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From the *Escuela Moderna* to the *Työväen Opisto*: Reading, (W)Riting, and Revolution, the 3 “Rs” of Expanded Proletarian Literacy

Gary Kaunonen

In working class education, one of the primary goals in addition to basic literacy was the formulation of class-based interpretations of society. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as literacy programs began to filter into the lives of the proletariat, an attempt to expand the definition of literacy past basic reading and writing skills occasioned the rise of institutions that defined literacy as not only reading and writing, but also knowledge of class and economic theory. Thus, these early proletarian programs developed a broader definition of literacy, past basic reading and writing programs, to class-based educational curriculum.

Literacy...a powerful word that means nothing to those who cannot read it, but for a significant period of the late 19th through early 20th century, the struggle to craft programs of literacy and education for the working class took on new and innovative directions and meanings. As the push to educate and develop literacy programs among the masses developed under the regulation of religious and bourgeois statist administrations, a struggle developed to formulate and implement a class-conscious pedagogy that embraced working class values and egalitarian educational principles. A basic, working definition of expanded proletarian literacy is the acquisition of class-consciousness in addition to the basic skills of reading and writing. This type of proletarian literacy was an expansion of the term literacy past the mechanical aspects of reading and writing to a type of social, cultural, and class-based literacy—an expansion of literacy past the two traditional Rs of reading and (w)riting, to a literacy program that incorporated the three Rs of proletarian literacy: reading, (w)riting, and revolution.

There is an under-representation of this type of radical proletarian literacy program in scholarly literature and secondary source examinations. This presents an opportunity for this article to identify the historical gap in scholarship regarding anarchist, anarcho-sindicalist, and industrial unionist literacy programs at radical proletarian educational institutions.

Previous work in the field has produced several book length works on “labor schools,” but none has ever discussed radical proletarian literacy programs while identifying print media as one of the guiding educational modes for anti-statist, dissenting educational institutions. Possible reasons for this lack of writing on anarcho-syndicalist literacy and educational efforts may include the under-representation of anarchist studies and accompanying faculty in academia. As David Graeber argues in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, “Most academics seem to have only the vaguest idea of what anarchism is even about; or dismiss it with the crudest stereotypes (Anarchist organization! But isn’t that a contradiction in terms?) In the United States there are thousands of academic Marxists of one sort or another but hardly a dozen scholars willing openly to call themselves anarchists.”¹ One place in academia that does perhaps reserve a place for analysis of anarchist interpretations is women’s studies programs, due to the significance of anarcho-feminists, but again this representation is somewhat small compared to other forms of study regarding feminism.

So, even though the history of anarcho-syndicalist and industrial unionist literacy efforts has been somewhat neglected in scholarly circles, it does not dismiss the historic importance these programs have had in fostering alternative methods of attaining literacy. Literacy is not always about reading and writing; social contexts for literacy are perhaps more pronounced if underlying class differences are not included in an analysis of literacy. What contemporary society can learn from anarcho-syndicalist and industrial unionist literacy programs is that hand-in-hand with efforts to stomp out illiteracy should be grassroots programs to explain the causes of illiteracy. The theory of literacy is important, but the social and economic roots of illiteracy are not theoretical; they have institutional and tangible forms that must be understood first by those enacting literacy programs and then by those striving to become literate on their own terms.

So, what of the group of people who were targeted for radical literacy programs by anarcho-syndicalists and industrial unionists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: they were working class folk, or proletarians, who had previously garnered little say in their own actual education. As the benefits of industrialization lined the pockets of robber barons, steel magnates, and monopolists, and as so-called public educational institutions became dominated or heavily influenced by bourgeois statist power structure, there was a struggle by some to carve out a place for literacy and educational programs among the industrial working masses on their own terms. For members of the working class, there was a desire to define and apply literacy programs and educational opportunities, free from others’ class backgrounds. Class-conscious literacy programs offered working class folk a chance to learn that was void of statist class influences, which many

derisively concluded sought to create a pacified under-class and placated workforce.

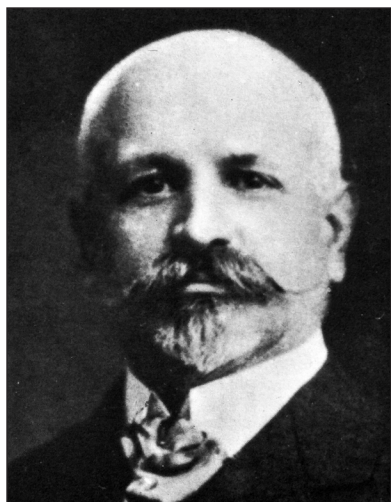
The struggle was not perhaps so much a fight to gain access to facilities, as churches, local governments, and even industrial companies provided certain forms of education; rather the struggle was to shape education and literacy with a class-consciousness. It was the struggle to forge an opportunity to learn that was not beholden to the upper classes or even to emerging middle class values. The task was to mold an education that was egalitarian in nature and specific to proletarian cultural and social values.

