Central European
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COMPASS: Critical Education and Trade Unions: Episodes from a Rich History of Political Education of the Labour Movement in Europe

Report Findings



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LABOUR STUDIES INSTITUTE

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COMPASS
Strengthening democratic skills

Deliverable 2.2 - Historical case studies report

Critical Education and Trade Unions: Episodes from a Rich History of Political Education of the Labour Movement in Europe

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(eds)

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Abstract

This document presents Deliverable 2.2 of the Compass project, based on historical case studies, with the aim to contextualise the educational activities of unions in the countries in scope of the project, and to highlight the roots of democratic education within the trade union movement. It aims to illustrate the emergence of the trade union education role at the beginning of the mass labour movement and trace its development, connecting it with today's understanding of the concept of critical pedagogy. The report explores how early trade union education activities contributed to shaping political awareness and democratic participation among workers, and how these historical practices resonate with or diverge from current ideas of political education. In addition to providing general contextualisation, cases focus on a selected example of a trade union educational institution — or a long-term educational initiative — that was specifically dedicated to educational and political-ideological training. This focus allows examine the ways in which trade union education was used as a tool for political formation, democratic empowerment, and social transformation.

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Introduction

Tibor T. Meszmann, Adam Šumichrast & Karolien Lenaerts

Traditional education has long been built around a top-down model: a fixed curriculum, a teacher at the centre, and students as passive recipients of knowledge. This model, as Freire (1970) famously described it, treats education like a bank – depositing information into learners rather than engaging them as thinking, active participants. Critical pedagogy developed as a direct challenge to this approach, arguing that education is never politically neutral, and that real learning must be rooted in people's actual experiences and aimed at changing the conditions they live in (Kincheloe, 2008). The labour movement in Europe understood this long before critical pedagogy had a name. The struggle for free and good education for all, led by trade unions and left-wing political parties and movements, went hand in hand with their fight for political rights and democracy. This was important for worker emancipation, enabling workers to participate more meaningfully in political life. Equally importantly, education was essential in building up capable organisers and activists in the labour movement, as well as organic intellectuals of the movement in the Gramscian sense.

Across Europe, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, workers and their organisations built their own educational institutions – not to replicate the schools they had been excluded from, but to develop something different: education in the service of emancipation, collective organisation, and political participation. Trade union organisers and social innovators understood that knowledge is power. They also recognised that producing knowledge through democratic education was key to building democratic communities and subsequently to societal change. Through these processes, they experimented with collective learning and the critical dissemination of revolutionary scientific insights in the humanities and natural sciences.

This collection – which was prepared as part of the Compass project on 'New pedagogic methodologies for politicising training of union reps' – looks at five cases of workers' education from five countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary,[1] and Spain. Its aim is to contextualise the educational activities of trade unions in the historical context, in order to highlight the roots of democratic education within the union movement. It explores how early trade union education activities contributed to shaping political awareness and democratic participation among workers, and how these historical practices resonate with or diverge from current ideas of political education, and its connection with the concept of critical pedagogy. To this end, this collection zooms in on five countries at the core of the Compass project, in each case first sketching the wider context and then highlighting selected example of a trade union educational institution or long-term educational initiative that was specifically dedicated to educational and political-ideological training.

As such, our collection fills an important gap. Namely, in most of the countries, with the most notable exception of Spain, there is no substantive literature that explicitly explores the connection and role of critical pedagogy and critical education in the historical development of

1 The labour movement and critical political education initiatives in Hungary and the Czech lands originated within Austria-Hungary and evolved differently after the dissolution of the empire into the newly formed states of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

the labour movement. The reasons for this varies across countries. In Western Europe, the likely explanation is that the labour movement contributed to the public good of public education and with the entrenchment of the welfare states of the 20th century the importance of pushing for broader, critical and political education within the labour movement waned, but it also decreased the vocal voice of labour for critical education serving human emancipation and fulfilment. Besides Spain, there are notable exceptions. Perhaps the most interesting example and notable exception is Germany, where critical political education took root in the trade union movement. In the former countries of the Eastern bloc, on the other hand, the history of the labour movement and trade unions after 1989 the role of critical education in the labour movement and trade union politics received little attention and legitimacy for deeper exploration in scientific circles. It is only recently that scholars have rediscovered the important role of critical education in fuelling the growth of trade unions and their engagement in radical democratic practices (e.g., Todorova 2020, Csunderlik 2017).

The five short studies of this volume span different periods and very different political contexts, but they share a common set of questions: Should workers' education aim to raise the general political awareness of the whole working class, or focus on training a specific layer of organisers and union officials? What happens when education actually works, when workers start thinking, organising, and disagreeing? Does it matter whether education is built into a formal institution or kept close to the ground? And who should drive it – the workers themselves, outside intellectuals, or the party?

Rediscovering critical education in the Belgian labour movement, Gillis at al. examine one of the earliest worker-led educational initiatives in the Belgian workers' movement: the Leesgezelschap, or Reading Society, established in Ghent in 1860 by members of the Broederlijke Maatschappij der Gentsche Wevers. As they note, the Leesgezelschap was not merely a library, but also a reading room and reading club, an educational institution, an association based upon democratic principles, and a training ground for future labour activists. The authors also point out that *„the history of the Leesgezelschap also reveals conflicts, ideological tensions, and organisational fragmentation that accompanied the growth of worker education and political consciousness, and which would taint the later workers' movements in Belgium'*.

In Bulgaria, and in two entities of Austria-Hungary - Hungary and the Czech lands, workers' education was an integral part of the socialist or socialdemocratic party's strategy to strengthen itself organisationally, simultaneously building up trade union infrastructure, provide and expand new spaces for worker education. In the Bulgarian case, Dinev documents the particularly vivid period of workers' schools in the first years of the 20th century, which organically emerged and expanded from worker clubs, libraries, public lectures, and evening schools. Similarly to Bulgaria, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia the role of a few organic intellectuals was essential in launching critical education for organised workers. Meszmann outlines the brief history of the Free School of Social Sciences. It came about in a unique, turbulent historical period, stemming from an alliance of critical intellectuals, an anarchist thinker and social democratic party activists. In an unhealthy authoritarian setting, in a context of entrenched conservative and nationalist politics and a highly unequal education system, the school established a new model of critical, emancipatory education for organised workers, an early version of public sociology, that grew quickly in both form and scope. While critical education was instrumental in launching the Hungarian revolution of 1919, it led to more evolutionary and more sustainable change in the case of Czechoslovakia. As Šumichrast highlights, the Workers Academy was built on the earlier tradition of the educational role played by workers' associations in the Czech lands of the Austria-Hungary Empire, and grew within the newly established state of Czechoslovakia, playing a very important role in shaping up the critical educational institutions of the young democratic state.

Finally, in Spain critical education played a key role not only in the democratic turn and revolutions of the early 20th century, but also during and in the immediate aftermath of the Franco regime. As de la Fuente Sanz outlines, in the mid-1970s, during Spain's transition to democracy and following the period of Franco's dictatorship, trade unions played a significant role in a shift in the methods and curricula of education in Spain.

In all our cases, critical political education initiatives came up with novel, specific methodologies and practices too. For example, in Bulgaria most classes within the workers schools were conducted as guided discussions (*besedi*) rather than formal lectures. In Hungary, students were evaluating the academic year jointly with lecturers and school organisers. In Belgium, several practices of the Leesgezelschap - re-humanisation, self-organisation, collective learning, discussion, and the connection between education and participation bear notable similarities to later emancipatory educational approaches. In Spain, trade unions established an active, participatory and cooperative educational training practice for adults, drawing on certain perspectives of critical pedagogy developed in the country.

