

# **Education: For Slavery or Liberation?**

**A Socialist Perspective**

**Jo Williams**

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# Education: For Slavery or Liberation?

## A Socialist Perspective

*By Jo Williams*

All of us have experienced some form of institutionalised education at some period in our lives. Whether at a primary, secondary, or post-secondary level, it is most likely that the experience was largely negative, one of isolation and alienation. From an early age school teaches us all sorts of lies and myths. Students are forced to accept that education is either of purely “academic” interest or simply a necessity for one’s later work and career, rather than being encouraged to view it as a process of understanding the social reality in which we live, in order to change it for the better.

As socialists, we know that the new society we are fighting for requires the conscious and active involvement of the majority of people. From this standpoint, it is crucial to understand the role that education plays under capitalism and what an alternative revolutionary and liberating education might involve.

### **Education & class society**

Throughout the history of class society, education for working people has been fundamentally determined by the economic needs of the ruling class.

Prior to the development of class society — i.e., in “primitive communist” or “hunter-gatherer” societies — institutionalised education did not exist, primarily because there were no class interests to be maintained. Young people learned through everyday practice, by watching adults and participating in the various tasks of the community. They assimilated the traditions, norms and skills required to participate in the primitive production methods which ensured survival.

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With the development of class society, the ruling minority monopolised knowledge. The exploited classes had no access to education as the ruling class had no need to develop their intellectual capabilities. All they required of the masses was a physical capacity for hard labour, as illustrated by the example of the slave-based societies of ancient Greece and Rome.

In feudal times, the domination of the ruling lords and princes over the exploited peasant serfs and urban masses was ensured not only by their monopoly of armed force but also by the increasingly powerful ideological influence of the church. Religion played a centrally important role in cementing the feudal social order and ensuring that the subordinate social groups understood their proper place in the scheme of things.

The bourgeois revolutions which brought capitalism to political power gave education a new content. In asserting their authority, the emerging capitalist class had to break the absolute dominance that the church and its mysticism had held for so long. This was necessary to assist the great developments in the sciences and technology in particular, as the new capitalist order required an increasingly educated and skilled working class. This, along with the increasing popularisation of bourgeois democracy and its catch cry of opportunities for everyone, saw institutional education being opened up to much greater numbers of people, slowly replacing the church — and, in part, the family — as the ruling class's key ideological vehicle.

However, as education theorist Everett Reimer points out:

In capitalist countries schools confirm rather than replace the value-distribution functions of these older institutions. Family, religion and property have such an important influence on access to and success in school that schooling alters only slowly and marginally the value distributions of an earlier day.<sup>1</sup>

In the current context of global capitalist crisis, the ruling class has responded with austerity measures further restricting the access of most working class people to basic social services. In the area of education, we have seen massive funding cuts across the board, the introduction of further user-pays schemes and the increased corporatisation of educational institutions. This does not mean however, that the capitalist class is planning to exclude the working class completely and return to the days of elite education. It simply means that it now aims to shift the cost of education entirely onto the shoulders of students and their working class families.

It is also clear that the role and nature of education is changing to fit the changing needs of big capital, all the while maintaining and reinforcing the status quo. This is difficult, of course, with the ruling class needing to find a balance between educating workers to be “clever” enough to increase capitalist profits but not “clever” or critical

enough to work out the dead-end nature of capitalism and become active in fighting for social change.

## **Maintaining the privileges of the wealthy**

Educational institutions play a key role in maintaining the privileges of the ruling class. To what degree students can survive this system, determines the degree of privilege they will enjoy in later life. School sorts people into the positions they will occupy as adults and creates an environment in which young children enter the ranking game at a very young age.

In the form of a handicap race, school holds the same finish line for all students, but its class bias ensures that the distance to run is much, much farther for some. Factors heavily influencing a student's success include: access to books and other resources in the home; the level of education and knowledge of the parents; how much leisure time parents have to assist and motivate their child in learning and so on; through to the more overt and structural divisions and hierarchies of educational institutions.

A direct and obvious division is that of public versus private education. Propped up by the ruling class — and, of course, increasingly directly by the state through generous funding — these elite, private institutions have better resources, restricted access and higher status than public schools, which suffer as funds decrease, with the development of the education for profit, competitive playing field.