Like so many other aspects of the industrial life in this era, opportunity to shape and access to learn was contingent upon power relations. In her article "Complicating the Complex," Victoria Purcell-Gates writes:

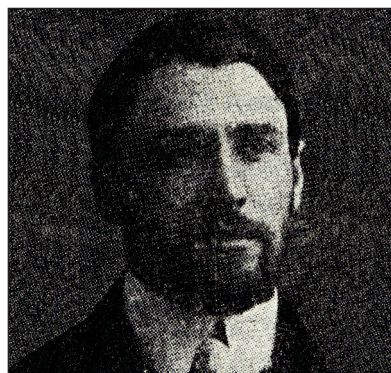
Literacy is always embedded within social institutions and, as such, is only knowable as it is defined and practiced by social and cultural groups. As such, literacy is best considered an ideological construct as opposed to an autonomous skill, separable from contexts of use. Its ideological nature, according to this view, reflects the fact that literacy is always constructed and enacted within social and political contexts and subject to the implications of differing power relationships.²

To this perspective I would also add class, because literacy and education are also a function of hierarchy and top-down social structure. Perhaps one of the most truly proletarian and successful ventures into education and the teaching of basic literacy skills to the working masses were anarcho-syndicalist and industrial unionist efforts to create an egalitarian, non-androcentric, proletarian-centered education. It is perhaps fitting that this mechanism to bring literacy to the masses came from an anarchist background, because what better way to subvert the power relationship in literacy and education than by advocating for the destruction, the obliteration, of the very social system that kept a truly proletarian-themed education separated from the masses. Anarcho-syndicalist literacy efforts invariably meant, "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."³

One of the very first and most successful instructive programs to approach proletarian literacy in this manner was an anarchist school in Spain. This article starts with analysis of literacy programs and proletarian education in Spain because it was a hotbed of anarchism in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. So much that Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, who came from a middle class background, was able to begin an educational institution in Barcelona that taught anarchist interpretations



Francisco Ferrer y Guardia



Leo Laukki

of such things as “basic literacy to adults and a rationale education to their children.”⁴ For his attempt to bring a truly liberated education to the masses, the Spanish government executed Ferrer, but from the ashes of Ferrer’s Spanish *Escuela Moderna*, Modern Schools made their way across the Atlantic and organized in the United States.

In addition to the anarchist Modern School, a host of socialist or labor colleges were springing up in the United States in the early 20th century such as the Peoples’ College in Fort Scott, Kansas, which was founded in 1915, and the Brookwood Labor College, founded in Katonah, New York, in 1921. A precursor to many of these colleges espousing a proletarian curriculum was the Industrial Workers of the World affiliated Work Peoples’ College (WPC), founded in 1907 in Smithville, now Duluth, Minnesota. The WPC was a center of proletarian education that based its curriculum specifically on propaganda of the deed ideology, which advocated economic and physical responses to capitalist exploitation in lieu of political mechanisms of change. The school was a bastion of socialist and

later specifically anarcho-syndicalist and industrial unionist thought, with many of the professors, such as Leo Laukki, teaching direct action tactics such as the general strike and industrial sabotage.

The *Escuela Moderna* and the Work Peoples’ College shared a commitment to the implementation of a more contextualized, class-based literacy. The *Escuela Moderna* offered education in the sciences to children, while presenting the opportunity for less-formalized, broadly defined social education to adults in Sunday lecture series. These lectures offered a type of economic and social literacy for proletarians in Barcelona, Spain, giving the opportunity for education regardless of class. Literacy efforts at the WPC

4 From the *Escuela Moderna* to the Työväen Opisto

were broader in terms of application. At the WPC, literacy and educational efforts were not just in the “two Rs” of reading and (w)riting, but rather in the three Rs of proletarian literacy: reading, (w)riting, and *revolution*. The school’s curriculum reflected this notion, and the turning away from bourgeois forms of public education was advocated in an overt manner, as Richard Altenbaugh writes:

Radical Finns believed that the public schools taught their children blind conformity and hedonistic materialism, ministering to bourgeois hegemony. Work People’s College, in contrast, sought to preserve Finnish culture, promote literacy, and instill socialist ideals, thus serving a counter-hegemonic function.⁵

This dedication to radical forms of education separated the literacy programs of the Escuela Moderna and the WPC from other general literacy programs. It was not just about the mechanics of reading and writing; it was ultimately about reading and writing as a way to break the bonds of repressive institutional hierarchies such as religion, statism, and capitalism. The type of literacy aimed for by the Escuela Moderna and the WPC was not a basic literacy; it went deeper than that. It was mechanical competency in languages, as well as cultural, class, economic, and philosophical literacy of the proletarian movement in general and specifically anarchist and industrial unionist literacies. As imagined, this revolutionary approach to a program of literacy met with great opposition in many reactionary, liberal, and even progressive circles.