Read together, the five cases reveal a set of recurring tensions that cut across all national contexts and historical periods: between broad education and immediate political action; between centralised institutions and grassroots initiatives; between rational knowledge transfer and the emotional and cultural dimensions of learning. These historical cases also do not offer simple lessons, but they do present useful episodes of linking education to democracy and political struggle and show different ways to address various problems and tensions – and perhaps the most useful thing is that they offer the opportunity to think about workers' education today in general, which remain relevant to date.

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1. Is reading a revolutionary act?

Dirk Gillis, Karolien Lenaerts & Noah Van Geel[2]

The 'Leesgezelschap' of the 'Broederlijke Wevers'
in Ghent in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

'The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled' - Plutarch

The Broederlijke Maatschappij der Gentsche Wevers, founded in Ghent, Belgium in 1857, generally referred to as the Broederlijke Wevers (sometimes translated as Brotherly or Fraternal Weavers) is generally regarded as Belgium's first trade union.[3] Shortly after its establishment, in

2 The authors would like to thank the staff from all the libraries consulted, especially Sandra Vervynck & Klara De Maeseneir @ the 'Boekentoren' and Emma Vancoillie @ AMSAB-ISG, both in Ghent.

3 For the (contested by some but widely accepted) status of the Broederlijke Wevers as Belgium's first modern trade union, see: Neuville, J. (1957). Il ya cent ans naissait le Syndicat des 'Broederlijke Wevers'. Études sociales, No 9 1957, Syndicalisme. La Pensée catholique, Bruxelles, Office général du Livre, Paris, pp. 3-4; Dorssemont, F. (2002). Rechtspositie en syndicale actievrijheid van representatieve werknemersorganisaties, Interuniversitair Centrum Voor Arbeidsrecht I.C.A.-Reeks, bijzondere reeks nr. 3, Die Keure, Brugge, https://bib.kuleuven.be/rbib/collectie/archieven/boeken/dorssemont-rechtspositiesyndicaleactievrijheid.pdf, pp. 75-77; Regniers, G. (2026). 'Werklieden van alle standen, laat u niet meer gebruiken als ellendige werktuigen'. Pol Van Loo (1813-1866), flamingant en militant. Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent, 76(1), p. 156. Note that the magnus opus on the history of the christian workers' movement in Belgium, does not pay much attention to the (establishment of) the 'Broederlijks Wevers' while at the same time, devoting many pages to the struggles between liberals and catholics in 1957, the year the 'Broederlijke Wevers' were established, see: Gerard, E. (Ed.). (1991). De christelijke arbeidersbeweging in België (Vol. 1), KADOC- STUDIES 11, Leuven University Press, google books, pp. 22-28.

1860, members of the union created a Leesgezelschap (Reading Society and Library).[4] Both the Broederlijke Wevers and the Leesgezelschap were grassroots initiatives seeking to not only improve the material conditions of workers, but also their self-esteem, dignity,[5] literacy, intellectual and political development and capacity for collective action. The Leesgezelschap provided access to books, newspapers, lectures, lessons, a forum for discussions and a capacity for collective organisation, collective decision-making and organisational responsibility.[6]

Nevertheless, the history of the Leesgezelschap is not simply a success story. The institution that fostered reading, education and discussion also became a place where generational,

4 In this case study, we opted for not translating the names of the trade union (the Broederlijke Wevers) nor of the Leesgezelschap. Historical research on the constitution of the 'Leesgezelschap' is complicated by the fact that different authors have used different names and terms over the years and have sometimes used them interchangeably: 'Bibliotheek', 'Leesgenootschap', 'Leesgezelschap', 'Leeskabinet', ' Boekzael', etc. which could be translated as ''Library', 'Reading Society', 'Reading Club', 'Reading Room', or even 'book club'. (cf. Regniers, Regniers, G. (2005). De bibliotheek van de Gentse wevers. Kroniek van een sociaal-culturele dynamiek. Brood & Rozen, 10(1), https://openjournals.ugent.be/broodenrozen/article/id/64584/download/pdf/, p. 20 & 22). Regniers even mentions someone also used the term 'de leesbibliotheek van de sociëteit' (given the connotations of the nouns used, the phrase is hard to translate. One translation could be 'the society's reading library' where society should be read as having a rather religious connotation or reference, as in e.g. the Society of Jesus). Furthermore, the name of the Leesgezelschap itself (Broederlijk Genootschap der Wevers) is confusing, the name of the trade union commonly known as Broederlijke Wevers being 'Broederlijke Maatschappij der Gentsche Wevers' (cf. among others Regniers, G. (2005). op. cit., p. 22). To make matters worse, Regniers states that 'The name 'Leesgezelschap' strictly speaking applies only to the breakaway faction [see below], although there is often some confusion over the term, with the original library also being referred to as 'Leesgezelschap'' (Regniers 2005, op. cit., p.30). In this case study, we opted to use the name 'Leesgezelschap' for the 'Broederlijk Genootschap der Wevers' the original reading society that was founded in 1860.

5 The Leesgezelschap's motto would later become 'Leren vereert'. 'Leren' is 'to learn'. 'Vereert' is harder to translate. At it's core, there is 'eer' (honour) and 'eren' (to honour) whereas 'vereren' nowadays translates as 'to worship'. 'Leren vereert' could be translated somewhere between 'Learning brings honour' and 'Learning brings dignity'..

6 For some similarities with, while treating critical pedagogy as an analytical lens (rather than a historical category used by the actors), see for instance: Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the oppressed, 30th anniversary edition, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, New York, ISBN 0 8264 1276 9, especially pp. 44-45.

ideological and personal tensions surfaced. As a result, the Leesgezelschap and eventually the trade union split.[7]

As we will see, the history of the Leesgezelschap is still relevant today, for it allows us to examine the emancipatory possibilities of grassroots organisations, providing a sense of dignity and self-worth as well as education. At the same time, its history teaches us that critical thinking while adhering too strictly to tradition, dogma and/or ideology will divide and weaken those who should stand united.[8]

7 'Tensions arose quite quickly within the 'Broederlijke Wevers'. A number of young people, led by Karel de Boos, opposed the conservative leadership, which was not particularly sympathetic to liberal ideas. Initially, only part of the 'Leesgezelschap' broke away, but eventually a split occurred within the 'Broederlijke Wevers'.' (X, Leesgezelschap der Wevers te Gent 'Leren vereert' (1860-1983), http://www.odis.be/lnk/OR_33709 (author's translation). For a more detailed account, see for instance: Van Deuren, J. (2017). Een verbeelde toekomst: Nieuwjaarswensen van de Broederlijke Wevers van Gent (1861-1881). Brood & Rozen, 22(4), https://openjournals.ugent.be/broodenrozen/article/id/64025/download/pdf; Regniers, Regniers, G. (2005). op. cit., pp. 27-30; De Nil, B. (1997). Leest, leert, denkt en ontspan u!!: de Vlaamse sociaal-democratie en de roman (Doctoral dissertation); Faniel, J., & Vandaele, K. (2011). Histoire de la Centrale générale des syndicats libéraux de Belgique (CGSLB), Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP, 21232124(38), https://shs.cairn.info/article/CRIS_2123_0005/pdf?lang=fr, p. 12 & Arnaut, K. 'De ontwikkeling van socialistische bibliotheken te Gent tussen 1830 en 1890.' AMSAB Tijdingen 3, no. 1-2 (1984), pp. 50-52; Neuville, J. (1957). op. cit., pp. 47-77; Avanti (1931). Een terugblik - Bijdrage tot de Geschiedenis der Gentsche Arbeidersbeweging, second edition, S.M. Volksdrukkerij, Sint-Petersnieuwstraat 64, Gent, pp. 249-256.

