

ARCHIVE:

ECONOMICS FOR WORKERS IN THE 1920s

Beginning with the Beginner

Introduction by Tim Putnam

How does 'theory' become politically effective in the labour movement? It informs the interventions of political organisations and thus has a powerful if indirect effect on working class experience. It is used to generate counter-ideology, and is itself changed in the process. And by directly entering the education of militants, it becomes bound up in the structure of political organisation. Considering all the labour expended by intellectuals in the development of theory as a knowledge about the world intended to be a means of changing it, relatively little is known about the modes in which this knowledge actually is effective.

The following article shows something of the process by which one British group approached these problems in the early part of this century. It appeared in *Plebs*, the journal of the Plebs League—for Independent Working Class Education—in 1920. Its author, Fred Casey, was a tutor in the Manchester Labour College who later gained a reputation as an expositor of Joseph Dietzgen's 'monist' philosophy in his *Methods of Thinking*. Here, however, Casey was intervening in a discussion in the Plebs League and related Labour College movement of how education in basic (Marxist) political economy should be inserted into workers' political self-education. His paper was adopted by the April 1920 Plebs conference as the basis for one of a series of small texts for evening classes, and sold over 50,000 copies in the first few years after its publication.

The movement for Independent Working Class Education became one of the most important forms of class organisation in this country during and immediately after the First World War. The Plebs League grew out of a revolt by trade union students at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1908 against an attempt by the University to take over the college, sack radical staff and replace socialist curricula with safer material. The League developed an extensive network of part-time and full-time study under working class control at a time when various state agencies were perceiving the need to

integrate working class representatives into public institutions. Vehemently opposing any notion of class-impartial 'objective' knowledge, the League and the National Council for Labour Colleges with which it merged struggled against the W.E.A. under the banner of: "No compromise with bourgeois culture!"

In this article, Casey puts forward a scheme of organisation for evening classes which became the characteristic style of the Labour College movement in the early twenties. Short courses offered large numbers of workers a stimulating introduction to basic issues, while the opportunity to do more advanced study was linked with the responsibility for teaching basic courses to new groups of workers. It is worth noting that Casey did not find his worker-students 'apathetic', particularly as some historians (e.g. MacIntyre, 1977), neglecting the important differences between organisations, would have us believe that 'working class apathy' was a problem recognised by all would-be socialist leaders at this time. Casey implicitly asks us to look again at the aspirations and expectations of political leaders who encountered apathy, suggesting either that their analysis was insufficiently materialist or that their political practice itself created the apathy it pretended to discover. The short time it took *Plebs* to achieve a monthly circulation of over 10,000 and the National Council for Labour Colleges to build a national organisation which reached ten times as many workers certainly bears out Casey's point. Nor was the activity limited to study; as 1926 approached the League's position as a class organisation made its meetings an important forum of strategy and tactics for the anticipated trial of strength.

Although history of class struggle and the analysis of contemporary imperialism came to the fore after 1924, Political Economy remained one of the key subjects in Labour College curricula throughout the movement's history. The range of economic theory considered in *Plebs* was wide: a post-war debate on inflation brought together Kautsky, Keynes and Marshall, among others. But it was always important to the notion of Independent Working Class Education to be able to put forward Marxism in opposition to conventional economics, and Casey's outline gives interesting evidence as to how these positions were put over to a mass audience. Particularly striking is the extent to which Casey chooses, even in a short course on basic issues, to give an outline of the development of the world, and that human history in this account is technologically determined. Against this is juxtaposed an implicit syndicalist politics, which is underpinned in the analysis of capitalist development by the theory that the increase of the reserve army of labour was producing a more militant and class conscious unionism.

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 PLEBS may be consulted at the Marx Memorial Library, Clerkenwell Green, London.

BEGINNING WITH THE BEGINNER

FRED CASEY

Educate, educate, educate! Um-yes, but how? Just precisely how?