The WPC was somewhat different from the Modern School because it focused for the most part on adult and continuing education, though it did offer summer school to children of working class adults. As with the Modern School, basic literacy courses were supplemented with didactic coursework. Though proletarian literacy was the desired outcome, a need for basic literacy programs was very apparent due to the lack of formal education in general among the WPC’s students. As Richard J. Altenbaugh wrote, “The rudiments of mathematics and the basic rules of Finnish grammar had to be taught to worker-students who, although literate, came from poor rural backgrounds in Finland, which required a minimal amount of formal schooling.”⁶ The need for basic forms of education was very apparent early in the school’s history. As Douglas Ollila, Jr. wrote:

Of the 123 students enrolled in 1911-1912, forty had had no previous education whatsoever, while fifty-seven had had at most two years of training in the elementary schools of Finland. The educational level of the Finnish immigrant was thus quite

low, in contrast to the stereotype that Finns had attained a high educational level in Finland. It is interesting to note that the need to master basic educational skills was so imperative that the college founded a correspondence school whose chief aim was lessons in English.⁷

The WPC had a somewhat tempestuous early existence because for a time it mirrored the split in the Finnish immigrants' divided labor and proletarian political movement. In its early years, the school teetered between parliamentary socialism and industrial unionism (some might opine anarcho-syndicalism), but as Ollila wrote:

At the 1909 meeting of the Finnish Socialist Federation, industrial unionism and especially the Industrial Workers of the World were condemned as being anarchistic, but radicalism persisted in the Midwest, especially at the school.⁸

From my own research regarding the school's student publication, *Ahjo* (The Forge) and from work with the Finnish language version of the Industrial Workers of the World newspaper *Industrialisti*, the school was a hotbed of anarcho-syndicalist thought. The WPC did offer courses on Marx and scientific socialism, but for the most part the curriculum became centered on industrial unionism and propaganda of the deed. It was a very radical curriculum, much like the Modern School's anarchist philosophical foundations.

Literature Review

Examination of anarchist literacy programs and proletarian education is difficult because the very institutions that intended to teach reading and writing seldom preserved their written records. Anarcho-syndicalist pedagogical resources are rare finds in the historical record. These sources are rare because of two possible variables: one, we are talking about anarchists, and record keeping was not always at a premium. The decentralization of basic anarchist thought perhaps led to a rather incomplete historical record. Lost to history are likely some of the basic documentary sources, such as class lists, administrator's records, and coursework notations. The second factor is more insidious. Government suppression, forced school closures, and book burnings deleted the historical resources of many anarchist and syndicalist groups. In some instances treatises, official newspapers, and pamphlets were banned by official government actions; in still other instances, social pressure forced such

movements underground, tacitly censoring records that could have given a historical glimpse into efforts to educate the working class.

What remains of the primary historical record does, however, afford a look at the broad and varied contours of anarcho-syndicalist efforts to educate the masses, and for the purposes of this article, there is a rich contextual account of firsthand knowledge regarding anarcho-syndicalist efforts at literacy and education programs. One such source is the memoir of Francisco Ferrer titled, *Origins and Ideals of the Modern School*, which Joseph McCabe translated from Spanish into English in 1913. Also from the primary record are pamphlets and booklets concerning anarcho-syndicalist education, literacy, and organization printed by the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Finnish language publishing company, the Workers' Socialist Publishing Company (WSPC), headquartered in Duluth, Minnesota. In addition to the WSPC, the WPC also had publishing facilities on their campus, as did the Escuela Moderna in Spain, and the Modern School in New York.

The importance of proletarian media forms in advancing the cause of anarcho-syndicalist and industrial unionist education and literacy cannot be understated. Much of the "schooling" that occurred in the movements was actually done via print media and in popular culture by song. Forthcoming sections of this article will examine literacy and education via the printed word and song in greater detail, but for the purposes of this literature review we will highlight three of these offerings presently. From the WSPC, the title *Nuoriso, Oppi ja Työ (Youth, Learning and Labor)* written by William Rein and translated into Finnish in 1929, will give an intimate look into the education of youth in the industrial unionist movement. A look at popular literacy, via song, comes from the IWW's more commonly known "Little Red Songbook," but officially titled, *IWW Songs: To Fan the Flames of Discontent, Joe Hill Memorial Edition*. Print media was an incredibly important tool for working class literacy and educational programs, so much that the WPC even advertised for their correspondence school in the Finnish language IWW-affiliated newspaper *Sosialisti*, which would later come to be named *Industrialisti*, after official affiliation with the IWW. As can likely be imagined, a full archival representation of this newspaper does not exist due to the ravages of the Palmer Red Scare and McCarthy HUAC eras.

For a specific secondary source examination of the Modern School movement in Spain and America, this article consults Paul Avrich's book, *Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*. In addition to Avrich's book, Florance Tager's article, "Politics and Culture in Anarchist Education: The Modern School of New York and Stelton, 1911-15" in a 1986 edition of *Curriculum Inquiry* examines socio-cultural aspects of a defined temporal period in United States anarchist education.

These two scholarly readings represent two of the few secondary sources that specifically examine the Modern School movement in America. For an in-depth examination of anarchist education in Spain, we turn to Carolyn P. Boyd's article, "The Anarchists and Education in Spain, 1868-1909," which appeared in a 1976 edition of *The Journal of Modern History*.