8 The motto of the spinners was Eendragt maakt macht (Unity makes strength; cf. Avanti (1931). op. cit., p. 197 & 319), which is also the Belgian national motto. For a great piano composition on the theme, see: Frederic Rzewski, The People United Will Never Be Defeated, 36 Variations on a Chilean Song. Ursula Oppens, piano. Vanguard Classics CD, OVC 8056. Of course, the motto should be read both as a statement, a wish and a warnning, for the opposite is also true: division weakens. After all, Rzewski composed the variations as a tribute to the struggle of the Chilean people against the newly imposed repressive regime of Augusto Pinochet (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_People_United_Will_Never_Be_Defeated!).

1.1 Historical Background

Even before its independence in 1830,[9] Belgium was rapidly developing into one of the world's most industrialised countries.[10] Industry, and notably textile manufacturing and metallurgy as well as coal mining, expanded significantly, particularly in Ghent, Liège and the Borinage. Ghent, in particular, became a major centre of mechanised textile production.[11]

Industrialisation generated wealth, but it also created a new 'class' in society: the working class. Workers experienced long working hours, child labour was rampant and educational opportunities limited. Living and working conditions for many people were appalling while social

9 Both legend and history have it that the Belgian Revolution was sparked by an aria - Amour sacré de la Patrie - of the opera 'La Muette de Portici' by Daniel Auber, with a libretto by Germain Delavigne & Eugène Scribe. For the libretto, in French, see for instance: http://www.operafolio.com/libretto.asp?n=La_muette_de_Portici. The Belgian Revolution was fueled by discontent with the policies of Willem I, King of the 'Koninkrijk der Nederlanden' (Kingdom of the Netherlands) of which what later would become the Kingdom of Belgium was a part. Notably regarding religion and specifically the power of the catholic church, the use of languages and the advancement of industrialisation. Deneckere, G., De Wever, B., De Paepe, T., & Vanthemsche, G. (2020). Een geschiedenis van België. Lannoo Meulenhoff-Belgium, pp. 123 et seq.; Op de Beeck, J. (2015). Het verlies van België, Horizon/Overamstel, Schoten/Amsterdam, pp. 20 et seq.; Van Istendael, G. M. J. M. (2015). Het Belgisch labyrint: een wegwijzer (overschilderd natuurlijk). Olympus, pp. 20-26.

10 The first Industrial Revolution in Belgium mainly took place in the coal, metal and textile sectors, in Liège, Vervies (the Borinage) and Ghent (cf. among others: Deneckere et. al (2020). op cit., p. 94). Belgium was also the second country in the world, and the first on the European continent, to construct a railway. The first line was installed between Brussels, seat of the government and home of the royal family and Malines (Mechelen), the seat of the Belgian Archbishop (Gwyn, D. (2023). The coming of the railway: a new global history, 1750-1850. Yale University Press, p. 264; Fremdling, R. (2002). European railways 1825-2001: an overview, p.3-4).

11 For a brief account of the Belgian economical evolution in the first part of the XIXth century and the social consequences thereof and of industrialisation, see: Gerard, E. (Ed.). (1991). De christelijke arbeidersbeweging in België (Vol. 1), KADOC- STUDIES 11, Leuven University Press, pp. 29 et seq. For an account of the impact of automisation on the cotton-industry, and the effect thereof on the position of workers, see: Vanschoenbeek G. (1998). Arbeid adelt - De arbeidersaristocratie als verklaring voor het reformisme in de arbeidersbeweging, in: Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire, tome 76, fasc. 4, 1998. Histoire medievale, moderne et contemporaine - Middeleeuwse, moderne en hedendaagse geschiedenis. pp. 1021-1061.

policies were all but absent, leaving people in need mostly to charity.[12] Social legislation was all but inexistent, the legal provisions on labour being limited in two articles of the civil code, all in favour of the employer.[13] At the same time, political participation remained restricted. In short, the lower classes were depended solely on themselves and on charity rather than on rights, social policy, or democratic inclusion.[14]

In spite of Belgium's - for its time - very progressive constitution, which guaranteed freedom of religion, of association, of education, and of the press, census suffrage - which, in short, means that only the rich had a right to vote - excluded the overwhelming majority of the population from political representation.[15] The formal freedoms of the new constitutional state, therefore, coexisted with profound social and political exclusion.[16] Such exclusion was kept in place by the

12 For a good contemporary song about the paradoxes of charity, see (or rather listen to): Skunk Anansie (1995). Charity, One Little Indian Records. Both the clerus, nobelmen and large parts of the (conservative) bourgeoisie did not care about the lower classes, which they considered 'paupers'. See Deneckere et al. (2020). p. 159: 'The lower social classes were also ideologically controlled. The Catholic Church played a significant role in this. It wholeheartedly sided with the rich, with whom it identified completely. Wealth was regarded as a sign of divine grace. The wealthy could therefore convince themselves that their wealth was a sign of divine favour. The only obligation they felt they had – and which the Church also called for – was charity in the form of alms to the poor, provided that the latter remained submissive and resigned themselves to their lot. Paternalistic charity was virtually the only form of social policy, and poverty itself was seen as an inescapable reality that, just like wealth, was willed by God' (author's translation). For an interesting read on 'paupers', and on the concepts of (un)deserving poor and charity, another point of agreement between catholics and conservative liberals, see: Spijkstra, A. N. (2024). 'The New Paupers': A Historical Analysis of Social Security Law and the Rise of Automation. Tilburg Law Review, 29(1), https://tilburglawreview.com/en/articles/10.5334/tilr.361. To put it in the words of Paulo Freire: ' This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the op pressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the op pressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their 'generosity,' the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity,' which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false gen erosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source' (Freire, P. (2000). op. cit., p. 44).

13 See, among others: Van Den Eeckhout, P. (2005). Van werkboekje tot arbeidscontract. De negentiende-eeuwse arbeidsrelaties revisited. In: Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis, (2005)2-3, pp. 163-169.

14 Deneckere et al. (2020), op. cit., pp. 115 & 159; Spijkstra (2024), op. cit. Also see Dorssemont, (2002). op. cit., p. 75 and the references cited there.

15 According to Van Istendael, less than one percent of the population had the right to vote (Van Istendael, G. M. J. M. (2015). Het Belgisch labyrint: een wegwijzer (overschilderd natuurlijk). Olympus, pp. 24-25).

16 See, for instance: Van Istendael, G. M. J. M. (2015). Het Belgisch labyrint: een wegwijzer (overschilderd natuurlijk). Olympus, pp. 24-25; Deneckere et al. (2020), op. cit., pp. 137-138.

'major agreement' between liberals and catholics, which had made Belgian's independence possible in the first place.[17]

Several factors delayed the development of trade unionism in Belgium until the late 1850s. Among the major obstacles to worker organisation, Dorssemont (2002) points to factors such as a dispersed workforce, continued commuting between city and countryside, initially relatively small workplaces, material deprivation, long working hours, illiteracy and, last but not least, the 'ban on coalitions'.[18]

Economic grievances, growing tensions between employers and workers, and a growing awareness of the developments in Great Britain encouraged Belgian workers to experiment with

17 For a brief yet interesting account of the strange coalition of catholics and liberals, see: De Laveley, E. (1882). The political condition of Belgium, The Contemporary review, 1866-1900, April 1882, 41, British Periodicals, https://orbi.uliege.be/bitstream/2268/209128/1/The%20political%20condition%20of%20Belgium.pdf, pp. 715-726. Also see: Deneckere et al. (2020), op. cit., pp. 123 et seq.; Op de Beeck, J. (2015). Het verlies van België, Horizon/Overamstel, Schoten/Amsterdam, pp. 136 et seq. Belgian's constitution was progressive inter alia because it contained the the freedom of religion and of association, freedom of education and of the press. It is not hard to see how these freedoms were favourable means for both conservatives and progressives be it for different if not oppossite ends. A matter which would later be clearly illustrated by for instance the various 'school wars' between liberals and catholics, the elaboration of which falls outside the scope of present case study. At the same time, Belgium quite rapidly became a home for European dissidents of all sorts. Among them, Karl Marx who would write The Communist Manifesto during his stay in Brussels (Deneckere et al. (2020), op. cit.; Op de Beeck, J. (2015). op cit., p. 151). Also see De Maesschalck, E. (2023). Karl Marx Wrote Global History in Brussels, 24 April 2023, https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/karl-marx-wrote-global-history-in-brussels/, consulted: 25 June 2026.

