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# THE PLEBS MAGAZINE

"I can promise to be candid but not impartial."

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## The Work before the Plebs

A S a recent adherent to the cause of the C.L.C. and to the work of the Plebs League, I have, like many of my comrades, been pursued across the country by screeds, more or less intelligible but always increasing in insistency, ending with the cryptic symbols "J.F.H." and requiring an article from my pen. He wants, this uneasy one, to have my impressions of the future activities and possibilities of the Movement. Now I am a new recruit and have not grown old in wisdom and experience of this organization like that Alpha which stands for Ablett. On his head, therefore, be my blood if ill befalls me.

Why have I, a "university man," joined forces with the Plebs League? Perhaps,—in fact, I am inclined to give that as one of my main reasons for doing so—because I have had some experience of one of the most democratic of the New Universities. Maybe, had I been other than a stranger within the graven gates and musty walls of Oxford or Cambridge. I should not have come to such a

bad end. Maybe it was the blatantly bourgeois surroundings of the Victoria University of Manchester which prepared me for this secession from respectability and that orthodoxy, which was, in its beginning, as heterodox as that of the C.L.C. The Universities of the 19th century—red brick monstrosities like that Birmingham parody on decadent Greece, brazenly Byzantine and Chamberlainesque; blackened sepulchres like Owens, with its random architectural tributes to cotton manufacturers, industrial chemists, and purse-proud engineers; or glorified technical night-schools like Armstrong College, Newcastle, or Firth College, Sheffield—are redolent as much of the sixpence-halfpenny dividend-mongering philosophy of their patrons as of the “stinks” of their Carnegie Laboratories. “*Arduus ad solem dividendumque* !”\*

That would have been a satisfactory motto for Victoria and all its contemporaries ! They are utilitarians with that vice—or virtue, in their sight—of bourgeoisdom ; magnificent with the skyscraping elegance of their mill-owner culture ; snobbish to the latest fad of their Sociological Societies and Fabian “Group” syllabuses. *Olent* ! They stink !

The universities of G. D. H. Cole—heaven help him and me—are, or were, universities. Their odour is not so much of the profits of futurity as of the sanctity of centuries of rents and tithes. They frown with superstition and glower with authority. They exude from their mouldering stonework the traditions of the Middle Ages, filtered through the Anglicanism of the landed and mercantile capitalists, that Tory ideology of the field stealer and the slave-owning “planter.” They are as patently bulwarks of the “past as the brick laboratories and marble-faced lecture-halls of the New Universities are ramparts of the present. The New has influenced the Old, and the Old the New until now they are rapidly approximating to each other. The universities, comrades, reflect the minds, the needs, the inclinations and the prejudices of their patrons. of those who founded them or those who administer their trust funds. The middle-class, in the persons of Owens of Manchester, Mason of Birmingham, Firth of Sheffield, Armstrong of Newcastle, the Whitworths, the Rylands, the Beyers, the Chamberlains, and their kind, founded their own colleges, because the Old Universities did not and would not conform to the notions of the industrial capitalists, the non-conforming profiteers and the mechanically inclined manufacturers. They wanted colleges of industry, night schools, experiments, lecturers who would give their point of view and write history and discuss theology from their angle of inclination.

The old Universities have built laboratories and founded chairs in Sociology. The new Universities have sought Dukes to be their Chancellors and have taken War Office representatives on to their

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\* *Arduus ad Solem* is Manchester's motto.

Senates. The cross-fertilisation of landlord and capitalist interests, which has become so visible in industry and the social marriage market, has been reflected in their schools. Now, they are talking of making membership of the O.T.C. (Officers' Training Corps) an essential part of a graduate's training. Not Holy Communion and Anglicanism, but Strategy and Militarism. Moreover, they are going to succeed to a very great extent.

Yet, it is these shrines whose oracles we are to look to for working class education! Ye Gods! Some of us thought so, too—so deeply ingrained were the prejudices and influences even of that against which our student life was one long, useless revolt. Well, we have eaten of their flesh-pots, have learned their lore. We have sat at the feet of Michael Sadler and learned more than he ever would have dreamed he was teaching us. We have ransacked their libraries and cross-examined their professors. These people are very clever, very well-informed, often very well-meaning. But their ideology is not ours, and their idea of education will never aid us far in the emancipation of the working-class. When they are best-intentioned, they are—to my mind—most dangerous. The purpose which, I take it, education should serve for the working class is, in the opinion of the Plebs League, to arm it for the task of emancipation. The Plebs does not desire education for its own sake, or for the appreciation of middle-class culture, or for the better adaptation of the "hands" (or "brains") to the production of income and future reserves of capital. For the members of the Plebs League—

"The Cause alone is worthy till the good days bring the best."