Universities, with their theoretical and specialised courses are expected to be filled by students from the ruling class with only those from the better off and better-educated layers of the working class managing to make it. The TAFE system has for a long time been maintained as a low-fee-paying option, aimed primarily at the poorer sections of the working class, providing essentially vocational and practical courses.

There also exist hierarchies among the universities themselves, with the old and prestigious “sandstone” institutions poaching students in the profit-making education business. Melbourne University, for example, offers students from other universities who can afford it, the up-front fee option of completing the final year of their lowly degree at Melbourne, thereby translating it into a far more valuable certificate.

In Victoria until fairly recently, the secondary school system itself was segregated into technical and high schools, making the division even more transparent. This system was another means of ranking students, and opening or closing opportunities for various further study and career moves for individuals at an early stage. Any student attending a “tech” college wouldn't or shouldn't even consider a “thinking”

career and so on.

Also in Victoria, there now exists an initiative referred to as “Self-Governing Schools”, formerly known as “Schools of the Future”. With massive state spending cuts to public education, this places increasing power in the hands of school councils, with a greater focus on the role of the community, parents and business for economic support, as opposed to the government. These school councils assume the role of corporate boards, overseeing everything from staffing to advertising, from sponsorship to grounds maintenance.

What this means in practice is that schools with parent communities which do not have the skills, finances or time and inclination to become involved in running and promoting the school are left struggling under the increased administrative burden. Moreover, schools which achieve successful academic results and high tertiary attendance levels advertise for students on that basis, gain greater profile and in turn are able to secure corporate sponsorship deals. Schools in low socio-economic areas, which have been struggling in the face of teacher shortages, low retention rates and poor or run down facilities, find it very difficult to sell themselves against such success stories. As a result, their numbers drop, they receive dwindling funds and very often they close down or are amalgamated with other schools.

Of course small numbers of people from such backgrounds have beaten the system and gone on to become professionals or even joined the ranks of the ruling class. However the vast majority of labourers’ daughters will never be doctors, and the vast majority of lawyers’ sons will certainly not feel the need to earn a wage at 16. Those who do simply feed the myth.

## Ideological role of education

As Karl Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”<sup>2</sup>

Bourgeois ideology lies at the very heart of how the ruling class maintains its rule. Permanent mass repression is not a realistic option. Capitalism must sow illusions amongst big sections of the working class that the system works, otherwise they would question the control of the ruling minority and fight to wrest control out of its hands.

The role of education is indispensable in this aspect of capitalist rule. The Nicaraguan revolutionary and Sandinista leader, Thomas Borge, formulates it thus:

Education is the process through which society reproduces the ideas, moral and ethical principles, and behavioural habits of the successive generations. All social organisation is a function of the class interests that hold state power. Education is a process of

forming individuals in ideology, in a complex system of values and ideas that justifies the interests of the class which wields state power.<sup>3</sup>

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, puts it this way:

Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression.<sup>4</sup>

He notes that it is not in changing the situation which oppresses people that the oppressors' interests lie, but in changing the consciousness of the oppressed themselves so that they can be more easily dominated. He states:

The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better “fit” **for** the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquillity rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.<sup>5</sup>

Freire suggests that education under class society is suffering from “narration sickness”. He offers the formulation he refers to as the “banking concept of education”, which sees students as empty containers — to be “filled” by the teacher, as in a deposit transaction at a bank. A process which, he says, by “projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.”<sup>6</sup> The contents of this “banking education” are lifeless and petrified, detached from reality. The aim, of course, is to create adaptable human beings who accept the passive role imposed on them and to prevent them from developing a critical consciousness which would see them view their role as transformers of the world.

This theory is practically evident in schools and universities today, and is demonstrated by students who merely regurgitate the ideas with which they have been filled. Students are bound to absorb the message continuously pumped into them, that teachers and lecturers are infallible gods with no prejudices of their own. They also clearly recognise that teachers expect them to present a particular response, rather than express their own feelings, aspirations and ideas — and certainly rather than challenging what they are being “taught” by offering an alternative. These outcomes are ensured through the formulaic and uncreative teaching methodologies used, as well as the dehumanising and repressive treatment of individual students. Students are forced to deal with various rules and regulations, appearance norms and the enforcement of uniforms, segregation in varying forms and, until recently, corporal punishment.