18 In spite of the constitutional freedom of association, the ban on coalitions made it illegal for workers and in principle also for entrepreneurs and employers to associate. The ban on coalitions was a remnant of the different legal initiatives changing the corporist economy to one where the freedom of enterprise prevailed during the second half of the XVIIth century. For a brief and splendid overview of the legal history the ban on coalitions, see: Dorssemont, F. (2002). op. cit., pp. 78-99. For a recent and equally splendid account on the subject, see: Debaenst, B. & Humblet, P. (2025). Een andere kijk op de decriminalisering van de staking, in: in: Joachim Meese, J., Roelandt, J., Vancoillie, O., De Nil, N., Leloup, P., Cools m. & Vermeulen G. (Red.) (2025). En passant. Liber amicorum Philip Traest, Gompel&Svacina bv, Antwerpen, ISBN: 978 94 6371 583 6, pp. 265-283. Also see: Stevens F. (1998). Het coalitieverbod in België (1795-1866), in: X, Liber Amicorum Roger Blanpain 1998, Brugge, die Keure.

new forms of collective organisation.[19] Van Deuren cites a spinner who, at a meeting in the run-up to the establishment of the trade union, declared: 'If we are to improve our material and moral condition, it is essential that we organise ourselves like a regiment of soldiers, and that we establish a powerful association to protect us from the attacks that the masters might dare to make on our wages'.[20] These developments formed the context in which the Broederlijke Wevers emerged.

19 The facts predating the founding of the Broederlijke Wevers are extremely interesting. When the Belgian government planned to sign a free-trade treaty with Great-Brittain, the 'barons' of the Ghent textile industry feared harsh and according to them unfair competition. To rise opposition against the treaty, they rallied their workers arguing that the treaty would force them to lower wages and/or close shop during several days per week. The employers' initiatives failed, but in a certain way they showed workers it was possible to organise and, to a certain extent, also how. Together with stories about trade unions from Great Britian, these probably finally facilitated the establishment of a union, in spite of the ban on coalitions. For a brief account of the history of the Ghent textile industry, see: Scholliers, P. (1996). Patroons, lonen en arbeiders in het 19de-eeuwse Gent. Tijdschrift voor industriële cultuur, 14(55), https://openjournals.ugent.be/tic/article/id/75342/download/pdf, pp. 18-29. Workers were actually compelled (not to say: forced) to attend meetings after hours during several weeks. For an brief historical account, see: Regniers, G. (2026). op. cit., p. 157. Also see: Van Deuren, J. (2017). op. cit., pp. 34-35. Van Deuren cites a spinner who, at a meeting in the run-up to the establishement of the trade union, declared: 'If we are to improve our material and moral condition, it is essential that we organise ourselves like a regiment of soldiers, and that we establish a powerful association to protect us from the attacks that the masters might dare to make on our wages' (Van Deuren, op. cit., p. 34).

20 Van Deuren. (2017). op. cit.., pp. 34-35. A notable role was played by Pol Van Loo, a clerk working at a textile factory who was made to preside the meetings against a free-trade treaty the employers of the Ghent textile factories organised and which the textile workers were forced to attend. Regniers recounts how Van Loo did not only preside the meetings and explained the negative effects of the free trade treaty, should it be concluded. During said meetings, he also provided the workers with critical information, for instance, on the profits their employers made. As a result, the employers' laments about the threats of the English competition fell on deaf ears. Furthermore, Van Loo talked about the English trade unions, their aims and their goals. Rumour has it that source that seems to have been present at the time stated: 'We do not know what the orator's (Van Loo's] reasoning might have been, but this much is certain: it was that speech which first gave our workers the idea of setting up a resistance fund' (Regniers, G. (2026). op. cit., pp. 157-158). The title of Regniers article cites a quote by Regniers, who at a meeting on 23 October 1859 in Ghent called upon the workers with the words: 'Workers of all classes, do not allow yourselves to be used any longer as miserable tools' (Regniers, G. (2026). op. cit., pp. 155).

1.2 When a trade union establishes a library ...

The Broederlijke Wevers combined elements of mutual aid and support in cases of sickness, unemployment and labour mobilisation.[21] In well-defined cases, e.g. sickness or unemployment, workers (or their wives) would receive benefits.[22] In spite of the coalition prohibition, mutual aid funds were tolerated by the authorities - as long as they did not engage in trade union activities.

Nevertheless, the Broederlijke Wevers soon demonstrated their capacity for collective action. During labour conflicts in 1858 and 1859, the organisation demonstrated a notable capacity for solidarity and self-organisation, and resolve. In reaction to employers lowering wages, the members of the Broederlijke Wevers collectively gave notice. By doing so, they avoided a 'strike' whilst their collective action achieved the same effect. During their time of unemployment, the trade union provided financial aid.[23]

Soon after the establishment of the union, several members concluded that socio-economic organisation alone was insufficient. Intellectual development was viewed as equally important. In December 1860, approximately thirty workers founded the Broederlijk Genootschap der Wevers, commonly known as the Leesgezelschap.[24]

The initiative was financed by the workers themselves. Thirty trade union members each contributed one Belgian franc. A rather significant sum: a typical daily income was around two

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21 Systems of mutual aid and support in the event of loss of income due to accident or illness date back centuries' (D'Hondt, B. (2021). Mutualiteit - Het liberaal mutualisme nestelt zich vanaf de negentiende eeuw in het Belgische denken over zorgzekerheid en solidariteit, 7 July 2021, https://www.liberas.eu/nl/stories/mutualiteit). Such systems were condoned in spite of the ban on coalitions, as long as they did not resort to activities typical for trade unions (e.g. wage bargaining), cf. Regniers, G. (2026). op cit., p. 167.

22 A version of the first internal rules and regulations can be found (in French) annexed to Neuville, J., Il ya cent ans naissait le Syndicat des 'Broederlijke Wevers'. Études sociales, No 9 (1957), Syndicalisme. La Pensée catholique, Bruxelles, Office général du Livre, Paris, pp. 81-86. A very short account of the internal rules and regulations can be found here: Van Deuren, J. (2017). op cit., p. 35. From the start, the internal rules and regulations also tried to prevent cases of fraud and abuse. Typically, present day discussions about what constitutes welfare fraud - even more so - resonate and in some cases come down to the old discussions about who is deserving or not, degrading welfare from a fundamental or human right to a mere political right. It is noteworthy, however unfortunately falls outside the scope of present case study, that such topics were already present in the first trade union in Belgium - and would remain present. Today, given the Belgian coalitions of mainly nationalists, socialists and reactionary liberals, topped up with what is left of the catholic party, the discussions about banning the underserving from welfare and social security systems, are all the more present, be it the term 'undeserving' is not used as such.