Our object is to make the working class realise its position in relation to the master class. To that end we conduct classes in social science which, if others' experiences are at all like mine, work out something like this:

The promoters advertise a course of, say, 24 weekly lectures on Economics, starting in October—twenty enthusiastic students turn up—lecture starts on time—students studiously attentive—lively questions—slight shrinking in numbers as Christmas approaches—after Christmas, slump in attendance—students coming late—occasional good question and some poor ones—attention not really bad (in between yawns) but indefinable dullness pervading atmosphere—teacher tries to rouse things by questions of his own—after that, a few have urgent appointments elsewhere at question time, excuse themselves graciously and go out on tip-toe—very few studying at all after first couple of months and hardly one with a view to teaching. During one course I have in mind we started with twenty students and finished with three.

Some people believe the workers are apathetic. I don't. With some exceptions they seem to me very energetic. Think of the energy displayed in football; in practising the piano; at choir; orchestral or dramatic rehearsals; at club houses; at whist drives or in cycling; some are even energetic in drinking beer. Then why all this apathy when it comes to study? I conclude the majority of working class students *are not students* either by nature or training. True enough they are anxious to know our conclusions—high prices and bad conditions force them to want these—but they *will not* cover a long line of detailed argument, so why weary them and waste time when conclusions are all they will get when we have finished? Why not give the original twenty the conclusions before they dwindle to three, and reserve the detailed work for the training of teachers who certainly *must* have it?

One of the principles of our materialistic science teaches us to fashion our tools and methods to correspond with the nature of the material we are using, otherwise we FAIL. Now get that and grip tight! Very well! We want to make a present of our information to every worker, but, it is impossible to a man who won't have it. If I argue that he has to have a shave

somehow (the revolution) and, therefore he ought to accept it because it would save making a bloody mess out of his face, I miss the point. Even if I put it into his hand, as we do in the classes, and he puts it away in a drawer and forgets all about it, again I have failed. Not until I have succeeded in making him *desire* to possess and use it can I make the presentation successfully.

With some such thoughts in my mind I decided on a change of tactics. I would give a short course, say, half a dozen lectures, which could be repeated three or four times *in one season*. In it I would avoid the technical phrases, e.g., I would tell my audience that value was labour, and if they wanted to know any more about it, let them ask. And beyond telling them that money was only another form of the labour *embodied in commodities*, I would not mention its functions; that also could come out in questions (it did, with excellent effect). The idea was to *keep within the limit of what interested them*, and to tell them only as much as would excite further interest and make them want more. From such students I would select a very few individuals, force them to guarantee time for study or otherwise have nothing to do with them; these I would take on another evening, give them the best detail study I could, and then let them go to the Trade Unions in the district with the same summary as the general class was having. And I would continue that treatment until the Trade Unions were sufficiently alive to the necessity of *finding money* to equip residential *Labour Colleges* for training *their own men in a proper manner*.

I have had only one opportunity for putting the plan into practice; I give the results for the sake of comparison. The first lecture, an extremely simple affair, led, apart from some brilliant questions, to a unanimous request to go over it again with special reference to the 'socially necessary', mention of which had been brought out in questions. The course of six lectures was extended by request to eight. No late starts. Questions, the most searching I had ever had, were continued beyond what ought to have been the closing time, so that the caretaker told us we could not have the room again unless we would get out to time; we did so and stood outside in groups discussing matters—and the month was February. *The attendance rose in eight weeks from twenty-six to thirty-six*—the only time in my experience when the number of students increased. They 'sat up and begged' for a text-book, but *the cupboard was bare*.

Now, if the above plan is considered to be good, it should be extended. But it can't be extended without a suitable book, and the purport of my writing is to supply a proposal concerning the form such a book should take. The proposal is only intended to *serve as a basis* for discussion of this very important question at the forthcoming April Conference. It is, therefore, hoped that before they come intending delegates will give some critical thought to the suggestion and that they will formulate any desirable counter-proposals beforehand, thereby saving time at the Conference and enabling the idea to take some definite shape on that occasion.

In the foregoing I have treated the idea as though it belonged entirely to myself. Of course that is not so. Many people hold similar ideas, and several variations of it were introduced by different delegates at the recent Manchester Conference.