While scholarly writing on anarchist literacy programs and education is rather scant, more numerous are works regarding general socialist and labor education programs. Book length works about general socialist and labor education in the United States include Kenneth Teitelbaum's 1993 work, *Schooling for "Good Rebels": Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900-1920* and Richard J. Altenbaugh's *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s*, published in 1990. Articles by Jane Greer, "No Smiling Madonna: Marian Wharton and the Struggle to Construct a Critical Pedagogy for the Working Class, 1914-17," Florence Tager, "A Radical Culture for Children of the Working Class: 'The Young Socialists' Magazine, 1908-1920,'" and Kenneth Teitelbaum and William J. Reese, "American Socialist Pedagogy and Experimentation in the Progressive Era: The Socialist Sunday School," fill out a complementary examination of Left-oriented educational programs.

Assembled together for the purposes of this article, these resources give a varied yet comprehensive analysis of the availability, breadth, and pedagogical foundations of working class literacy and educational programs. In the primary sources, we find firsthand, intimate accounts of the cultural and ideological foundations of anarcho-syndicalist literacy and educational programs. The secondary sources provide a contextual interpretation of the struggle to form a new paradigm for working class literacy and educational opportunities in a broader sense. It is through this integrated analysis of primary and secondary sources that this article will elucidate the truly unique aspects of the founding of proletarian literacy and educational programs across two continents, but among a single social and economic class.

The Escuela Moderna: A Short Primer

The *Escuela Moderna* (Modern School) was a unique educational endeavor that challenged and defied power relationships in turn of the century Spanish society. Founded by Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, the school concentrated on delivering an anti-religious and anti-statist education to children while offering less-formalized educational opportunities to the greater public. While Ferrer came from a middle class background, the school sought to produce educational opportunities devoid of class distinctions and open to people from all social strata. The school taught

a rigorous Enlightenment-style curriculum that had a dual purpose, according to Teitelbaum:

The Modern Schools of Spain were intended to serve a dual purpose: as instruments of self-development, and as levers for social transformation. On the one hand they [Modern Schools] were expected to encourage self-expression, individual freedom, and practical knowledge; on the other hand children were expected to embrace certain social values. Ferrer emphasized brotherhood, cooperation, and sympathy for the downtrodden and oppressed, along with anti-militarism, anti-capitalism, and anti-statism.⁹

Key words for literacy and educational outlook at the Escuela Moderna were: freedom, spontaneity, creativity, individuality, and self-realization. As an institution, it was grounded in “empiricism, rationalism, natural sciences, physical study...it was away from and a response to the rigid control of the Catholic Church and its superstitions.”¹⁰ Here-in lies the fundamental difference between the Escuela Moderna and other schools in Spain; the Escuela Moderna was not controlled by the church, but also it was not under purview of the state. Just as church-sponsored education could be



Escuela Moderna in Spain

rigid and inflexible, Ferrer noted that the potential bureaucracy of the state, dominated by bourgeois administrators, could also prevent the discovery of proletarian ideals through denial of educational opportunity and class-oriented pedagogy. Ferrer outlined the role of the school in subverting the power structure by making natural science an egalitarian endeavor:

Its [the Escuela Moderna's] aim is to convey, without concession to traditional methods, an education based on the natural sciences. This new method, though the only sound and positive method, has spread throughout the civilized world, and has innumerable supporters of intellectual distinction and lofty principles. We are aware how many enemies there are about us. We are conscious of the innumerable prejudices which oppress the social conscience of our country. This is the outcome of a medieval, subjective, dogmatic education, which makes ridiculous pretensions to the possession of an infallible criterion.¹¹

While educational opportunity was ensured to the masses at the Escuela Moderna, it was a school of all classes, or at least open to all classes. The school did not, however, teach outright “revolution” to its children, but preferred to instill a foundation for future rebellion. Ferrer wrote:

I venture to say quite plainly: the oppressed and the exploited have a right to rebel, because they have to reclaim their rights until they enjoy their full share in the common patrimony. The Modern School, however, has to deal with children, whom it prepares by instruction for the state of manhood, and it must not anticipate the cravings and hatreds, the adhesions and rebellions, which may be fitting sentiments in the adult. In other words, it must not seek to gather fruit until it has been produced by cultivation, nor must it attempt to implant a sense of responsibility until it has equipped the conscience with the fundamental conditions of such responsibility. Let it teach the children to be men; when they are men, they may declare themselves rebels against injustice.¹²

The vehicle for increasing class literacy in the masses, including adult workers, at the Escuela Moderna was the Sunday lecture. The design of these lectures was to enlighten on a wide array of topics, but the crucial role of the lecture was to break the bonds of class in the ability to better oneself:

We arranged a series of public lectures on Sundays, and they were attended by the pupils and other members of their families, and a large number of workers who were anxious to learn...On other occasions, when we had no lecturer, we substituted useful readings. The general public attended assiduously, and our advertisements in the liberal press of the district were eagerly scanned.