It should be clear that it is not just the overtly “political” subjects at school and university which transmit bourgeois ideology. All students involved in the capitalist “education system”, including those in supposedly “non-ideological” courses, can be

sure they are receiving a hearty dose of the capitalist world view — its values, concepts, ideology and prejudices.

Everett Reimer bluntly sums up capitalist education by suggesting that “The main thing children learn in school is how to lie.”<sup>7</sup> The extension of his theory is that students learn very quickly that they are waging a battle against the system and, more importantly, what is required to give them the best chance of winning that battle.

The education system is not only important for disseminating and reinforcing bourgeois ideology but, in the case of universities and other higher education institutions, for producing new forms of bourgeois ideology — or, rather, reproducing old and familiar bourgeois ideological forms adapted to the current political period.

The bulk of academics’ time is concerned with research. So much of this, especially in the social sciences and arts areas, boils down to churning out “new and improved” forms of bourgeois ideology. Upon inspection, for instance, we find that postmodernism — the big fad of recent years — bears a marked resemblance to the existentialism pushed our way in the 1960s. Much research has as its aim the affirmation of the capitalist system and as such employs increasingly unscientific and factless methodologies and analyses.

The metaphysical approach, which permeates “theory” under capitalism, is one which views objects and events in isolation, and is therefore unable to understand or reflect on important historical and social trends. Such an approach will certainly not conclude with a class analysis. Such a “theory” is employed because a factual and scientific approach would conclude that the current system is incapable of dealing with the growing social crisis, a result that the ruling elite has no interest in at all.

## **Racism, sexism & homophobia in school curricula**

The content of curricula in schools and universities all reflect the ideological pillars of the capitalist system. Sexism, racism, and homophobia — important tools in the justification of oppression — are all left unchallenged in schools and indeed are reinforced.

The family unit is presented as unchanging and eternal, and studies in history and the social sciences, in particular, consistently down play and distort the role of women in society throughout history. Women are depicted as innately passive and submissive, with few or even no women recognised for the important achievements and gains they have made. Certainly, very few women are presented as role models for young people in schools.

A true and accurate history of Australia which recognises the brutal genocide of our indigenous population is still far from being taught in schools, nor is the crucial



question of how indigenous Australians continue to suffer an existence recognised internationally as being that of Third World standard. Just imagine for a moment that everyone had learned through their schooling the real facts behind the invasion of this country and the continued racism and oppression of Aboriginal Australians, instead of the glorified and false representation of the great James Cook and all the rest of it. Imagine how difficult that would have made it for the Howard government to get away with its racist Wik land scam legislation.

Sex education in schools remains extremely limited and unsatisfactory, and is either totally heterosexist, non-factual, moralistic and designed to scare young people off “evil sex” for life or non-existent. As a result, sexuality-related issues are the single greatest cause of the disgraceful number of youth suicides which have occurred in this country over recent years.

The “education system” is crucial in transmitting these capitalist ideologies which justify oppression and exploitation.

## Teachers & academics

And what of those who are transmitting this ideology? How does the ruling class guarantee the support of teachers and academics?

Academia’s loyalty to capitalism is maintained basically through a dual process of cooption combined with the crushing, censorship and marginalisation of dissent. Academics are essentially bought off with a privileged lifestyle, through being offered high-paying research positions. As their privileged lifestyles depend on this research, even those individuals who initially disagree with the bourgeois theories they are expected to reproduce are eventually likely to succumb. Of course, the degree to which this occurs and the speed with which occurs will depend on the state of the broader political situation, i.e., on the strength of the social movements and the overall struggle against capitalism.

Acceptance of the academic lifestyle — one which is characterised by the separation of theory and action — greatly assisted many of the ’60s radicals who became academics in the 1970s to become some of the most enthusiastic defenders of the capitalist system.

Those who do retain their radical or even Marxist beliefs face immense pressure and isolation in the university environment. Academics engaged in the arts and social sciences, whose subject matter more directly impinges on current social and political realities, are more likely to be pressured to choose safe topics, threatened with defunding or with job loss through restructuring and so on. And those involved in the natural sciences are likely to face a situation in which their research is channelled into anti-

human means — to develop technology required to meet the needs of destructive, exploitative capitalist industry or the “military-industrial complex”.