23 See, among others: Dorssemont (2002), op. cit., p. 94-95.

24 Regniers, G. (2005). op cit., p. 22. X, Leesgezelschap der Wevers te Gent 'Leren vereert' (1860-1983), http://www.odis.be/lnk/OR_33709; Gaus, H. (1990). De Literatuurreceptie bij Arbeiders in het Midden van de Negentiende Eeuw te Gent. In Vlaamse literatuur van de negentiende eeuw, Brill, https://brill.com/downloadpdf/edcollchap/book/9789004613386/B9789004613386_s011.pdf; Heymans, F., Leesgezelschap der Gentse Wevers, https://literairgent.be/lexicon/leesgezelschap-der-gentse-wevers; Arnaut, K. (1984). De ontwikkeling van socialistische bibliotheken te Gent tussen 1830 en 1890, AMSAB Tijdingen, 1984, 3, no. 1-2.

francs. The union added forty-two francs. With this starting capital, the first book purchases were made. Among them, works by Hendrik Conscience.[25] Conscience, who had fought during the Belgian Revolution, was known in Belgium as 'the writer who taught his people to read"[26] which made his works symbolically appropriate for a worker-led reading initiative.[27]

Soon after its founding, the Leesgezelschap possessed approximately 160 books. The collection could not immediately be expanded due to limited funds. The Ghent city council, weary of the workers' organisational activities, refused to subsidise the initiative.[28] Nevertheless, the library soon included not only literary works but also newspapers, periodicals, and government publications containing statistical and socio-economic information. This material gave workers access to knowledge about the society in which they lived and worked.[29]

Historians have repeatedly emphasised the importance of the Leesgezelschap. Regniers (2026) notes that since the earliest historiography of the Ghent labour movement, its significance has been recognised.[30] From a genealogical perspective, the Leesgezelschap was regarded as a seedbed for later social democracy[31] and a training ground for future labour activists.[32]

1.3 ... that is not just a library

The statutes of the Leesgezelschap reveal an ambitious educational programme. According to its statute, it aimed to promote education and cultural development. Article 2 of the internal rules provided: 'The [Leesgezelschap]'s aim is education and cultural enrichment; to achieve this aim, the [Leesgezelschap] has a library and reading room, where members may borrow books, periodicals and newspapers to read. Lessons will be given in the Flemish and French languages to teach reading, writing, letter-writing, arithmetic and other useful subjects. Public speaking

25 Regniers (2005). op. cit., p. 22. Op de Beeck (2015). op cit., pp. 326-327.

26 Cf. Canon of Flanders, The Lion of Flanders - Hendrik Conscience and the Flemish Movement, https://www.canonvanvlaanderen.be/en/events/the-lion-of-flanders/.

27 Regniers (2005). op. cit., p. 24.

28 *En revanche*, six years later, the Leesgezelschap would later start subsidising the city's school system. See, for instance: X (1867) Verslag over het bestuur en den toestand der stad Gent, Volksdrukkerij, Gent, https://www.google.be/books/edition/Verslag_over_het_bestuur_en_den_toestand/4xgUAAAAQAAJ?hl=nl&gbpv=0, p. 74.

29 X, Leesgezelschap der Wevers te Gent Leren vereert; Gaus, H. (1990). op. cit., pp. 171-172.

30 Regniers, 2005, op. cit., p. 20.

31 'Het Leesgezelschap heeft voor 90 % deel aan de democratische beweging die later volgde' (Verbauwen, P. (1924). Schetsen uit mijn leven of de geschiedenis der Gentsche wevers. Gent, 1924, p. 54; quoted in: Regniers, 2005, op. cit., p. 20. Again, the sentence is hard to translate. 'Deel hebben aan' is an outdated expression which translates somewhere between 'causing' and 'taking part in'. As such, a potential translation could be: 'The Leesgezelschap took part in/caused 90% of the democratic movement which followed (it) later'.

32 Regniers, 2005, op. cit., p. 20.

sessions will also be held. Furthermore, the [Leesgezelschap] will provide its members, whose children are continuing their education at higher schools, with the necessary books and school supplies'.[33] The institution thus combined literacy and cultural training, language instruction, practical knowledge, and access to public information.[34]

Jan-Baptiste Smeesters, then vice-president of the Broederlijke Wevers and president of the Leesgezelschap, stressed that education 'must teach the workers their rights, [...]. It must instil in them a sense of self-respect; teach them to recognise their worth as human beings'.[35] Such statements reveal a view on education as a means toward dignity, citizenship and social and political participation.[36] Child labour prevented many children from attending school, while most adult workers had generally had no realistic opportunities for study. The Leesgezelschap addressed this deficit by creating a space for learning governed by the workers themselves. It did not wait for charity, clerical instruction, or state provision. Instead, workers created their own educational infrastructure.

Gaus (1990), however, was of the opinion the Leesgezelschap should not be taken as a sign of much literary interest from the part of its members: 'Indeed, this library should be seen more as a sign of the high regard in which books were held by the workers – and thus of their status value within the working-class community – than as evidence that people read a great deal in these circles. The library of the [Broederlijke Wevers] can therefore be likened more to the acquisition of a banner embroidered with gold thread than to the beginning of a literary culture'. Given other historical accounts and the internal rules and regulations of the 'Leesgezelschap' (cf. supra), this opinion cannot be supported, rather on the contrary. Furthermore, Gaus' opinion denies, yet intuitively does sense, the Leesgezelschap's importance and relevance for the self-worth of the workers. He continued: 'However, it should not be suggested that the Broederlijke Wevers involved in the library's foundation would not have been proud of it, or that the library would not have played an important role as a centre of fellowship and scholarly thought. Evidence of this is undoubtedly provided by the information regarding the provenance of the books during the early years: for instance, there were government publications, often in French, containing statistical or other information on the economic and social situation. Indeed,

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33 Author's translation. Original text cited in: Deheusch, R. (1993). Leest, vrijzinnige werklieden : leeren vereert ! De geschiedenis van de vrijzinnige werkmansbibliotheek 'Leeren vereert' : van het Leesgezelschap van de 'Broederlijke Wevers' (1860) langsheen het leven van Albert Bracke. Gent, (Eindwerk bibliotheekopleiding), https://opac.amsab.be/Record/300013795, p. 4.

34 Arnaut (1984), op. cit., p. 46. Heymans, op. cit.

35 Regniers, 2005, op. cit., p. 22. During his speech, Smeesters stated: 'Volksonderwijs must teach the workers their rights, [...]. It must instil in them a sense of self-respect; teach them to recognise their worth as human beings'. The term 'volksonderwijs' is hard to translate and could mean 'education of the people', 'education for the people' and 'public education'. For one overview of the use and meaning of the term 'Volksonderwijs' from the XVIIth-XXth century, see: De Vroede, M. (1976). Volksonderwijs en maatschappij in België en Nederland van de zeventiende tot het begin van de twintigste eeuw, BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review, 92(2), 181-207. For a brief discussion of the term 'volksontwikkeling' ('people's development'), see: van der Lans, J. (2008). 1784 Maatschappij tot Nut van `t Algemeen - De noodzaak van volksontwikkeling, Canon Sociaal Werk, 1 May 2008 (last update: 29 October 2018), https://canonsociaalwerk.eu/nl_scw/detail/5. The passage on 'recognising their worth as human beings' resonates with the writings of Freire on the importance of undoing dehumanisation (cf. for instance Freire, P. (2000). op. cit., p. 4.

