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“A People’s University”: Communist Workers’ Schools, 1923-1956*

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Abstract

U.S. Communists charged public-school culture was “a potent instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie to enslave the toiling masses.” In response, leftists created Workers’ Schools, counter-beacons to “clarify their minds, …elevate them to the dignity of builders of a new society.” Beginning in 1923, Communist Workers Schools offered courses “to equip the workers with the knowledge and understanding of Marxism-Leninism” so that worker-students could engage in “militant struggle.” In the 1940s schools adjusted to the Popular Front, but New York’s Jefferson School and Chicago’s Lincoln School continued offering courses in Marxism even as they offered a progressive American narrative, delivering some of the first courses in African American history and the history of anti-colonial struggles, championing a humanistic form of adult education for “workers of hand and brain.” Schools also provided access to literature, arts, and other humanities courses in a progressive milieu. With the Cold War’s onset, McCarthyism darkened the schoolhouse door, and by 1954 the government dismantled Workers’ Schools. But they endure as a liberating, pedagogical genealogy. Now, when monetization threatens the liberal arts, and campus protest met with the blunt cudgel of police terror, we must look to an earlier era’s “people’s university” for instruction.

Keywords: *Community struggles, critical pedagogy, Marxist education, communist party USA, workers' schools.*

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Introduction

Nearly a century before rubrics, some critics of education argued public schools were designed to turn out nothing more than obedient cogs for corporate America. From the left aisle of the classroom, workers in the Communist Party USA argued schools were agents of indoctrination, designed to instill quiescent, interchangeable workers. Fortunately, the Party established a network of workers' schools, in the words of Chicago's Workers School, "to equip the workers with the knowledge and understanding of Marxism-Leninism" so worker-students could engage in "militant struggle … toward the decisive proletarian victory" (Chicago Workers School, 1935). During the Communist Party's Third Period, when comrades were certain the American Bolshevik revolution was imminent, such strident rhetoric was commonplace. Calls for "militant struggle" would be tempered as workers' schools adjusted to the Popular Front, but schools such as New York's Jefferson School and Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School continued to offer courses in Marxism even as they taught a progressive American narrative. Schools pioneered in teaching some of the country's first courses in African American history and labor and working-class history, and championed a humanistic form of adult education for "workers of hand and brain" (Jefferson School, 1949). This is an overview of the workers schools and their effort to provide class-conscious education, while disseminating, as the Jefferson School phrased it, "the best of all thinking in past history, … the works of the great theoretical leaders of the working-class movement and … the democratic heritage of the American nation" (Jefferson School, 1949).

The deficiencies of public education were spelled out in 1925 by Max Bedacht. "What is Workers' Education?" he asked before detailing the means by which "the educational machinery" created "the mentality and psychology of the masses which falls

an easy victim to the guiles of the capitalist press and the preachers, which succumbs so easily to the germs of patriotic paroxysms without any attempt at resistance …" Capitalist schools, Bedacht argued, had to give "the prospective wage-slave the intellectual requirement to make him a useful wheel in the profit mills of present day society" but not a loose wheel: "(T)he exercise of the mental faculties of the pupil present a dangerous prospect for the ruling class. Therefore this ruling class endeavors to accompany this positive education with enough hypodermic injections of intellectual poison to sterilize the minds of the pupils as much as … possible" (Bedacht, 1925). That same year a *Daily Worker* article derided public schools as "hothouses of reaction": "The primary motive of the institutions of so-called free education is to turn out … obedient patriotic wage slaves …" (Kaplan, 1925).

"A Real Bolshevik Result"

To counter this indoctrination, the Party established a network of "people's universities," the workers' schools. The flagship New York Workers School was founded in 1923 to provide counter-pedagogy to students unwilling to become "useful wheels." The school offered courses in the Principles of Communism, Marxism-Leninism, and Historical Materialism, and was frank its mission was preparing pupils for their role in bringing about the workers' state. School Director Bertram Wolfe declared his school's "educational work as a part of and subordinate to the political agitation and propaganda of the party, to be designed to definitively serve the party's needs in its major campaigns. … This is the spirit in which we must approach our work." (*Daily Worker*, November 4, 1925) In July 1934 a later school director, Harlem dentist Abraham Markoff noted that CPUSA leader Earl Browder addressed the entire faculty of the school, "emphasiz[ing] the importance of bringing about a real Bolshevik result in the teaching of Marxism-Leninism in our schools." General theory in courses, he stressed, "must be linked up with the immediate problems and developments of today" (Markoff scrapbook, 1933-1935). The following year, Chicago's Workers School similarly asserted, "The Workers