In any field, research which challenges the status quo or which does not fit into the ideological or technological agenda of big business is likely to receive short shrift. The idea of academia being the domain of scholars who pursue the truth wherever it may lead is rubbish — it was never like that and it certainly isn't today.

In the school system, teachers must work within the constraints of a highly restricted and prescribed curriculum; with restricted texts and resources — especially in those areas which the ruling class perceives as having a “political” content. They are forced to comply with school disciplinary and administration procedures and are faced with repercussions if they don't or if they attempt to introduce more human or progressive situations into their classrooms. At the same time teachers are overworked and stressed and have less and less employment security. This is in the context of general attacks on the wages and conditions of working people but also the increasing power held by school principals and school councils to hire and fire staff. Teachers also experience sacking and discrimination for being active in teachers unions and campaigns to improve education.

## Education as alienation

An important aspect of the ideological indoctrination of the “education system” is the alienation of individuals. The factory-like nature of education creates a very alienating process in which the contradictions between bourgeois ideology and the social reality experienced by students can become sharply exposed.

The education system under capitalism seeks to smother individuality. It presents the world as a whole range of one-off, static events, to be merely perused, with no room for questioning and reflection. The individual feels alienated as nothing but a hapless spectator.

As Paulo Freire puts it, “to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.”<sup>8</sup>

Through the actual physical structures of a school environment and also by uniforms, disciplinary action, ridiculous and degrading rules and regulations, formulaic lesson structures, subject choice restrictions and so on, students are repressed and denied the most personal aspirations, choices and questions.

The bulk of what is learnt from “education” under capitalism is irrelevant and useless to us for the rest of our productive lives. This is because theory is separated from practice. It means that the gross dissatisfaction amongst so many workers might have been avoided if practical experience had been gained rather than years of abstract

theory. Take, for example, the student teacher who graduates only to find that he or she dislikes teaching intensely. They could have become aware of this after six months of working as a productive teachers' aide — as opposed to spending four arduous years and lots of money attending teachers college and learning nothing much at all about teaching.

The very concept of “school” in the context of the “school-work-retirement” divide under capitalism sees that young people potentially remain “children” until they're 25 — economically, legally and politically — to a lesser or greater extent. Studies have shown that, due to the emphasis on the child care and disciplinary aspects of schooling under capitalism, teachers spend less than 30% of their actual time “teaching”. In contrast, in peasant, urban poor and some tribal communities around the world, young people do not need to be “looked after” or “disciplined” in preparation for life, rather they are already playing a significant and productive role in society.

## **The example of revolutionary Cuba**

Undoubtedly the greatest example of an attempt to put socialist education theory into practice is that of Cuba.

Since the 1959 revolution, the Cuban people have made enormous and very significant gains in terms of education, despite the extremely difficult conditions they continue to face. Moreover, education in Cuba has played a key role in consolidating revolutionary consciousness — that is, understanding the process of and recognising the need for revolutionary social change — and ‘in determining the ability of the revolution to survive.

The Cuban revolution was the first to include and to view education as an integral aspect of the struggle, from as far back as the early clandestine stage in the 1950s. The first efforts in education conducted by the revolutionaries took place during the period of the revolutionary war.

Partly, this consciousness came as a result of the appalling educational levels in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Although the country's adult literacy rate was one of the highest in Latin America, it was only 25%. Education was available to only a small minority of Cubans, primarily the urban elite. It was clear to the Cuban revolutionaries that an extensive education campaign would determine the long term success of the revolution.

Right after the January 1959 victory, the new government began the task of tackling education in Cuba with a tremendously ambitious drive to achieve mass literacy. Although literacy campaigns have occurred and achieved some success in many countries around the world, the experience of Cuba remains unique both in its scale

and in its results.

Fidel Castro pledged to remove illiteracy in one year — and achieved it! Cuba now has a literacy rate of 98%! Such an effort involved the commitment of the vast majority of the Cuban people and could really only have been achieved in the midst of a great revolutionary upheaval.

Ever since the revolution, US imperialism has made ceaseless attempts to undermine the revolutionary government and the Cuban people's struggle for national independence and socialism.

In the period immediately after the seizure of power, the vast majority of professionals in Cuba, including teachers and doctors, were lured overseas by the prospect of secure and lucrative employment.