In view of these results, and in order to encourage the disposition of the general public, I held a consultation with Dr. Andres Martinez Vargas and Dr. Odon de Buen, Professors at the Barcelona University on the subject of creating a popular university in the Modern School. In this the science which is given--or, rather, sold--by the State to a privileged few in the universities should be given gratuitously to the general public, by way of restitution, as every human being has a right to know, and science, which is produced by observers and workers of all ages and countries, ought not to be restricted to a class.¹³

Ferrer's educational ideas were revolutionary, and as a result of his commitment to this egalitarian form of education, he died as a martyr to the cause in 1909, executed by the Spanish government. By 1911, however, the Escuela Moderna concept had made its way to the United States. The most prolific of these schools was the one that began in New York City but was



Work Peoples College class ca. 1910

then forced to the outlying areas of that metropolis, settling in Stelton, New Jersey. Notable faculty at this school were Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, the man who had tried to assassinate Henry Clay Frick after the Homestead Steel Strike in 1892. Curriculum for children included scientific study, humanities, class-conscious education, as well as training in etiquette and manners. One girl who attended the school remarked, "There is nothing in the libertarian idea that is antagonistic to genuinely good manners."¹⁴

The *Työväen Opisto*: A Radical School to Create a Literate Proletariat

While from current research it is unclear if the *Työväen Opisto* (Work Peoples' College-WPC) took any cues directly from the *Escuela Moderna* in organizing its educational program, it is clear that the two educational institutions were on a similar mission differing only somewhat in ideological and student backgrounds. While the *Escuela Moderna* was a solely anarchist, scholarly based institution teaching to mainly a youth population, the WPC was decidedly a young adult or older-oriented institution aimed at educating labor agitators and organizers for work in the field. At the WPC, professors were generally older and battle-hardened Finnish immigrants associated with the labor movement, such as Leo Laukki, Yrjö Sirola, and Fred Jaakkola, but the institution itself was home to young proletarians looking to shape the world, starting with the Lake Superior basin region, into a more equitable place. For many twenty-somethings, the WPC was likely a great place to be young, passionate, and radical.

The WPC's birth in a cauldron of political tempestuousness did not end with the adept manipulation of stock takeover from religious elements to form the radical school. The school purposefully chartered a path of heavy resistance, and this was reflected in the college's curriculum. Early in the college's existence, various forms of socialism and industrial unionism dominated the curriculum. As Ollila, Jr. wrote:

While basic education was a primary aim, nevertheless a good many students absorbed socialism in a greater or lesser degree. For many, it was perhaps a very superficial mastery of the theoretical ideas of Marx, Engels, and Kautsky. No doubt the most important learning which took place could be described as "experiential" in the sense of emotional commitment, comradeship, and a faith that "the world would soon be ours."¹⁵

The college took a further radical swing to the left when the faculty and students began to advocate the philosophy of anarchist philosophers and implement propaganda of the deed curriculum. The turn toward

anarcho-syndicalism and industrial unionism did not go unnoticed by the Finnish immigrant socialist community:

Alarm was expressed when Haywood and Bohn's text, *Industrial Socialism*, was made a standard textbook for classes, and when students had concluded at a 'tactics' session that the MacNamara dynamiting episode had been of benefit to the socialist movement because it showed the poverty of craft unionism.¹⁶

This radical curriculum found a willing audience as enrollment numbers consistently hovered above 100 students during the 1910s, reaching a high of 157 students during the 1913-14 school year. This high-water mark in the early 1910s was the upward swing, as the fractioning of the Finnish Socialist Federation after the 1913-14 Copper Strike in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the repressive social measures of the World War I and Palmer Red Scare eras occasioned a decline in the college's enrollment. The WPC survived the repressive era after World War I, but did so with a pronounced institutional limp. Affiliation with the IWW brought recognition, but this recognition never really translated into increased student numbers, or for that matter increased enrollment of non-Finnish background students.¹⁷

A delve into the primary sources regarding the proletarian literacy programs of the WPC, and for that matter the IWW, illustrates multi-modal attempts to create a literate Finnish immigrant and Finnish American working class that was familiar with both the theoretical basis for industrial