School is not purely an academic institution. It participates in all the current struggles of the working class. It takes part in strikes, campaigns and demonstrations …" (Chicago Workers School, 1935). Two years later Chicago was still advertising its courses were "based upon the principles of scientific Socialism" and "deal primarily with social, political and economic problems, … presented from an authoritative Marxist-Leninist viewpoint" (Chicago Workers School, 1937). The CPUSA asserted it provided the only genuinely Marxist education in America, deriding "those so-called workers' education movements that wish to bring bourgeois 'culture' to the working class thru the aid of bourgeois professors." Particularly mocked was the Rand School of the rival Socialist Party, with its ostensibly trivial music and literature courses (*Daily Worker*, February 23, 1926).

Ironically, twenty years later successor Workers Schools would offer extensive courses in the humanities. But even in the 1920s, the comrades were beginning to broaden their horizons, with some smattering of liberal arts. Lectures in Freudian psychology, Voltaire, evolution, and theology were offered at Chicago's Workers' University and Russian Technical School, with "Social Forces in English Literature" added in 1924 (*Daily Worker,* May 27, 1924). The New York school, too, by 1927 offered courses such as "The Social Interpretation of Modern Literature, expanding the curriculum beyond Lenin and Marx to study authors such as "Zola, Flaubert, … Shaw, … Wilde, … O'Neill, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Walt Whitman …" (*Daily Worker,* February 3, 1927). In Worcester, Massachusetts, radical Finnish schools offered biology, sociology, political economy, and American history alongside classes in Marxism (*Daily Worker*, January 14, 1925). A more expansive definition of worker education was already battling with the more programmatic, Bolshevik conception of the schools. In the main, though, praxis went to the head of the class. When a New York Workers School contingent marched in 1934's May Day parade, they chanted, "Don't be a boss' tool! Learn to fight at the Workers' School!" (Markoff scrapbook, 1933-1935).

Yet while the class struggle remained front and center, already by the mid-1930s schools were expanding in two ways: The curriculum grew in offering many courses in the broader humanities. And workers schools opened not just in large cities but in many smaller places too. Already in 1927 the New York school established ancillary schools in Passaic, Elizabeth, Paterson, and Newark, New Jersey, as well as Philadelphia, Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Lecturers were sent even further afield, and the school planned "eventually to establish a chain of Workers Schools thruout the country and correspondence courses for self-study" (*Daily Worker*, September 19, 1927).

Within a few years these plans came to fruition. From 1933 to 1935, a weekly *Daily Worker* column, "What's Doing in the Workers Schools of the U.S." demonstrated the depth of offerings, pedagogical and geographical (*Daily Worker*, scrapbook, 1933-1935). In January 1934, James Ford, recently Communist vice-presidential candidate, and James Allen were offering a course on "Problems of the Negro Liberation Movement," which covered "Negro" history from colonial times to the present, highlighting "the revolutionary traditions of the Negro people which have been buried by bourgeois and reformist historians" (*Daily Worker*, January 8, 1934). The schools offered a mix of ethnic culture, training in public speaking and union organizing, and history lessons from America's submerged ethno-racial and working-class past. Already in 1930, organizers of classes on Black anti-colonialism, which featured homages to Toussaint L'ouverture, said, "It is the duty of every Negro and militant white worker to join in commemoration of the heroic deeds of the Haitian revolution," a message certainly not offered in public schools (Negro Department CPUSA, 1930). The Harlem Workers' School in 1934 also offered a course on "History of the Negro in America," with lectures on "What has Capitalism Done for the Negro?" (no bonus points if you answered "not much.") (*Harlem Student Worker*, 1934).

Similar courses on Black and anti-colonial history were taught in Saint Louis; Brownsville, Brooklyn; Los Angeles; Detroit; Buffalo, even Newport, Illinois (Markoff scrapbook, 1933-1935). The valorization of African American history continued in the

schools as the Party swung into its Popular Front period, when Communists asserted, like General Secretary Browder, that Communism was "Americanism updated for the twentieth century." Schools after 1935 claimed prominent historical figures as progressive icons; they were urged in 1936 to stress "the revolutionary historic role of Lincoln" and to "*link up their present struggle with its revolutionary traditions and past"* lest "fascist falsifiers" claim "all that is valuable in the historical past of the nation," so "that the fascists may bamboozle the masses …" Workers' Schools embraced Lincoln, as well as "that great liberationist son of the Negro people, Frederick Douglass," as part of a progressive American genealogy (Agitprop Commission, 1936; Frederick Douglass Educational Center, 1952). The *Daily Worker* as well as Communist immigrant newspapers serialized history lessons lauding John Brown and presented the revolutionary legacy of Lincoln and Douglass (Gold, 1924).