As a result, Cuba desperately needed to find huge numbers of teaching staff to address the enormous illiteracy issue. Hundreds of thousands of volunteer teachers signed up to participate in the literacy drive — including teachers as young as 12, who were teaching classes while attending school themselves!

These volunteers went out into the countryside to live with and teach peasant families. Each volunteer was issued with two text books, one pair of boots, two pairs of socks, an olive-green beret; two pairs of pants, two shirts, a shoulder patch, a warm blanket, a hammock, and a special badge! Off they went into the rugged rural areas of Cuba to teach peasants, young and old, to read and write.

The revolutionary government went to great lengths to gain support for the literacy campaign, using posters with slogans such as:

Young men and women

Join the crusade for Literacy!

A family of peasants who cannot read nor write awaits you

DON'T LET THEM DOWN!<sup>9</sup>

From the outset, the literacy campaign had very clear revolutionary aims. Sending enthusiastic young volunteer teachers from the urban centres to the rural areas was about much more than teaching the poor peasantry to read. It was also about bridging the enormous gap which existed in pre-revolutionary Cuba between urban and rural Cubans, bringing them all together, united by the aspirations of the revolution. As Mier Febles, one of Cuba's senior educators said:

The goal of the campaign was always greater than to teach poor people how to read. The dream was to enable those two portions of the population that had been most instrumental in the process of the revolution from the first, to find a common bond, a common spirit, and a common goal. The peasants discovered the word. The students discovered the poor. Together, they all discovered their own patria [nation].<sup>10</sup>

## Support amongst the Cuban people

Despite the huge numbers who volunteered to teach as part of the literacy campaign, the task of educating the vast majority of Cubans was enormous and proved out of reach of the volunteer teacher brigades. When it was realised that the campaign was failing to meet its targets, Fidel called upon 30,000 workers to take up the role of teaching reading to the masses — 21,000 responded.

Revolutionary organisations such as the Cuban Federation of Women coordinated their members who volunteered to be “people’s teachers”, teaching in their local neighbourhood. Such measures were possible as a result of the Cuban government giving local school boards the power to oversee all teachers in a particular area, allowing for greater supervision, organisation and therefore success.

Not even innumerable imperialist attacks interrupted the literacy campaign. The Bay of Pigs invasion and the murder of young teachers by CIA agents were just some of the attempts to undermine the commitment of the Cuban people to the literacy campaign and the revolution itself. Such counter-revolutionary acts actually served to strengthen the efforts of the people in achieving the literacy aims and further bring them together in defending the revolution.

At 12 noon on November 5, 1961, Fidel Castro declared Cuba to be fully literate!

However, the campaign for education did not stop there. The campaign was about much more than gaining basic literacy skills. Certain measures were taken to ensure that the educational level of all Cubans was raised significantly, thereby increasing their ability to participate in society more broadly. After the initial program Cubans were encouraged to enrol in “sequiemento” — meaning “follow up” — and then to take up the “battle for the 6th grade”. This resulted in the vast majority of Cubans being educated to at least primary school level. Today some 60% of adults are enrolled in some type of formal ongoing part-time study.

The literacy campaign is internationally recognised for some of its achievements. For example, at the very beginning of the campaign there were 10,000 unemployed teachers who remained in Cuba, so the Castro government immediately organised the resources to build 10,000 schools!

Many mansions of the upper bourgeoisie in Havana — left empty when their owners fled after the revolution — were used as community schools! Volunteers built new universities, special schools, technological schools, physical education schools, teachers colleges, teachers aides schools, childcare teachers schools, vocational schools and so on, to address the grossly inadequate resources inherited from the past.

Today in Cuba there is 100% enrolment at the primary school level, over 90% enrolment in secondary schools, and a student retention rate of over 90%. These

figures are extremely impressive not just by Latin American standards but even by the standards of most advanced capitalist countries.

The literacy campaign also made the government more aware of other problems facing the people — particularly in the area of health — and had a huge impact on the life of the country. For example, 177,000 pairs of spectacles were provided by the government free of charge to those most in need, after the literacy campaign drew their attention to this problem. And due to the big increase in childcare staff and resources the campaign created, it enabled all women to access childcare, not just a limited number of working mothers as was previously the case.

### **Objective difficulties facing Cuba**

As a country committed to building socialism, Cuba continues to face imperialist aggression, principally from Washington. Despite the significant educational success the Cubans have achieved, objective difficulties and barriers have created limitations.