36 Regniers (2005). op. cit., p. 24.

the very fact that the Weyers were presented with such government publications implied, for a number of them, genuine recognition as 'educated' people.' [37]

'When in 1885, 25 years after its establishment, the relevance of the Leesgezelschap was questioned by some, Van Gyseghem[38] interrupted the meeting to state: 'As for me, and on behalf of all well-thinking workers in particular, I cannot fail to pay warm tribute to the board and to all those who have helped to establish the Leesgezelschap for this truly civilising work. Indeed, it is our duty to expand this reading room as much as possible, *so that, through wholesome reading material, the worker may come to realise his own worth*. It is an inexcusable act [...] to regard the founding of the library as a wrongful; and, if he [who criticises the Leesgezelschap] has been fortunate enough to receive an education, it is a crime for him to criticise his fellow members for wishing to provide their comrades with beautiful books to read; *it is precisely we, the outcasts of society, who must do everything in our power to develop our minds and liberate our class from the slavery to which it is chained by capitalist exploitation*'.[39] This statement is completely in line with what Verbauwen and other authors would later write about the establishment of the Leesgezelschap: that is was the younger generation that came up with the idea. According to some, with the main purpose of educating the older generations, hoping they would be then more perceptible to their more progressive views. According to Verbauwen, this was not the only reason. He wrote that the younger members, 'already had a vague suspicion that a struggle for a few pennies' more pay and a couple of hours' less work might continue, with varying fortunes, for all eternity without yielding any significant results. One of them [...] was already thinking of a social revolution.' But he, as well as his friends and followers, realised that they themselves, just as much as the other workers, still had a great deal to learn before they could even begin to consider anything in this field.[40]

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37 Gaus, H. (1990). op. cit.. pp.. 171-172. Reservations need also be placed because of the lack of nuance this writer showed in his text. Apart from the above, he also stated the ' The 'Broederlijke Wevers', together with the 'Noodlijdende Spinners', were the first socialist trade unions to be founded in the textile city of Ghent in 1867'. However, the first Belgian trade unions cannot be reduced to having been unanimously consisting of socialists, rather on the contrary (see. for instance: Neuville (1957). op cit., p. 78-79, Regniers, G. (2005), op. cit., p. 27 & Regniers, G. (2026). op. cit., p. 180).

38 A little more than a year later, on 21 September 1886, Frans Van Gyseghem would be one of the signatories the act officially founding the 'Coöperatieve Maatschappij Vooruit', which had been established on 21 November 1880 (at which time Van Gyseghem was its treasurer; cf. Avanti (1931). op cit., p. 341) but had not been officially incorporated as such (Van Haverbeke, E. (2007). De kleine historie van de socialistische militant August Roets (1853-1931) alias Ruuje Gust Familiekunde in Amsab-ISG. Brood & Rozen, 12(3), p. 59; Avanti (1931). op cit., p. 339). Van Gyseghem had been an influential leader of the Broederlijke Wevers (De Witte, P. (1898). De Geschiedenis van Vooruit en de Gentsche Socialistische Werkersbeweging, Bij Den Schijver, Molenaarstraat 109 Gent, p. 130).

39 Bracke, A. (1960). Onze honderdjarige bibliotheek: twee bijdragen over hare geschiedenis, in: Opvoeding, 1960 nr. 2/3, p.8; geciteerd in: Deheusch, R. (1993). Leest, vrijzinnige werklieden: leeren vereert ! De geschiedenis van de vrijzinnige werkmansbibliotheek 'Leeren vereert': van het Leesgezelschap van de 'Broederlijke Wevers' (1860) langsheen het leven van Albert Bracke. Gent, (Eindwerk bibliotheekopleiding), https://opac.amsab.be/Record/300013795, p. 11 (emphasis added).

40 Verbauwen, P. (1905). Eenige bladzijden uit de geschiedenis der Gentsche wevers, Drukkerij Vr. Vandenhoeck, Onderbergen 16 Gent, pp. 13-14.

The Leesgezelschap also provided practical instruction, for instance mathematics lessons and courses held on Sundays (their only free day of the week) concerning tools.[41] Such activities suggest that the institution did not only provide cultural and civic, but also vocational forms of education. Knowledge was valuable not only because it allowed workers to read books, but also because it enabled them to write, calculate, correspond, understand social conditions, participate in organisational life, etc.[42]

The Leesgezelschap was further characterised by a high degree of member participation: according to its rules and regulations, attendance at the general assembly of the Leesgezelschap was mandatory and unmotivated absence fined.[43] Finances were managed collectively, and office holders were accountable to members. Membership required a monthly contribution. The treasurer collected the money and deposited it with the secretary; together they presented the accounts to the executive committee and general meeting. The secretary handled correspondence, administration, and purchases but needed approval from the board for expenditure. In this respect, the Leesgezelschap functioned not only as a place of learning but was also a school through organisation and promoted 'learning by doing'. It is also here that, provided it is made carefully, comparison with critical pedagogy can be useful. Since Paulo Freire wrote more than a century later, and the Ghent weavers could not use his concepts. The (activities of the) Leesgezelschap can, therefore, not be classified as inspired by critical pedagogy in the strict sense. Nevertheless, several of the Leesgezelschap's practices bear striking resemblance to ideas later associated with emancipatory educational approaches: learning was not merely linked to knowledge but also and firstly to (regaining) dignity, self-worth, agency with a view of (re)claiming rights that beforehand had been reserved for nobility, bourgeoisie and the catholic church.[44]

The composition of the Leesgezelschap also deserves attention. According to Neuville (1957), at that time the vast majority of workers was illiterate. [45] But the Leesgezelschap's members were not all purely 'proletarian'. Some came from artisan backgrounds and were somewhat higher educated than others. This relative heterogeneity may have contributed to the institution's dynamism. It created a setting where workers with different degrees of literacy, experience, and ambition could meet, learn, and organise together.[46]

Nevertheless, the initial success of the Leesgezelschap did not prevent tensions. On the contrary, it became a place where differences within the early labour movement became

41 Regniers 2005, op. cit., p. 24.

42 Regniers 2005, op. cit., p. 24.

43 Deheusch, R. (1993), Leest, vrijzinnige werklieden: leren vereert! De geschiedenis van de Vrijzinnige Werkmansbibliotheek 'Leren Vereert': van het Leesgezelschap van de 'Broederlijke Wevers' (I860) langsheen het leven van Albert Bracke (1919-1974) tot AMSAB (1981), Gent, (Eindwerk bibliotheekopleiding), https://opac.amsab.be/Record/300013795, p. 5.

44 Regniers 2005, op. cit., p. 24-25.

45 Neuville, J. (1957). op. cit., p. 19.

46 Regniers 2005, op. cit., p. 23-25.

apparent.[47] For instance, younger and more progressive members opposed older and more conservative leadership. Furthermore, personal conflicts intensified ideological differences and different opinions on strategy and tactics. Eventually, a number of members left the Leesgezelschap. The split within the Leesgezelschap is often connected to an apparently trivial dispute traditionally associated with the binding of two books into one volume and which of the books was to be first.[48] This dispute is best understood as symbolic of broader disagreements concerning ideology, strategy and leadership and possible an example of a pernacious phenomenon which tends to perpetuate systems of oppression. In 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Freire described how oppressed people can experience inhibitions in separating from their oppressors and, even more important, from phenomenon of oppression itself: 'But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to be come oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.' The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of 'adhesion' to the oppressor. Under these circumstances they cannot 'consider' him sufficiently clearly to objectivise him-to discover him 'outside' themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression'.[49]

The split of the Leesgezelschap ultimately led to the split of the Broederlijke Wevers. The later socialist, liberal, and Christian trade unions each attempted to claim the Broederlijke Wevers as part of their origin. The historical evidence, however, suggests that the Broederlijke Wevers is best understood as a pluralist organisation, bringing together catholics, liberals, and those who would later be identified as socialist.[50]

The schism illustrates central paradoxes at the heart of emancipatory initiatives and education, still relevant today. Workers who read, discuss, and organise are unlikely - and indeed not meant - to remain passive. They develop views, opinions, interpretations, expectations,

47 Regniers discusses serveral theories regarding the reasons for the splitting of the Leesgezelschap. One theory states that the idea for the establishment of the Leesgezelschap came from the younger generation who hoped it would contribute to the 'development' of the older, more conservative generation. (Regniers 2005, op. cit., p. 29-30).