This emphasis on progressive Americanism led to some unintended ironies. Popular Front Communists at New York's Jefferson School celebrated both Jefferson and "Negro slave revolts" as progressive American icons (Education Department, 1938). What was unusual, though, was that schools offered courses on "Negro Slave Revolts" at all. Elizabeth Lawson's 1939 course on the "History of the American Negro People" offered some of the first rejoinders to the dominant public-school canard on Reconstruction as "the Era of Negro Misrule." Likewise, she presented Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey as heroes, surely a dissenting view in the 1930s (Lawson, 1939). New York's Workers School, Chicago's Lincoln School and the Jeff were some of the only majority-white venues in which African American agency and self-liberation was recognized at all. Into the 1950s, as Clarence Taylor notes, New York public schools instead taught that Africans were backward and North American slavery had actually benefited African captives (Taylor, 2011). Workers schools championed Madison Washington, the Amistad rebels, Harriet Tubman and others decades before Critical Race Theory alarmed conservatives.

Other innovative humanities courses, while anchored in a Marxist perspective, expanded workers' horizons. New York's school in 1934 had courses in "Social Forces in American History;" "History of Science and Technology;" "Origin of Man and Civilization;" "Colonial Questions," and "Revolutionary Interpretation of Modern Literature." Los Angeles students could take "Emancipation of Women," taught by "a specialist in social medicine and women's hygiene." In Chicago courses in art and literature by 1934 similarly were offered, while Detroit offered "Elementary Photography" to accompany Marxism and "Struggle of the Negro People." Drawing and illustration and dramatics were already proving popular with children and adults enrolled in Cleveland, although that school also offered Russian History. Workers schools in Queens; Crown Heights, Brooklyn; Harlem, and Detroit had drama and art courses, with a Queens Laboratory Theater run by the school's students. Sacramento offered journalism and radio courses, and Harlem's school offered "Labor Journalism." At Cleveland's Workers School, the library contained many novels such as Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* to enhance courses in literature, but no works, Markoff lamented, by Lenin or Engels. Some students evidently gravitated to workers schools for expanded horizons in literature, art, or the theater. The schools already offered a proto-course in adult education (Markoff scrapbook, 1933-1935).

This was in contrast to the 1920s, when New York Workers' School instructors derided "so-called workers' education movements that wish to bring bourgeois 'culture' to the working class thru the aid of bourgeois professors," mocking "courses in appreciation of music, literary criticism and aesthetic dancing" as irrelevant to the proper training for revolutionary workers (*Daily Worker*, February 23, 1926). Michael Denning has noted that during the Popular Front, culture was reconceived by the left as a force for progressive political change (Denning, 1997). From the mid-1930s, workers' schools abandoned earlier fixation on praxis-driven Marxist courses, and offered a broad array of courses in music, literature and art.

Workers schools were capacious, too, in their geographical reach. The largest number of courses were offered at the New York school, and course material was available to interested parties elsewhere if they contacted Markoff. But he noted in his *Daily Worker*'s column workers schools offered courses in industrial centers such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Los Angeles, but had also sprouted in places such as Eugene, Oregon; Sacramento; Jersey City and Bayonne; Oklahoma City; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Worcester, Massachusetts; New Brunswick, New Jersey. Most intriguing was the announcement in May 1934 of a "Farm School on Wheels," to offer classes on organizing and rural problems in North and South Dakota and elsewhere. A similar course had already been offered in Arkansas; the Dakota "Farm School on Wheels" was reported to be a "travelling school … complete … with tents, cooking equipment, library, a truck … and a staff of three instructors and a cook. In each district a leading farm organizer participates in conducting the discussion of organizational problems." Markoff lamented even Philadelphia had trouble maintaining its school, so it is unclear how durable some of these schools were (Markoff scrapbook, 1933-1935).