During the whole of the “special period” — that is the increasing economic difficulty Cuba has faced as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union — not one school has closed down. However, resources remain scarce and classes occur under difficult conditions. There is generally insufficient contact time between teachers and students and a lack of concrete teaching aids. Teachers on the whole remain inadequately trained, particularly in the case of those primary school students who are teaching basic literacy to adults. These problems mean that the education Cubans are receiving is less than perfect in terms of creativity or insight or even actual cognition.

From the very beginning the Castro government sought to convince the Cuban people of the link between education and their own personal liberation. The commitment of the people to the literacy drive is indicative of their early success. This is highlighted by a letter written to Fidel Castro by an illiterate peasant who was taught to read and write during the literacy campaign:

Amigo Fidel, you have brought us liberty, you have given us land and work, you have raised us up and have assured us and our sons of a future. Now that I have learned, I am able to write to you and say; Long live Cuba and its socialist revolution. Nation or Death.<sup>11</sup>

The curriculum used in the literacy campaign was based very heavily on the writings of Che Guevara and the poetry of Jose Marti. Topics of study included the identification of oppression and the recognition of the conditions under which it is experienced, i.e., the capitalist system. Students were always encouraged to discuss and express their own feelings and experiences within the social dynamics of the revolution and to relate their study very much to their own social reality.

Cuba, while obviously experiencing enormous objective difficulty, provides us with some excellent lessons and an experience which has been useful in clarifying some of the basic tasks of socialist education.

## **A socialist 'education system'**

Any presentation of a Marxist theory of education will necessarily be largely based on theories and ideas. Socialist revolutions have been few and far between, have occurred in poverty-stricken Third World countries and — apart from Cuba — have been disfigured by the bureaucratic blight of Stalinism. These harsh realities have militated against a socialist theory of education being put into practice.

There are some general conclusions, however, that we can begin to draw about a socialist "education system".

Socialist education will guarantee freedom of access to all, removing all social barriers which are currently faced in accessing education. It will ensure that all cultural and knowledge monopolies and privileged forms of schooling are abolished and that all students are offered equal opportunities. Thus all education will be free, public and uniform. It will ensure that the necessary human and material resources required for everyone to learn are provided.

When addressing ANDEN, the National Association of Nicaraguan Educators, Nicaragua's main teacher's union, in 1983, Sandinista leader Thomas Borge said of the task of education:

A new philosophy, a new structure, a new strategy of education constitutes the most important task of this revolutionary process, a task that belongs to the entire society but whose fundamental responsibility lies with the teachers.<sup>12</sup>

Borge spoke of the absolute priority of education in the tasks of the revolution:

This battle is going to complete the liberation of Nicaragua. It will open the way for the formation of a society where man can unleash all his physical, spiritual, scientific, and artistic faculties, that is, a society that develops man's freedom to create, construct, and fabricate beauty and culture, to master science.

A society where a new morality will be born, a society of abundance of man's material and spiritual needs. A society that ends ignorance, a society that halts the degradation of man, a society that ends competition between individuals, a society that does not put aside social interests for individual interests, a society without robots and mental slaves.

A society where education is not an obligation but rather a vital necessity. We are going to create a new education so that men will be masters of machinery instead of machines mastering men, a new education to establish the reign of freedom, a paradise

on earth.<sup>13</sup>

A central aspect of the socialist theory of education is the liberation of the individual. The premise is that education must begin with the purpose of the individual gaining an understanding of their “individual reality” and therefore the recognition of their social role in transforming that society.

Paulo Freire has written a great deal on this aspect of education theory. He states: [The oppressed] will not gain liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it.<sup>14</sup>

And further:

Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it ... This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade ... To do this authentically (to be able to perceive the here and now of their situation critically and how they intervene in it) they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting and therefore challenging.<sup>15</sup>

In reaching “this goal, Freire presents, as an alternative to “banking education”, the “problem-posing” method of education. He writes:

The role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students ... Whereas banking-education anaesthetises and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality.<sup>16</sup>

And:

Problem posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world — no longer something to be described with deceptive words — becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanisation ... Problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor.<sup>17</sup>