My suggestion is a simple preliminary booklet—more like a chat with the reader. Although I realise there is no one way which could be said to be the best (for some audiences are more intellectual than others), yet I suggest the following series of leading ideas as a basis for the discussion of the form our book should take; and will venture to remind intending delegates that we want helpful criticism towards the production of a book at once simple and impressive enough to help our teachers to move the “masses” better than even do the “movies”.

ELEMENTARY MARXISM—AN IMPRESSIONIST SERIES OF LECTURES

Lecture 1: Commodities and Money

Refer to social evils. Contrast riches with poverty. What is wealth and how got? Wealth a combination of matter and useful labour. Nature supplies the matter *and charges nothing for it*. Man supplies the labour. *Where does wealth go?* National Income divided into Wages and Profit. Wages paid to people who work; Profit taken by people who do nothing for it. How is this done? By buying and using a certain commodity. How are quantities of commodities determined in buying and selling? Commodities being exchanged for commodities (C-C), the quantities being measured by the quantities of labour in them, say 10 hours labour in one form exchanged for 10 hours labour in some other form. Explain this by a simple imaginary picture of pre-exchange times—exchange beginning with direct barter (C-C). leading to the idea of indirect exchange (C-C-C). The middle one grows to become money. So, money is only a separate—i.e. independent, in-between—form of labour (C-M-C). Since M is *only another form of some commodity's value*, profit cannot be made in exchange, for where one commodity has a price that exceeds its value, some other commodity *must* have a price below its value because the extra price of the one *can't come from nowhere*. So, if one man's gain is another's loss how do the profit takers get the profit?

Lecture 2: Capital and Profit

Recall the question of profit left over from Lecture 1. Go Back to the savage and his poor tools—he had not enough to eat, let alone sell. Better tools produce more wealth, so buying and selling becomes possible. Further development of tools (and methods) begets the ‘one man one job’ (division of labour in society), more buying and selling results in some folks’ getting a stock of other folks’ labour (value) stored up in money form. With this M a trader would buy raw materials and get some workman *who possessed his own tools* to work it into commodities; he would pay the workman and sell the commodities elsewhere. Later, he gets a *workshop and tools of his own* and gets a worker to work for him *for wages*. The worker gradually gets separated from his own tools and eventually has nothing to sell but his own strength (labour power). The price of labour power (wages) is determined like the price of any other commodity—by the *quantity of labour* consumed by (embodied in) the man, in the form of necessities of life. Assume this quantity of labour to be 4 hours

and that in the factory the man works 12 hours. This 12 hours is *new labour* in the form of some commodity that belongs to the master. The master sells it and converts that labour into the form of money, out of which he gives 4 hours in wages so that the worker can reappear the day after. This leaves the master with 8 hours profit. We see that the capitalist advances nothing, for the workman has created his own wages before they are paid to him.

If you were a capitalist would you tell your workmen how the trick is done? You'd be a fool if you did. Draw the moral as expressed in all forms of capitalist education (the press, platform schools, W.E.A., Whitley camouflage, etc.) and contrast it with his struggles in the workshop against more wages and more hours.

Lecture 3: Shorter Hours and More Profit

Summarise chief points concerning profit, in Lecture 2. Longer hours mean more profit. From the Great Plague onwards Acts of Parliament (Labour Statutes) forced workers to conform to capitalists' wishes—showing the *capitalist nature of the State*. Why then did they pass the Factory Acts to shorten hours. Tools again! Some people had better and quicker machinery than others. They could produce more goods in the same time which, when sold, resulted in more profit, so it paid these people to have an Act passed limiting hours of labour. (Legislation can only go as quick as capital will let it—it must pay *first*, otherwise no Act.) But, how could it pay—machinery reduces labour and consequently price, doesn't it? It surely does, but if similar goods were sold on the same market at an average price, then those who produced with machinery gained in the form of money part of the labour put in by those who had no machinery, because the money can only represent labour that has been put in somewhere and what one gained the other lost. But even so, was there not a *general loss*, e.g., if the *total wages remained the same* and the *total labour* embodied in the total goods was reduced, wouldn't the total profit be reduced? True again, but when machinery makes it possible to produce the workers' necessities of life in 2 hours, wages can be reduced to 2 hours (the workman still getting the same *quantity of stuff* to live on—though it would be worth less), and then where it used to be a 12 hour day with wages 4 and profits 8, you can think of it as an *11 hour day* with wages 2 and profits 9. With increased profits the capitalist could buy still more machinery, and the game goes on.