"Learn and Have a Bit of Fun"

Still, in the depths of the Depression the demand for counterhegemonic instruction was great. Already immigrant radicals such as the members of the Slovak Workers Section, affiliated with the Party-led International Workers Order, had established a network of workers schools offering classes to children by day, and evening sessions for men and women avid for lessons in literature, history and practical courses such as union organizing, vocabulary building and public speaking. Larger cities such as New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago featured several Slovak Workers' Schools, but even smaller places such as East Akron, Youngstown and Bellaire, Ohio, had schools. As with enrollees in workers schools, radical Slovaks appreciated the liberatory possibility of art, with theater, choral groups and film and painting classes on offer at the

Chicago school. Attendance at this school was praised as "a rare opportunity to learn and have a bit of fun, too" (*Rovnosť ľudu*, 1928).

Proletarian earnestness was not neglected, however. As war clouds threatened and the economic Depression persisted, the Chicago Workers' School announced in 1937 it was "offering a special course for unionists and all others who want to familiarize themselves with readings about the biggest threat of war. Courses on the foundations of political education; the Popular Front movement in France and Spain; … the movement against war and fascism" and others were publicized. Chicago two months later explained the need for its classes: "The working class needs an instruction and education, for right now the march is on for higher wages, better working conditions and a better world" (*Ľudový denník*, January 9, 1937, March 29, 1937).

By World War II, the schools were part of a leftwing network, which served as "a people's university," as the Polish newspaper *Głos Ludowy* (People's Voice) labeled Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School. During the war annually more than 4,000 black, white and Hispanic men and women flocked to classes at Lincoln, which included courses in "The People's War; Structure of Fascism; Propaganda Analysis; … Economics; Philosophy; History; Psychology; Art; Music; Writing for Short Story; Newspaper and Radio; Public Speaking; Labor Problems; History and Culture of Racial and National Groups." Polish history and language courses were introduced during the war. (*Głos Ludowy*, 1944) Such schools, combining practical skills with liberationist education in subjugated people's history and culture, were welcomed by students such as a Young Pioneer who wrote to a Slovak Communist paper, "Away with bosses' propaganda!" (*Rovnosť ľudu*, 1930).

Bosses might be slammed, but by the war the workers' schools refashioned themselves as advocates of progressive Americanism, with talk of revolution downplayed. Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School in 1943 and 1944 now advertised its goal as "For a national unity and a united world through people's education." Education,

the school argued, must be "a truly American method of preserving and extending our democracy through frank, objective discussion." This was a far cry from "the decisive proletarian victory" the school's predecessor had demanded less than a decade earlier. Still, courses in Negro Liberation taught by William Patterson remained revolutionary in their content, as arguably were courses in the lessons of the Four Freedoms and the necessity for enduring Soviet-American friendship. Lincoln by war's end was also offering courses in "Jewish History and Culture;" "Irish History and Culture;" "Czechoslovakia in the Storm of Ages;" "The First Democracy of the Western World" (ancient Greece); "Latin American History and Culture;" "Art as a Weapon;" and "How Writers Fought for Freedom," which examined Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Milton. Proletarian novelist Jack Conroy taught "Problems of the Individual Writer" (Abraham Lincoln School, 1943, 1944).

Similarly, although the New York Workers School in 1943 still urged students to "study as you fight!" it now offered enrollees a course in "Giants of American Democracy." "By learning from the mighty movements of the people throughout the ages, and from their leaders – Jefferson, Paine, Lincoln and Douglass; Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin; Browder and Foster – we will be better equipped to fight the battles of today." Other courses offered in 1943 were "Women in the People's War" co-taught by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn; "History of the Negro People;" "The Negro People and the War;" "Key Problems of American Foreign Policy;" "The Italian People and the War;" and "The Jewish People and the War" (New York Workers School, 1943).

After 1944 the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York became the premier workers' school. It offered courses in African American, Latin American, and U.S. labor history by scholars such as Herbert Aptheker, Lawson, and the Foner brothers. Aptheker and Phil Foner's resurrection of the salience of slave revolts and Frederick Douglass to America's freedom story was a counterhegemonic pedagogy at a time when public schools persistently dismissed abolitionists as unstable, dangerously

violent extremists and slavery as a benign institution. Into the 1950s New York public schools taught slavery had been beneficial to the "lesser-developed" African race (Taylor, 2011).

This mixing of progressive culture with Marxist analysis continued into the 1950s. In some respects, Jefferson was not coy about where its ideological focus lay: The school's capstone was the Institute of Marxist Studies, (Jefferson School, 1949-1950) and history classes offered a counterhegemonic analysis of workers' militancy and anti-racism. But Jefferson and other schools also brought literature and art to "workers of hand and brain." Jefferson offered a panoply of non-credit classes in art, literature, music, and sculpture to workers interested in education and culture for their own sake. By 1950 it was possible for a garment worker to take classes in "Mystery Story Writing" with Dashiell Hammett, or painting instruction with Philip Evergood or Anton Refregier. Hugo Gellert and Charles White also taught painting and drawing. Creative fiction classes were taught by Myra Page and Howard Fast. The course catalogue labeled its varied classes, whether in painting, Marxism, Black History, Shakespeare, or creative writing, as "Know-How for Progressives." The school argued, "Students come to the Jefferson School solely because they believe the school will help them understand the world we live in" (Jefferson School, 1950).