48 For an account of the disagreement concerning the binding of the books into one volume, see for instance: Regniers (2005), op. cit. pp. 27-28.

49 'But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to be come oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors.' The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of 'adhesion' to the oppressor. Under these circum stances they cannot 'consider' him sufficiently clearly to objectivize him-to discover him 'outside' themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression' (Freire, P. (2000). op. cit., p. 45).

50 Faniel, J., & Vandaele, K. (2011). op. cit., pp. 12-13; Regniers (2005). op. cit., p. 27. Neuville, J. (1957). op. cit., pp. 78-79.

ambitions and strategies of their own. The Leesgezelschap succeeded in fostering intellectual engagement. The resulting plurality of views was both its strength and a source of fragmentation. However, emancipatory initiatives and education are not bereft of the typical power dynamics of every emancipatory and educational action, something Paulo Freire struggled with himself, notably in Pedagogy of the Oppressed.[51]

The case of the Leesgezelschap also warns against overly teleological narratives. The Broederlijke Wevers should not simply be presented as proto-socialist, proto-Christian, or proto-liberal. Its early history preceded the later institutional an initially pluralist workers' association that predated later ideological segmentation.

1.4 Conclusions

Not only are the Broederlijke Wevers to be considered the first trade union in Belgium in the contemporary meaning of the word, but it was also the first trade union to establish a library, and thus set an example that started a tradition on its own.[52] The Leesgezelschap of the Broederlijke Wevers, however, was far more than a library founded by workers. It was a worker-led initiative and association, that functioned simultaneously as a cultural institution, and educational department fostering democratic principles, and a training ground for future labour activists.[53] The experience of the Leesgezelschap demonstrates how grassroots educational initiatives can contribute to restoring human dignity, to collective organisation and to democratic participation.[54]

Its history remains relevant because it shows how culture and education may become means through which people, who are excluded from formal educational and political institutions and from the rights we now consider fundamental, can develop the capacities required for collective action and democratic participation and the claiming of such rights.

As mentioned before, at the time of the establishment of the Broederlijke Wevers, 90% of workers was illiterate.[55] Contrary to the general perception, today (functional) illiteracy is still widespread. Based on the 2012 Pisa report the Universidade Nova de Lisboa reported between 10 and 25% of adults have literacy difficulties.[56] The European Education Area's website now states 'One in four 15-year-olds fails to understand basic texts or apply simple scientific

51 For Pol Van Loo, it went without saying that the initiative had to come from the workers themselves: 'We believe that, despite all the men of science, despite all the theories and assumptions, no one is capable of saving the working class except the workers themselves' (Regniers, G. (2026). op. cit., pp. 157-158). His words remind us of the words allocated to Lucy Parsons who allegedly said: 'Charity cannot liberate the people. They must do it themselves. Just like a small, isolated group of revolutionaries cannot act on behalf of the masses. Those who wish to be free must take action themselves'.

52 Not only would the Leesgezelschap's split give rise to the libraries of the socialist workers' movement. Also the liberal 'Laurent Circles', founded between 1865 and 1885 seem inspired by it (cf. Faniel, J., & Vandaele, K. (2011) op. cit., p. 11).

53 Regniers (2005). op. cit., pp. 20 & 34-35.

54 Van Loo 1859, 5, quoted in Regniers, G. (2026). op. cit., p. 178.

55 Neuville, J. (1957). op. cit., p. 19.

56 https://mgciissn.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/factsheet-literacy_in_europe-a4.pdf.

knowledge'.[57] Moreover, time and again, Pisa studies report a worsening of basic reading skills.[58] At the same time, popular reading clubs are being organised by bookstores, public libraries and online while books by authors such as, among others, Krishnamurti and Lacan are still being read and discussed in group today. There is no reason why reading should no longer be a means for people to stay informed about different views and opinions, fundamental and other rights and the means to critically assess different means of (often covert) persuasion and propaganda. Therefore, a contemporary Leesgezelschap does have a place in present trade union and other grassroots organisations, notably when working with and organising people in precarious jobs and social situations.

In 1905, Verbauwen wrote about the importance and the pertinence of the history of the labour movement: 'Slaves have no history,' it was once said. And until quite recently, this was also true of the so-called 'free' labourers of our day. Now, however, as in so many other matters, this too has changed. The suffering and struggles of those socially disowned, their endeavours, their aspirations, their defeats and victories now arouse sufficient interest to be read – and thus also to be written about.[59]

It is now common knowledge that those who do not remember - and cherish - the lessons their history can teach them are bound to repeat it while it is unfortunately nowadays less known that 'Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past'.[60]

The Leesgezelschap offers a powerful example of grassroots organisation and emancipatory education in practice. It reveals how workers who were largely excluded from formal political power and educational opportunity created an institution which allowed them to read, learn, discuss, administer, and organise. It also shows that education, even if it is meant to be emancipatory, is never politically neutral. The same practices that foster critical capacities may generate conflict and division and even perpetuate forms of oppression internalised by the

57 https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/basic-skills, accessed 5 August 2026.

58 See for instance: https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/report-of-pisa-2022-study-outlines-worsening-educational-performance-and-deeper-inequality & https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/worsening-2022-pisa-tests-results-oecd/.

59 'De slaven hebben geene geschiedenis>>, zcgde men voorheen. En tot voor weinigen tijd was dit ook wààr voor de zoogenaamde vrije werklieden onzer dagen. Thans is ook hierin, als in zooveel andere dingen, verandering gekomen. Het lijden en strijden der maatschappelijk onterfden, hunne betrachtingen, hun streven, hun nederlagen en overwinningen wekken heden genoeg belangstelling op om gelezen, en dus ook beschreven te worden' (Verbauwen, p. (1905). op. cit., p. 3).

60 Orwell, G. (1949). Nineteen Eighty-Four - A Novel, Secker & Warburg, London, p. 45.

oppressed.[61] It is therefore vital to not revere particular persons[62] and to always be aware not only of the power dynamics of every emancipatory and educational action but also and maybe foremost of what Foucault called the Panopticon[63] we ourselves are subject to.[64] After the splitting of the 'Broederlijke Wevers', both factions' ideological differences gave rise to heightened clashes, which made use of all means available: fierce propaganda, threats of being ousted from the community or to even 'burn in hell', etc. The pernacious effects and consequences thereof can still be observed today.

For contemporary debates on democratic principes and the rule of law, the historical lesson is clear. Democratic institutions require citizens capable of reflection, collective organisation, participation and last but not least: disagreement. The Ghent weavers far predated and hence could not use the language of critical pedagogy, but their Leesgezelschap demonstrates that the

61 See, for instance: Freire, P. (2000). op. cit., p. 48. Also see Foucault's take on Bentham's 'Panopticon': Foucault, M. (1975). Surveiller et punir : Naissance de la prison, Gallimard, Paris, ISBN: 9782072176609, 340 p.