I have said enough, already, to make it clear why I am in favour of the workers having their own educational system to propagate the revolutionary thought of an independent and militant working class. They want to learn to think for themselves and to see and learn and teach the story of human society from the angle of inclination of the working class. There is an amazing amount of dross which we have to unlearn when we make our transition from Marshall to Marx. It is so difficult to realise that "Pure Economics" is but the expression of a class view-point. It comes to my mind and then slips away again because of my training. They were crazed on impartiality, those teachers of mine. They should not have permitted me to study Economic History and Economic Theory. I learned Scientific Socialism from my study of original sources. Its truth hit me in the eye at every hand. Having continuously, for years, fortified my growing opinion, my increasing conviction, with the accumulations of first-hand research, and having at last read and found myself most at ease with the literature of Boudin and Engels and Unterman and Dietzgen and Morgan, and of course, that great master-piece of Labriola, *Essays in the Materialist Conception of History*, I have

*had* to join the Plebs League. I have been weary of and, almost, nauseated by the superficialities of most of the pacifist socialists since the War broke out. Then I found *Socialism and War*, and met W. W. Craik. The rest has followed.

In the current *Socialist* there is stated a basic truth of our propagandist needs throughout the Socialist Movement.

Open-air propaganda can only succeed when behind it there are *trained students, a scientific literature, and a Press* to back up both.

It is our work to create those. The Plebs League can do so. It is going to do so. It is going to be a great educational organization. That is the function it has to perform for the Socialist Movement in this country. Unhesitatingly I would say that nothing is so much needed here as this kind of work. Until it is done the Socialist Movement will borrow its philosophy and its economics and its views on foreign questions from those brilliant non-Socialists whose emotions are nearest akin to its own. Men and women in the I.L.P., the B.S.P., the S.L.P., and the trade union advanced wing, can find in the Plebs League a common rallying centre where they can study and can compare the results of that study. There are Marxists even in the I.L.P. There are going to be more. I believe in the I.L.P. just as sincerely and vigorously as I dislike many of the sentimental tendencies of that organization. I hope to see Marxists rally to the Plebs from all these bodies. I hope to see, and I am working and shall continue to work for, joint action between the Plebs League and those who have, as their first object, the education of our children in the Socialist Sunday Schools, Sunday Schools, Socialist "Young Citizens," Plebs League Classes for Adults and the Central Labour College—that is the ladder we have to build. It is not going to be done immediately, but the two Movements naturally connect together and will be a growing source of strength one to the other.

Now, for the provision of scientific literature. I have one serious fault to find with the literature of the S.L.P. and the text-books of the Plebs League; and I do not think that either body will disagree with me. They are too purely theoretical and too advanced for the beginners. We have before us the task of writing our own literature, preparing our own histories and our own text-books in economics. There is nothing wrong with Marx except the way in which his theory is served up by its teachers. What we need to do is to apply the Marxian method to the study of present-day problems and of developments in industry and commerce, in politics, and diplomacy since Marx's death. Craik has led the way. Much less successfully, because it was not written to meet the same demand, I have endeavoured, in *How Europe Armed for War* to present a vivid picture of the strength and complexity of one phase of Modern Capitalism. Only after I had finished it did I discover that it was Marxist.

I believe that nothing would be more effective than a series of short text-books—which could also be enjoyed by the ordinary reader—dealing with the rise of Capitalism in different parts of the country where we are establishing classes, or already have them set up. Simple studies of working conditions in the mining, railway, engineering, wood-working and other industries at different periods of technical development and the effect these had on the methods of organization by guild, society, craft union, local sectional union, either craft or otherwise, industrial unions, and on political consciousness, would be invaluable to propagandists of Industrial Unionism.

Such are some of the suggestions I would throw out. Let us have no unnecessary diversion of our energies and enthusiasm. All together, now, Comrades of the I.L.P., the B.S.P. and the S.L.P., into the Plebs League !

J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD, (M.A.)