Socially conscious pedagogy, too, endured at the Jeff. In its final year, classes offered included "The Puerto Rican National Minority" by Jesús Colón; "U.S. History Schools Don't Teach" by Aptheker; "History of the African Slave Trade" by W.E.B. DuBois, and "China, India and Africa: New Role in World Politics" by Alphaeus Hunton (Jefferson School, 1956). Students pursuing non-credit, non-career-driven courses were the antithesis of Bedacht's pupils as "useful wheels." The Jefferson School catered to workers interested in education for education's sake.

Radical workers created a counterhegemonic pedagogy in these "People's Universities," as the Jefferson's directors called the school, designed to help workers

"achieve that education which can enable them to change their world through ever better understanding of it" (Jefferson School, 1950). The school reiterated its commitment to educate "workers of hand and brain – for it knows that these are not only the most numerous group in our society, but also that in their thought and struggles lies the promise of the future" (Jefferson School, 1950). At a celebratory banquet on its fourth anniversary (attended by Paul Robeson, DuBois and others, the school proclaimed, "Ideas – when the people take hold of them – can change the world!" (Jefferson School, 1948).

For a time it seemed progressive pedagogy was a growth industry. The Jeff developed annexes in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens, and made its course outlines in anti-colonialism, Black history, and labor available to other progressive institutions such as Newark's Walt Whitman School or White Plains' Tom Paine School. The moderate Republican *New York Herald Tribune* in 1945 approvingly reported the Jefferson School had annually enrolled 14,000 students and that the "Leftist School [was] Copied in Seven Other Cities," citing the Sam Adams School in Boston among others. The "experiment in adult education" was, the paper noted, regarded by the Jeff's directors as "a strong trend … toward realization of the dream of a 'people's university' – an educational forum geared to the 'needs of citizenship in a democracy,' rather than to 'self-development' or 'heightened individual awareness.'" The bemused *Herald Tribune* wondered, "Does this mean that a new educational yeast is beginning to leaven in the nation?" (*New York Herald Tribune*, 1945).

Within a few years, the paper had its answer. By 1947, progressive schools were in the cross hairs of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations and other professional red-hunters. Schools were stigmatized for preaching such heresy as anti-colonialism or scientific Marxism but also for teaching racial equality.

By 1954 the schools were placed on the List of Subversive Organizations. The Jefferson School faced declining enrollments and crushing legal bills as it fought "subversive" designation. The school's directors pleaded with the public, "Don't Let McCarthyism Darken the Halls of Learning," (Jefferson School, 1954) but it closed by the end of 1956. In announcing its demise, Jefferson's board wrote they were sure the school would rise again (it didn't.) They were also "confident that the understanding and inspiration provided by the School will live on in the minds of its many thousands of students, and will continue to be reflected in their daily lives" (Board of Trustees, 1956).

Many school alumni continued working on behalf of civil rights, peace and other causes, and alternative schools rose again through the efforts of Students for a Democratic Society, the Mississippi Freedom Summer and other liberationist organizations such as New York's 1965-68 Free University. Still, some of the momentum for alternative, radical education was forestalled by the eradication of these Workers' Schools. The curriculum of dissent had to be reconnected after the government's suppression.

Final Remarks

Currently, higher education in North America faces draconian funding cuts and punishment of students and faculty who question the sanctity of corporate hegemony or scorched-earth military campaigns of U.S. allies such as Israel. In the bleak twenty-first century, in which schools are again instructed to be the handmaidens of the reactionary status quo, the words of Max Bedacht, Bertram Wolfe, and other advocates of the Workers' Schools seem prescient, and remind us that an alternative, liberatory educational model once thrived in New York, Cleveland, and countless other places. Workers' Schools combined the humanities with earnest Marxist pedagogy that instructed students another world was possible, and necessary. Workers' Schools offer a progressive pedagogical genealogy to counter contemporary privatized, marketized

education mania. In a neo-Dickensian era where monetization has replaced much of the liberal arts, we must look to an earlier era's "people's university" for instruction.

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