For the first time in our history, if you want to watch Gaelic games you have to pay an Australian billionaire for the privilege. But in a market society the monetising of our culture provides another income stream for the gombeen comprador class and turns us, the people, the creators and owners of our own culture, into the passive receivers of X-culture, from active participants to a passive, paying audience.

This is a society in which the impulse to engage in political struggle is absent—because we’re not just losing the political battle, we’re losing another battle: the battle of ideas. Our complete inability to claim

ownership of the material means of production is matched by our inability to own the intellectual means of production. The pace and depth of private ownership of the media and the subservient nature of state media to the market serve to underline the “pole position” of neo-liberal hegemony. It’s a control that shapes our obedience to its rule, uniting persuasion from above and consent from below.

But perhaps what’s most surprising and disappointing is our collusion in this process. “After the Chilean coup strong processes of neo-liberalism have transformed the world, transformed us to the point that all of us are neoliberals, whether we like it or not . . .” (David Harvey).

Increasingly, we have all bought in to the logic of the market. It is indeed the end of history, and the most pragmatic solution is to agree that there are no alternatives—indeed to suggest otherwise is to be utopian, uneconomic, impractical, naïve, or—worse—socialist.

The lesson, of course, is that capitalism is so normal it has become part of our common-sense understanding of the world and therefore there can be, there are, no alternatives. This dictatorship of no alternatives has colonised the political and economic regime, academia, our school curriculum, and even large parts of the labour movement.

It is most obvious in a sometimes slavish adherence to the “skills” agenda, in which individual approaches to personal

development and improving our own “economic opportunities” supersede organising, collective bargaining, and industrial action. Too much of our trade union education is infused with the language of “lifelong learning,” “career-pathing,” “personal effectiveness.”

It is the opposite of collectivism and redistribution; it is the language of individualism and pre-distribution, a philosophical fraud that suggests that the way out of inequality is “responsible” or “inclusive” capitalism, in which a much higher-skilled, higher-wage economy is the apparent solution. In this economy it is the responsibility of individual workers to “upskill” themselves and to better sell their labour power by being more attractive to entrepreneurs and foreign capital, thereby ensuring higher wages at their point of entry to the market: “pre-distribution,” not redistribution.

So, the way to tackle massive inequality and social breakdown is “upskilling.” Never mind tax reform, democratic banking, green new deals, social housing; in this new world you don’t need welfare states, progressive tax or trade unions to redistribute the wealth that is created: workers, by virtue of their supreme skills, will ensure higher wages through their own individual competitiveness, their own “human capital,” their own entrepreneurial and individual spirit.

But the answer to the massive inequality that characterises the majority on this planet is not FETACs. Upskilling everyone leads to lots of highly skilled unemployed; and what of care workers,

cleaners, creche workers, and other so-called low-skilled jobs? How do they “pre-distribute”? Oh, that’s right, they don’t. To hell with them; they should have worked harder, applied themselves better at school; they should have availed of the opportunities that the “upskillers” took. Their low pay, their children’s poverty are by definition their own fault and, therefore, fair.

This is neo-classical liberalism dressed up as “opportunity.” It’s the fraud of meritocracy all over again. It’s a global race to the bottom . . . and we’re in the lead.

Workers’ education should not become a mirror of the needs of the market. This is the discourse of the “global market,” of competition, of supply and demand, within which there is a remarkable, even unprecedented, degree of consensus between capital and labour, as if there were no class differences any more, as if our interests were the same as theirs. Well, thank heaven there are some people around to remind us that that’s not the case. “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning” (Warren Buffet).

Solely focusing on an “instrumental” approach to trade union education is locking us in to a reformist tradition that follows the logic of the market, and in 2014 that means giving priority to market needs above all else, which prevents us from playing a role as agents of radical social change.

What we need is another

“transformative” approach, which emphasises the building of class consciousness and mass, not individual, education. So what should that look like?

Even if we take a normal prospectus but look at it critically, look at it from the viewpoint of a radical trade union pedagogy, it becomes a tool of class consciousness.

Health and safety. Do we teach shop stewards to argue the economic benefits of health and safety?—that if workers are healthy, if they remain uninjured, this helps the profit line? Or do we argue for our right not to die in the course of a day’s work? Can we not expect to go home with the same number of fingers we started with? Are our rights as workers not a fundamental human right?

Employment law. It is crucial to know how this operates, as it’s the dominant model that mediates relations between capital and labour; but if we engage critically when we’re teaching it we can reveal, as we should, its ideological roots in liberalism and individualism, its dilution of collectivism, and its absolute inability to address structural power imbalances in work and society.

The point is not to stop the instrumental approach to training members in practical areas such as disciplinary procedures, employment law, negotiation skills, but that politics and ideology should run through education like Brighton rock: wherever you slice it, it should be there.

And of course we should also be mainstreaming education that deals with broader political education, labour history, international trade unionism, and basic political economy, which teaches us

- **to name and identify the system: who benefits, and how?**
- **to understand that there is no “value-free,” neutral account of economics**
- **to actively discuss and promote visions of just alternatives**
- **to participate in the construction of democratic organisations capable of challenging and indeed replacing that system.**

It's clear that the financial crash brought about dramatic changes, with far-reaching implications for the labour movement; and yet we haven't seen an increasing political radicalisation of organised workers or widespread mass action. At the same time the guiding principles underpinning trade union education haven't changed, and it remains mired in the status quo of reformist “social partnership,” which has led in some parts of the movement to a fossilisation of trade union education.

If the labour movement is to shift its role from partner to opponent, then education must be part of that process, because it's in opposition, in struggle, that real learning takes place. That's what “teaches” workers. Industrial

action and moments of mass action “teach” workers not only about tactics but also about political and economic power and where it lies, and why they don't have any.

It's at that point that more formal education can take place, because workers' education is at its best when it is built upon the relationship between knowledge gained in experience of struggle and knowledge brought by worker leaders, academics, or radical trade union educators.

There is a desperate need for a working-class intellectual revival that generates in workers a hunger for new knowledge and that requires a radical trade union pedagogy. It demands education programmes aimed at building collective identity and trade union consciousness and, ultimately, the building of working-class power.

The aim of trade union education should be to equip the working class with the analytical tools that will help it to interpret their world and in doing so, of course, to change it.

