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# Work People's College

Jon Bekken

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In the modern school's heyday, the U.S. labor movement recognized the importance of education. Unions fought against authoritarian school systems designed to funnel workers' children into endless wage slavery. A wide variety of working-class organizations set up their own educational institutions, ranging from preschool and elementary school programs to labor colleges offering programs in history, economics and literature, as well as practical organizing and union administration skills.

The short-lived Chicago Modern School operated a Sunday school for children and evening lectures for adults in 1910. In 1888 German workers launched a network of free-thought Sunday schools for children, alongside libraries and reading rooms for adult workers.

It is revolting to expect the worker to accept a promissory note for "heavenly joys" in lieu of profits stolen from him by greedy sharks. That the children shall not bow to such an economic system is the aim of the liberal Sunday schools...

Czech workers operated 18 schools in the 1920s, serving 1,340 Chicago students. The Free-Thought School Association was closely tied to a network of mutual aid societies, workers'

choirs and other associations which raised funds for their support and made their halls available to the schools. For adults, the Socialist Workingmen's Society offered evening lectures in economics and social science, while nearly every Czech hall had a reading room or library.

The Chicago Federation of Labor and Women's Trade Union League jointly sponsored the Chicago Labor College, offering night courses in English, parliamentary procedure, public speaking, economics, and other subjects in the 1920s and 1930s. The Workmen's Circle bought an auditorium in 1920 for its labor lyceum, which hosted lectures and cultural events, while on Chicago's Northwest side the Socialist Institute offered evening classes for children as part of an effort to counter capitalist indoctrination in the public schools. The Polish People's University, organized by socialists active in Chicago's labor movement, offered lectures and courses in science, history, mathematics, literature and English. Similar educational programs were sponsored by workers' organizations of every political tendency and ethnicity.

Similar projects could be found in every city with a significant labor movement. IWW and other union halls hosted libraries, classes and public lectures addressing a wide range of issues of interest to workers. One such project that deserves to be better remembered is Work People's College, in Duluth, Minnesota. Organized in 1903 as a Finnish "folk" school, it soon affiliated first with the Finnish Socialist Federation and, after 1913, the Industrial Workers of the World.

Work People's College was part of a vibrant Finnish workers' culture, including cooperatives, daily newspapers (including the IWW-affiliated *Industrialisti*), libraries, dramatic societies, choirs, etc. The College initially served a Finnish student body, but gradually expanded to other workers. Work People's College sought to educate students not to rise out of their class, but to become more effective actors in the class struggle, offering classes in economics, labor history and industrial unionism

as well as more “practical” subjects such as public speaking, journalism, bookkeeping, English, Finnish and running meetings.

The College launched a summer program for Finnish youth in 1929, offering courses in radical literature, Finnish language and culture, labor history and economics in the mornings, with afternoons set aside for recreational pursuits.

WPC instructor Fred Thompson described the economics curriculum in the September 1937 *One Big Union Monthly*. After reviewing increased productivity made possible by modern machinery, and working the increases as math problems, students

reached the inevitable conclusion that if we can produce so much more than we used to, and do not live more than a couple of times as well, it must be that the working class is gypped of a good part of what it is now able to produce.

To determine where this robbery happened, they turned to a hypothetical candy and ice cream store.

Suppose that there is a general complaint that where you buy your confections they charge such high prices that you are robbed. Will those who have no money to spend there be robbed? All agree the answer is “No” [The more they spend, the more they are robbed.] ... Is it possible to explain that one class with plenty of money, and spending plenty of it, lives without working by assuming that when people go to buy they are robbed by high prices? And so these 12-year-old economists conclude that the gypping of the working class must be perpetuated by the time the worker gets his paycheck, that “exploitation occurs predominantly at the point of production.”

Similarly, students tackled the problem of unemployment, proving somewhat more astute than the U.S. Congress. When faced with the fact that 12 million lacked jobs, while 28 million worked for nine hours a day, they treated the problem as a simple mathematical problem, concluding that a six-hour day would allow for full employment.

While the four-week summer program classes were structured by the WPC staff, students took charge of organizing social and recreational activities, putting their lessons in running meetings and organizing to practical use. Worker-students in the regular program played a more active role, helping arrange the curriculum, organizing the evening debates and lectures (as well as entertainments), and handling conflicts and discipline.

Work People's College had neither traditional tests nor grades nor diplomas. The faculty were not academics, but rather workers with many years' experience as wage slaves and in labor agitation.

While there was a schedule of classes, Thompson recalled, there was little lecturing. Rather, students were encouraged to hunt up information and present it in the form of debates, soap-box talks, articles and skits, many of which found their way into the pages of the IWW press. (A WPC theater troupe also regularly toured northern Minnesota and Upper Michigan, performing for immigrant and labor groups.) One of those plays, "Banker's Island," told the story of three workers stranded on an island with a banker who used his supply of gold to get them to build him a home and provide him with the necessities of life. But they organized when the banker decreed that they could not eat the bounty on "his" island without paying for it, and reorganized things to suit themselves. After a few days the boss capitulated, agreeing to wash the dishes in exchange for an equal share of the food.

Regular classes ended in 1941 (the summer program continued for a few years) and the army seized the campus during World War II. WPC did not reopen, and its building was sold in 1953.