It should be noted that Freire’s use of the word “subject” implies those who know and act, in contrast to “objects”, which are known and acted upon. Freire asserts that education — as the practice of freedom, in direct opposition to that which dominates individuals in every way — denies that human beings are abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world. Education as the practice of freedom also denies that the



world exists as a reality apart from people. As he puts it:

Authentic reflection, considers neither abstract man, nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.<sup>18</sup>

To clarify further, Freire explores the essential contradictions between banking education and problem-posing education:

Banking education (for obvious reasons) attempts, by mythicising reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologising. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the intentionality of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. In sum: banking theory and practice, as immobilising and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take the people's historicity as their starting point.<sup>19</sup>

One concrete necessity to arise from these assertions is that of reconciling the huge contradiction which exists between the student and the teacher in education under capitalism, or as Nicaraguan revolutionary Thomas Borge said, to develop "a country where the students learn to be teachers and the teachers learn to be students."<sup>20</sup>

From this starting point, that of education as the practice of freedom and liberation, the process of unfolding all the potentialities of the individual begins. A universe of needs then appears, activating the individual in all spheres of social life, including creation, the enjoyment of culture, interaction with others, and self-fulfilment.

This exciting task however, requires among other things, the central task of transforming the social division of labour from one which separates mental and physical labour.

Writing in 1924, Leon Trotsky explained:

... we learned long ago that the main curse of capitalist society consisted in the division between mental and physical labour. This division started before capitalism, with the first steps of the development of class society and culture; since that time, the task of management has become ever more bound up with mental labour and is operated through various categories of mental labour. In serving production, mental labour

becomes separated from material production. This process goes on throughout the whole development of culture. Capitalism puts mental and physical labour in the greatest contradiction, raising the division to an extraordinary degree of tension. Capitalism transforms physical labour into repellent, automatic labour, and raises mental labour, at the highest level of generalisation, into idealistic abstraction and mystical scholasticism.<sup>21</sup>

This contradiction is rooted in the capitalist mode of production and its removal can only occur in the context of a socialist mode of production. Thus the precondition for combining mental and physical labour, for combining creative capacity with social production, is the destruction of class rule.

In his discussion of the inhuman workings of the factory system in *Capital*, Marx makes some profound comments on education:

As Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future is present in the factory system; this education **will**, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings.<sup>22</sup>

The objective implied here is neither a better vocational training, nor the instilment of a work ethic. Rather, it is the closing of the historical gap between manual and mental work, between conception and execution, by assuring to all a full understanding of the productive process and, therefore, the creation of individuals as producers in the full and most creative sense.

Thomas Borge in his address to ANDEN said:

We should create a society where all students work and all workers study ... This obliges the revolution to forge in teachers the ideological point of view of the workers and farmers. Educational institutions play a most important role in the struggle to raise the level of consciousness of our people. On what, if not the new education, depends the attainment of the necessary link between theoretical and practical knowledge, on the one hand, and economic necessity and the general development of the country, on the other?<sup>23</sup>

Everett Reimer notes that learning occurs naturally at work and at play, but must be artificially stimulated when separated from practice. Schools, while separating learning from work and play, also parcel the world into subject matters and divide learners into teachers and students.

In practice so far, this important unity of education and work has been carried out in very different ways and under varying conditions. In Cuba, for example, due to harsh objective factors, much of the work that has been carried out since the revolution

we would seek to eliminate in a socialist society. Our recognition of the need to bridge the gap between manual and mental labour, does not lead to a glorification of the menial jobs that the working class has been forced to carry out throughout its existence. This type of work is increasingly able to be mechanically executed and technological developments towards this end would be a real priority for a socialist society.

Lenin wrote much about related tasks facing the Soviet Union. He realised that the key to increasing the demand for working class education, particularly amongst the most downtrodden sections of the proletariat and peasantry, was to link it very clearly with the current social and economic requirements. To achieve the crucial social and economic development required by Russia to defend the revolution, a massive increase in the level of education was required. Lenin recognised that this education must have clearly defined practical aims and be connected directly to the demands of the people. For example, agricultural education must occur alongside the distribution of farming equipment.

The Bolsheviks were very clear about the integral role that education would play in all aspects of Soviet development. Education was identified as the key way to tackle major questions of the revolution, for example, breaking down those divisions which occur between urban and country areas under capitalism. They recognised the importance of education as an effective vehicle for taking communist ideas to the people.