Lecture 4: Wages

Increase of machinery (tools again!) is changing the character of society. More capital is put into tools and materials, and relatively less into labour power; machinery is no use to a *capitalist* unless it enables him to pay in wages less proportion of every £100 invested than formerly. Capital is constantly managing with less labour per £100 and long ago we reached the point where the natural increase of the working population exceeds the number of workers required to work the other portion of capital—*viz*, that in the form of machinery and raw materials. Result—a permanent unemployed class, enabling capitalists to beat down wages. This gives rise

to the *fighting* trade unions. There can be no conciliation about the matter.

Wages are of different kinds. *Nominal wage*—how much money you get. *Real wage*—how much wealth you can get with your money. Even if real wage rises, it can only do so if *profits rise still more*, otherwise the system becomes crippled. Though wages are the price of labour power they are always reckoned on as payment for time, e.g., if the price of a day's power is 6s., and a man works 6 hours, it would be called 1s. an hour, if he worked 9 hours, 8d. an hour, or if 12 hours, 6d. an hour and so on. All wages are at bottom time wages, no matter what form they take. Wages do not affect prices of commodities; they are themselves the price of a commodity whose value is consumed and done with, and, therefore, not carried forward to the product.

Lecture 5: The Distribution of Wealth

The National Income is divided into Wages and Profits. Profits are divided into producers', merchants', wholesalers' and retailers' profits. Parts of all these profits are taken by other people to form interest and rent. Profit takers fight among themselves as to the division, but on questions of wages and hours they stand together as a solid 'freemasonry' arrayed against the workers. For if the workers get more wages or shorter hours (other things remaining the same) there is less profit then to divide. Taxes are not part of wages. Workers only pay taxes *by proxy*. Nominal wage is considerably reduced by National and local taxes (rates), cottage rents, monopolies and adulterations of goods—another form of monopoly.

Lecture 6: The Story of Society

(Up to the concentration of capital, give no more detail than is sufficient to leave a strong impression that the world and its people, its laws, moral codes, literature, art etc. are in a perpetual state of change consequent upon changes in the material basis of life. Afterwards, develop as much as time will permit, it being the last lecture they will stand a bit more.)

Stellar space—collision of dark stars—nebula and its condensation—geological formations—protozoa—plants—animals (tool users)—man (a tool maker). Savages and their poor tools—little wealth. Better tools beget more wealth and exchange. Exchange begets money. Money begets international trade. All the time customs, laws, moral codes, politics, etc. are keeping pace. Division of labour in society has already taken place. The merchant trader gets a workshop and separates the workman from his tools. Division of labour in the workshop develops special skill. Capitalists to some extent at mercy of workmen. Special skill and tools leads to machines. Skill no longer needed. Worker now at the mercy of the capitalist who owns the machines. Peasants driven off the land to make room for sheep (wool) and for other reasons. Workers now own neither tools nor land. In the beginning of capitalism (16C to 19C) tools and machines were small and could be got by many individuals. There were a *great number of small capitalists* competing for the market. Cheapness is the weapon of competition. They each saved up their profit (concentration of capital) to enlarge their respective businesses. The bigger ones beat the smaller ones with cheaper goods and drove them into the ranks of the workers. Then

several capitalists joined their capitals together in a company (centralisation of capital). In this way it comes about that today a few big capitalists own all the means of life and consequently control everybody else. On the other hand there is an immense army of workers who own nothing but their labour power. They combine in unions to avoid underselling each other. In this way the workers are reforming society and arranging to produce and distribute wealth in the interests of all. With this economic organisation as a base, they will seize social power, destroy all capitalist parliaments and establish Communism. Conclude with an appeal *re* Independent Working Class Education.

Note: The book should contain examples of blackboard demonstrations and notes for use on blackboard.

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