

LOOKING BACK ON VET THROUGH A CLASS HISTORY OF THE WORKER EDUCATION ASSOCIATION (WEA) IN AUSTRALIA

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We decided to put our history on the walls because in our day-to-day activities, our wage cases and everything else, we always needed a record. We used that as a sort of dictionary ... for education at job delegate meetings.

In Friesen and Taksa 1996: 191

This paper is a part of a larger research project that intends to examine the relationship between worker education and the history of class struggle in Australia. The particular focus of the paper centres on the formation of the Worker Education Association (WEA) in Australia and its tenuous relationship over time with working class aspirations. Drawing on existing historical research in the field the paper charts the organisational beginnings of the WEA in early twentieth century England to its adoption in Australia. Through the presentation of selected case studies, it is argued that the evolution of the WEA has been animated by the ideological tensions between liberalism (with its emphasis on consensus and political neutrality) and social radicalism (that stresses class conflict and the necessity of overtly political education). However, in the context of such tensions, the paper further argues that liberalism has been the historically predominant ideology of the WEA. It is against and from outside such consensual and apolitical impulses that, for example, working class theatre and folk music of the inter-war years developed. The paper presents these as both alternative educational forms and cultural expressions of class struggle. In its conclusion, the paper returns to the theme of the larger project that implicates contemporary vocational training and worker education within the liberal (and, more recently, neo-liberal) drive to deny worker-centered and class conscious education.

Adult Education's Hidden Tradition: Bob Boughton's 'Red' WEA

In Boughton's work in Adult Education he has

... been tracing a direct line from that publication of the Red WEA (i.e. The Communist Manifesto), down through the second half of the nineteenth century, an adult education tradition, not just in English [sic] or in Europe, but here in Australia. This was a socialist tradition and yes, communist tradition, which carried forward the Chartist's slogan raised against the Useful Knowledge Societies and the Mechanics Institutes established by their liberal masters. What we want, this tradition said, is not the useful knowledge you seek to give us, which will only make us more productive employees ... No, what we want, the Chartists had said, is really useful knowledge ... A knowledge, as Marx might have said, not simply interpreting the world, but helping us to change it.

<https://ala.asn.au/conf/2003/boughton.pdf>

Rachel Sharp: An independent and socialist tradition that defines

... an accommodation to the bourgeois order ... as incompatible with working class interests. That tradition threw up its own teachers, organic intellectuals with a clear class perspective and historical roots in the labour movement. It prefigured at its high points both a rigorous critique of state [forms of education and training] and the generation of alternative education forms firmly under working class control. It produced its own literature, its wown pedagogy and forms of training, as well as a range of cultural initiatives of profound importance for those who participated. It grew out of the historic split within the labour movement in the first decades of the twentieth century. It perceived, correctly, that capitalist production could never be other than a form of class domination. And that social democratic reformism promised much but couldn't deliver the kind of society which would eradicate inequality.

Sharp, R. (1990) Rescuing a Socialist Practice of Education *Education Links* 38: 14-20