While a social revolution is premised on the majority of people consciously struggling for change, much change can occur in a spontaneous and scattered way. During this period, mass education plays a crucial role in ensuring the highest level of consciousness and in enabling the individual to play an active role in such a transformation.

## **Role of teachers & academics**

Under socialism, the role played by teachers, academics and other teaching staff will be totally different to what it is under capitalism. As Trotsky explained:

The task of cultural education consists in awakening and developing the critical personality among the oppressed and downtrodden masses. The indispensable condition for this is that the educator himself must possess a personality developed in the critical sense ... Where convictions are imposed from above like a military command, the educator loses his mental individuality and cannot inspire either children or adults with respect or trust in the profession he exercises.<sup>24</sup>

The socialist teacher must be imbued with true revolutionary convictions. Lenin spoke of the need to immediately tackle the problem of raising the educational and cultural

levels of school teachers in Soviet Russia and of the task of developing school teachers so that they could assist in bringing the peasantry into alliance with the proletariat and with other revolutionary tasks.

In Cuba, teachers participate in all areas of social life. They hold a very broad view of the relationship between themselves and their students and most are active in a range of social and revolutionary organisations.

In the Nicaraguan revolution, the fact that the teachers worked in collaboration with the Sandinistas against the brutal Somoza regime was central in fostering anti-dictatorship sentiment and revolutionary consciousness amongst the people.

As opposed to repressing students and divorcing them from their own creative tendencies, socialist teachers will have as their aims: to raise the cultural level of all students and thus the whole population; to be the bearers of people's participation in education and society as a whole; to explain thoroughly the politics of social revolution, and thus impart revolutionary consciousness; to teach people to fight discrimination and oppression and to fight for justice and liberty; to explain the essence of exploitation and thereby the essence of freedom.

## **Education through the struggle!**

Under capitalism, there can be no real solution to the problems of education and alienation. Capitalist education may give you certain skills, hopefully those needed to make you more employable. It may give you some broader skills and knowledge. But either these are then not used in a useful or enjoyable way or are put to use in the service of big business. Generally we don't have a great deal of choice in the matter. One has to work or starve.

However, there is one choice we *can* make — to become involved in struggling to get rid of capitalism with all its crimes, horrors and suffering and create a new free, socialist society. In this struggle we can gain an education in what really matters most. In the only real way that is possible in class society, we can build a sense of community and belonging by joining with others in a common, freely-chosen fight for human emancipation through socialist revolution.

Capitalism, as Paulo Freire pointed out, is a problem-posing environment. While there are a multitude of problems for us to solve, the biggest one is capitalism itself. So for now there's no better "school" for us to be in than the anti-capitalist struggle!

## Notes

- 1 Reimer, *School is Dead* (Penguin Education: Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 27
- 2 Marx, *The German Ideology* (International Publishers: New York, 1976), p. 64
- 3 Borge, "The New Education in the New Nicaragua", *Nicaragua, The Sandinista People's Revolution* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1985), p. 72
- 4 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1996), p.59
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 57
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 53
- 7 Reimer, *School is Dead*, p. 18
- 8 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 66
- 9 McDonald, *Making a New People, Education in Revolutionary Cuba* (New Star Books: Vancouver, 1985), p. 64
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 68
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 75
- 12 Borge, "The New Education in. the New Nicaragua", *Nicaragua, The Sandinista People's Revolution*, p. 70
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 77
- 14 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 27
- 15 *ibid.*, pp. 60, 30, 66
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 62
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 67
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 62
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 64
- 20 Borge, "The New Education in the New Nicaragua", *Nicaragua, The Sandinista People's Revolution*, p. 71
- 21 Trotsky, "A Few Words On How To Raise a Human Being", *Problems of Everyday Life* (Monad Press: New York, 1973), p.135
- 22 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 614
- 23 Borge, "The New Education in the New Nicaragua", *Nicaragua, The Sandinista People's Revolution*, p. 79
- 24 Trotsky, "For Freedom in Education", *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 195

Education under capitalism is narrowly focused on producing workers with the skills and attitudes required by business and industry. Critical questioning of the aims and content of education at school or tertiary level is discouraged. The whole process is thus marked by conformity and alienation.

Jo Williams argues for a different vision of education. Under socialism education would be radically different, encouraging democratic participation, critical thought and social involvement and solidarity.

*Resistance books*