KASVATTAJÄRJESTÄÄ VAPAUTTAA

Industrialisti

TYÖVÄENLUOKAN VOIMA ON TUOTANNOSSA

KESKIVIHKONA, TAMMIK. 14 P. — WEDNESDAY JAN. 14, 1913

<p>LLA</p> <p>miehet ko-</p> <p>TYÖVIHKKOA ON LYHENNENNYT 6 T. SAKSASSA</p> <p>SEKOSTANUT TYÖNANTAJIEN KIN OLEVAN PARKOSAKSADOKSEN ALAISIA.</p> <p>Berlini, tammiik. 14 p. — Saksan rautatieyhtiöiden ja rautateiden omistajain edustajain välisessä neuvottelussa tehdyn sopimuksen kautta lyhenti rautateillä työskentelevien työntekijöiden työpäivää kahdeksan tuntia.</p>	<p>TYÖTTÖMYYSILANNE ON VAKAVA YHDYSVALLOISSA</p> <p>Työntömiön lukumäärän Toden Olevan Pajon Suuremman</p> <p>HALLITUKSEN VIRKAILLAKIN MYÖNTÄVÄT TIHANTEEN OLEVAN VAKAVAN.</p> <p>Washington, D. C., tammiik. 14 p. — Liittohallinnon senaattori LaFollette, Wisconsinista, puheessaan Yhdysvaltain sena-</p>	<p>MAANJÄRISTYS TEHNYT TUHOJA ARGENTINASSA</p> <p>USEITA PELÄTÄN SURMAUTUNEEN 7 TELIVUORTA TÖMÄNNÄSSÄ.</p> <p>San Antonio de los Cobres, Argentiina, tammiik. 14 p. — Maanjärityksen ja tulivuorten purkauksen osakseen aurmaanneen pallon ihmistä luu-ossassa Argentiinassa olevalla La Ponan alueella. Cobresissa luu-molettain kahden heikoin aur-</p>	<p>TEHTAILIJAT SULULLA</p> <p>Työläisten Mielel Katke-rottuneina Uhaak- sen Johdosta</p> <p>LAKKOTAISTEIT VAKUTAVAT JO OSAKKEIDEN HINTOIHIN LONTOOSSA</p> <p>Lontoo, tammiik. 14 p. — Ti- hanteen lakkoajien alueille on noussut sellainen että jolle hallitus sekunnu sen selvittä-</p>
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A headline from The Industrialist

unionism and the proletarian cultural apparatus to successfully translate that philosophy to sometimes illiterate or semi-literate immigrants and the children of immigrant industrial workers. The WPC was rich with what we might today term material culture. The school and its supporting media outlet, the Workers' Socialist Publishing Company (WSPC), cranked out a broad array of publications that brought the printed message of industrial unionism not only to the student body and faculty of the WPC, but also to the larger Finnish immigrant proletarian community. This adept usage of print media was something that the WPC and the Modern School shared: a knowledge and implementation of media to educate faculty, students, and remote audiences.

The WPC housed its own publishing company on the college's campus in Smithville. This faculty and student-run press printed numerous relevant titles but also a periodical appropriately titled *Ahjo* (The Forge), which discussed current issues in industrial unionism and official IWW business, while at the same time being a forum for student generated essays, prose, and poetry. The importance of this periodical cannot be understated as a vehicle for increasing literacy efforts at the WPC. What better way to encourage ascending levels of literacy in both reading and writing than to have a place for students to submit and read the fruits of their proletarian education.

The WSPC, also located in Duluth, in turn published companion print media that promoted the WPC, but also the industrial union movement and the IWW in general. The WSPC was a fully-fledged publishing company complete with a newspaper that had undergone several name changes that reflected its strengthened ties with the IWW. When the newspaper split from the Finnish Socialist Federation's *Työmies* (The Working Man) in 1915, the newspaper chose the name *Sosialisti* (The Socialist), which indicated its as yet unclear intentions to officially affiliate with the IWW. Little more than a year later, the publishing company changed the name of the newspaper to *Teollisuustyöläinen* (The Industrial Worker), indicating a commitment to industrial unionism in general. By 1917, the paper underwent its last name change, a name that stood until the mid-1970s when the paper folded due to declining readership. This new title, *Industrialisti* (The Industrialist), indicated full support and affiliation with the IWW, which had great implications for the industrial union movement in the Finnish immigrant population and within the walls of the WPC.¹⁸ Additionally, the WSPC also printed its own periodical, *Tie Vapauteen* (The Road to Freedom), which was a monthly look at IWW issues and industrial unionism.

On hand from past association with the Finnish Socialist Federation were previous tracts on anarcho-syndicalist philosophy such as the work of significant anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin. While still unified, the Finnish Socialist Federation published a Finnish-language translation

of Krapotkin's *Taistelu Leivästä* (The Conquest of Bread) before 1914. This translation was one important step in creating the proletarian philosophical literacy so strongly needed to educate and engage class-conscious Finnish immigrant workers.

While the IWW did not recognize the Finnish immigrant and Finnish American population as a separate ethnic organization within its ranks, the IWW certainly did print agitation and organization materials in the Finnish language. One such offering was the *Teollisuus-Unionismin Opas* (The Industrial Unionism Guidebook) published by the IWW for the Metal Mine Workers Industrial Union 490 in Virginia, Minnesota. This publication carried the official IWW logo and suggested, "For further information, if desired, write the IWW secretary WM D. Haywood 307 164 W. Washington St., Chicago, ILL."¹⁹

Another title from the WSPC gives an intimate look at just what the industrial union movement and the education and literacy of stated movement entails. *Nuoriso, Oppi ja Työ* (*Youth, Learning and Labor*), is a truly unique publication because it was bilingual. The first part of the book was printed in Finnish and the latter half of the book in English. The English section of the book contains a very exclusive glimpse of what was important to the cultural, historical, and philosophical literacy of Finnish immigrant and Finnish American industrial unionists. The first part of the second half of the book contains an English language account of human history from the evolution of life and "man," a short history of black slavery, an introduction to white, chattel slavery, a discussion of feudalism and capitalism, the fight for public schools, and a condensed history of the American labor movement.

This short, whirlwind history of humanity then leads to a detailed discussion of the IWW and the merits of industrial unionism, the differences between syndicalism and industrial unionism, and the misrepresentations of direct-action, economic organization. In a clearly instructional manner, the book elucidates in plain language the definition of syndicalism:

The term 'syndicalism' originated in France a long time ago. It is nothing but radical and revolutionary trade



*Workers Socialist Publishing Company
songbook cover*

unionism with socialist and anarchist ideals. It might be called a stepping block from the decaying trade unionism to the new industrial unionism.²⁰

This distinction between anarcho-syndicalism and industrial unionism is an important one and one that could be easily misunderstood by rank-and-filers. It is opaque philosophical material, but the book takes the time to address the differences and make readers literate in the terminology and dialogue of IWW issues:

Modern industrial unionism is not syndicalism, as it is no “syndicate” or federation of old craft unions. Its construction and scope of action are entirely different from those of the craft unions and different from all political and non-political parties...No old form of labor union can be made to fit the entirely new conditions in production; and no mere change of ideals, no matter how radical, can possibly make them conform to the new conditions. The entire structure and scope of action of the labor organizations must change...It [the IWW] is by no means perfect, but it has a right good outline and a firm basis upon which to stand and develop.²¹

Towards this end, the book reprinted a manifesto adopted by the future IWW at a founding conference in Chicago in 1905, and published the IWW’s preamble:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among the millions of working people and the few who make up the employing class have all the good things in life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.²²

The IWW’s preamble is a straightforward assertion of intentions, but the union took its proletarian literacy a step further when they produced a straightforward and accessible dialogue to explain the ideological and philosophical foundations of the preamble and industrial unionism. In a booklet titled, *What is the I. W. W. Preamble?*, two characters, identified as “Bob Hammond, a laborer, hardworked, but anxious to know,” and “Henry Tichenor, a technical engineer, his boyhood friend, eager to tell,” talk about all things IWW, including the importance of the preamble. While the

dialogue is somewhat formulaic and campy by contemporary standards, the rather plain, folksy tone and friendly manner communicated by the characters is likely an attempt to mediate the rough image and violent portrayal of the IWW in reactionary media of the era. In one section titled, “Wages Vs. Profits,” the dialogue reads:

Tichenor (amazed):...What are all these conflicts, if not manifestations of the antagonistic interests of capitalists and laborers? What do they prove, if not the truth of the statement that, “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common”?

Hammond (puzzled): Well, I guess you are right. There is no getting ‘round those facts. They show a wide, impassable gulf. But, how comes it that, despite all that, employers inaugurate welfare departments and workers’ republics, and give the workers the privilege to buy shares? Surely, they are looking after the workers and giving them something in common.

Tichenor (uproariously): Say, those are all methods to keep the workers docile, underpaid and unorganized. Welfare departments are cheaper than union wages and union control. They are also paternalistic...²³

These English language sources and the aforementioned combined language Finnish/English book, *Nuoriso, Oppi ja Työ (Youth, Learning and Labor)*, are important reminders that while the Finnish language was spoken often or perhaps even most of the time at the WPC, the learning of English was an important aspect of joining the greater American working class struggle. The WPC had classes in the English language and understood that if Finnish immigrants and the sons and daughters of Finnish immigrants were to join the American labor movement, it would be through the use of English. Along with the endorsement of the English language, an appreciation of the IWW’s unique culture followed. As students at the WPC became mindful of the vagaries of English, they also likely picked-up the humor, sarcasm, satire, and brazen smart-assed, often irreverent, culture of the IWW. This sense of irreverence came through in IWW publications, but perhaps even more so in song. As the singing union, the IWW, roasted its class foes with lyrical precision.

The IWW’s commitment to struggle was likely music to the ears of many young, disaffected, and disenfranchised children of Finnish immigrant laborers. Not only was it likely music to their ears, but the IWW had music for their actions as well. The oft-memorialized “Little Red Songbook”

was an ever-present feature of proletarian cultural activities and was an essential component to the process of crafting literacy in the working class, because even if a worker could not read, the songs of the IWW gave them an opportunity, at the very least, to understand the basics of industrial unionism. Added to this was the fact that many IWW songs had familiar melodies, often old religious tunes, with lyrics crafted especially to fit the industrial wage worker's milieu. An especially popular song was "Dump the Bosses off Your Back," written by John Brill and sung to the tune of "Take it to the Lord in Prayer":

*Are you poor, forlorn and hungry?
Are there lots of things you lack?
Is your life made up of misery?
Then dump the bosses off your back.
Are your clothes all patched and tattered?
Are you living in a shack?
Would you have your troubles scattered?
Then dump the bosses off your back.
Are you almost split asunder?
Loaded like a long-eared jack?
Boob—why don't you buck like thunder?
And dump the bosses off your back.
All the agonies you suffer,
You could end with one good whack—
Stiffen up you orn'ry duffer—
And dump the bosses off your back.*²⁴



Political cartoon from *Tie Vaputeen*

Songs were the ultimate organizational tool for the oft-harassed IWW and WPC, because songs, once learned, were untouchable by those who wished to suppress the message of proletarian literacy. Statist mechanisms of control could burn books, they could imprison teachers or agitators or organizers, but they could not take away the song, and in this lyrical literacy there existed an impenetrable means for the communication of discontent and revolution.

Along with popular IWW songs, the union used images and cartoons to educate. These images were designed to reach those

members of the proletariat who could not read and those that could not spend long hours reading philosophical tracts or IWW preamble dialogues. These two features, the IWW song and cartoon, are perhaps the most ingenious iteration of the crafting of proletarian literacy, because they use previously known songs, unique proletarian imagery, and common themes to educate workers about their own plight and the plight of the organization that was attempting to help them organize for the struggle to create a more just world. The production of the varied forms of media gave the Finnish immigrant and Finnish American proletarians multiple opportunities to improve upon their own literacy, not only in the basic fundamentals of reading, whether in the Finnish language or in the English language, but also in the basic fundamentals of being a “working class” American.

Conclusion

So, this contextualization of the historic efforts at proletarian literacy programs and their material culture is perhaps interesting, but what does it offer to current attempts at literacy in contemporary times? In other words, what does this historical study have to offer literacy programs of today? Limiting literacy efforts to reading and writing is not useful to those who often need literacy programs the most, the working class poor. Class-based explanations of literacy must account for an understanding of the social institutions that fostered the economic disparity that affects the people society has defined as illiterate. If people striving to become literate do not first understand the socio-economic and even cultural mechanisms for their illiteracy, any education or program to foster literacy will have no deeper meaning and thus little effectiveness.

In a final thought, as the direct action teachers at the WPC may have advocated over one-hundred years ago, theory is fine, but action is better. Grass-roots efforts to formulate and implement proletarian literacy efforts are meaningless unless they take root and are enacted by those in the contemporary proletarian populace. This struggle for a working class sense of ownership in educational efforts is especially prescient today, as revolving doors of political bureaucracy do little to address fundamental problems with education and literacy efforts. An expanded definition of proletarian literacy can thus act as a means to liberate literacy from its statist bonds, offering the chance and the means to a better life, a better world, to those who are often overlooked by political machinery.

Endnotes

1. David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004, 2-3.

2. Victoria Purcell-Gates, "Complicating the Complex" in *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice and Power*, New York: Routledge, 2007, 3.

3. Industrial Workers of the World, *What is the I. W. W. Preamble? A Dialogue*, 4th printing, Chicago: Department of Education, Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, 1923, 33.

4. Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*, Oakland, Cal. : AK Press, 2006, 24.

5. Richard J. Altenbaugh, "Workers' Education as Counter Hegemony: The Educational Process at Work People's College, 1907-1941," accessed at <http://www-distance.syr.edu/altenbaugh.html>, n.d.

6. Richard J. Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, 99.

7. Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "The Work People's College: Immigrant Education for Adjustment and Solidarity" in *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America*, edited by Michael Karni. Superior, Wisc. : Tyomies Society, 1977, 105-106.

8. Ibid., 103.

9. Teitelbaum, Kenneth. *Schooling for "Good Rebels": Socialist Education for Children in the Untied States, 1900-1920*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

10. Avrich, *The Modern School Movement...*, 7.

11. Francisco Ferrer, *The Origins and Ideals of the Modern School*, translated by Joseph McCabe, London: Watts & Co., 1913.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid. It should be understood here that the use of the word "libertarian" at that time and in Europe is distinct from current usage in the United States. "Libertarian" in Europe often refers to forms of libertarian socialism or anarcho-communism.

14. Avrich, *The Modern School Movement...* and Wikipedia, "Modern School (United States)," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_School_\(United_States\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_School_(United_States)), accessed 09-22-2009. The quote is from Avrich, *The Modern School Movement...*, 111.

15. Ollila, Jr., "Work Peoples' College," 106.

16. Ibid., 107.

17. Ibid., 110-113.

18. Gary Kaunonen, *Challenge Accepted: A Finnish Immigrant Response to Industrial America in Michigan's Copper Country*, Lansing, Mich. : Michigan State University Press, 2010, 189.

19. Industrial Workers of the World, *Teollisuus-Unionismin Opas*, 3rd printing, Virginia, Minn. : Quick Print, n.d., back cover.

20. Wm. Rein, *Nuoriso, Oppi ja Työ (Youth, Learning and Labor)*, Duluth, Minn. : The Workers' Socialist Publishing Company, 1929, 118.
21. *Ibid.*, 119.
22. *Ibid.*, 123.
23. Industrial Workers of the World, *What is the I. W. W. Preamble? A Dialogue*, 4th printing, Chicago: Department of Education, Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, 1923, 11-12.
24. Industrial Workers of the World, *IWW Songs: To Fan the Flames of Discontent, Joe Hill Memorial Edition*, Cleveland: I. W. W. Publishing Bureau, n.d., 38.

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