62 In the final paragraphs of the introduction to 'Hitler's Charisma', Laurence Reed gives us a valuable warning: ' 'Finally, whilst this work is entirely about Hitler, I do believe that it has relevance today. The desire to be led by a strong personality in a crisis, the craving for our existence to have some kind of purpose, the quasi worship of 'heroes' and 'celebrities,' the longing for salvation and redemption: none of this has changed in the world since the death of Hitler in April 1945. Human beings are social animals. We want to belong. Life, otherwise, can be a very cold experience indeed. And only by understanding how those who seek power try to influence us, and how we often actively participate in our own manipulation, can we finally understand the dangers we face if we leave rationality and scepticism aside and, instead, put our faith in a leader with charism' (Rees, L. (2012). Hitler's charisma - Leading millions into the abyss, Pantheon Book, New York, p. 11).

63 Concepts such as Foucault's 'Panopticon' are crucial in contextualising initiatives and methods claiming to 'emancipate' workers or other people. Such 'Panopticon' is well illustrated by the catholic motto, very popular in Flanders, 'God ziet u, hier vloekt men niet' [God is watching, we don't swear here] and the idea that God was not only watching over you but watching you all the time. As such, there is no bigger brother than a god. For a picture of the typical illustration of the motto, which could be found in practically every catholic home, and thus the majority of homes in Flanders, see for instance: https://www.hkschellebelle.be/ons-dorpsplein.

64 The lines between education, indoctrination and propaganda are extremely thin. For a popular introduction to the power of propaganda (or, as Edward Bernays called it: public relations) in our present-day societies, see for instance: Curtis, A. (2002), The Century of the Self, Documentary series, RDF Television & BBC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Century_of_the_Self. Another interesting documentary: Achbar, M. & Wintonick, P. (1992), Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media, Documentary, Zeitgeist Films, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manufacturing_Consent_(film). The documentaries can be found on several internet platforms. For the book with the same title, see: Herman, S. E. & Chomsky, N. (1988), Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, Pantheon Books, New York.

struggle for knowledge and the struggle for social justice and democratic agency have long been intertwined. In that sense, reading could indeed be a revolutionary act.[65]

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65 A good recent read on the fragility of democracy and the appeal and tricks of authoritarian regimes making use of storytelling techniques is Katja Hoyer's Weimar (Hoyer, K. (2026). Weimar - Living on the edge of catastrophe, Basic Books, New York). Also the book on Hitler by Rees (see note 45) is an interesting read. Novels warning about the dangers of authoritarian regimes still worth reading: 'The Iron Heel' (1908) by Jack London, 'We' (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, 'Brave New World' (1932) by Aldous Huxley, 'Animal Farm' (1945) & 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949) by George Orwell and 'The Handmaid's Tale' (1985) by Margaret Atwood. A good and interesting read on the history of concepts like freedom and democracy: De Dijn, A. (2020). Freedom: An unruly history, Harvard University Press, Cambridge - Massachusetts.

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2. Workers' Schools in Bulgaria (1899–1903): An Educational Practice of the Early Labour Movement

Ivaylo Dinev

2.1 The historical roots of the workers' schools in Bulgaria

The workers' schools in Bulgaria appeared in the broader process of modernisation, industrialisation, and the formation of the organised labour movement following the country's liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878. During the final decades of the 19th century, expanding wage labour and urbanisation stimulated the creation of the first workers' organisations among printers, teachers, and skilled craftsmen. In the predominantly agrarian Bulgarian society, large-scale educational and cultural initiatives were launched by prominent intellectual social democratic and socialist circles, which represented one of the earliest forms of non-state adult education aimed at empowering workers. Although the Tarnovo Constitution (1879) guaranteed citizens the right to establish associations, labour relations remained largely unregulated until the early twentieth century, leaving wages and working conditions to individual agreements between workers and employers. As a result, the labour movement increasingly mobilised around demands for improved working conditions, collective labour agreements, and the introduction of labour legislation.

Firstly, the Bulgarian labour movement developed in close organisational and ideological cooperation with the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (BWSDP), founded in 1894 through the merger of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Union and the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party. Consequently, workers' education became an integral part of the party's strategy to strengthen trade unions through workers' clubs, libraries, public lectures, and evening schools. The movement split in 1903 into the revolutionary Marxist Narrow Socialists and the reform-oriented Broad Socialists, a division that, as the historian Maria Todorova (2020) argues, extended beyond party politics to the trade union and women's movements. The Broad Socialists advocated organisational autonomy for trade unions, whereas the Narrow Socialists favoured closer party control (Iliev, 1927: 14-20; Blagoev, 1947: 186). Thus, the split reflected not only ideological differences but also competing visions of the relationship between socialist parties, trade unions, and workers' education.

Secondly, this orientation towards education and culture reflected the combined influence of two different intellectual traditions: the Russian Narodnik thought and the West European Marxism, particularly the growing influence of Karl Kautsky's writings (Todorova, 2020). Early Bulgarian socialists envisioned a political alliance of 'all oppressed' (*vsichki ugneteni*), with the industrial working class (which at that time was very limited) serving as its leading force.

Together, these two intellectual traditions provided the ideological foundation for the Bulgarian social-democratic and socialist movement's strong commitment to workers' education and culture.

2.2 Bulgarian socialists and the question of workers education.

The establishment of the Workers' Schools was closely linked to the political strategy and divisions within BWSDP. While both factions regarded workers' education as an important means of mobilisation, the Broad Socialists assigned it a particularly prominent role, viewing workers' schools as the foundation for building trade unions and a politically conscious labour movement. The origins of the high importance of education can be traced to the work and though of three major intellectuals and politicians from the Broad Socialists fraction: Nikola Gabrovski, Dimitar Dimitrov and Yanko Sakăzov (Sakăzov, 1903; Iliev, 1927; Blagoev, 1947; Yanchev, 1991[66]).

Nikola Gabrovski (1859–1940) was one of the earliest promoters of social democratic ideas in Bulgaria. A lawyer educated in Geneva, and influenced by the Narodnik thought, Gabrovski argued in his 1889 pamphlet *The Moral Mission of the Intelligentsia* that the intelligentsia had a moral responsibility to educate society, promote new social ideals, and lead social progress (Gabrovski, 1889: 44).

Yanko Sakăzov (1860–1941) was the leading figure of the Broad Socialist movement and one of the principal advocates of the Sofia Workers' School. His intellectual outlook was shaped by studies in London and Paris. Consistent with his broader political philosophy, he argued that workers' associations, trade unions, and educational institutions were complementary expressions of the same principle of collective organisation (Todorova, 2020: 17–47).

Dimitar Dimitrov (1876–1902) was considered as one of the most promising socialist intellectuals of his generation (Todorova, 2020: 117–146) and and the main engine beside the establishment of the Sofia Workers' School (Yanchev, 1991). After an early involvement in anarchist circles in Ruse, he became a leading figure in the Bulgarian socialist movement. He combined theoretical work with active organizational work in Sofia's printers union and contributed to the establishment of the carpenters' union (Iliev, 1927: 15). He translated the influential Eduard Bernstein's *The Preconditions of Socialism* into Bulgarian. Contemporary accounts described him as a man whose premature death deprived the Bulgarian labour movement of one of its most promising organisers (ibid). Even his political opponent, Dimitar Blagoev, recognised Dimitrov's importance, describing him as the principal ideologist of the Broad Socialists (Blagoev, 1947: 433–434).

2.3 Precursors of the Sofia Workers' School

The first durable institutional form of workers' education emerged with the establishment of the Sofia Workers' School, which officially opened on 11 January 1899 (Rabotnicheski Vestnik 1899a:3). The school was founded on the initiative of the Sofia's social democratic circle

66 The historiography of the Bulgarian labour movement has been strongly influenced by the ideological division between the Broad and Narrow Socialists. Following the establishment of the communist regime in 1944, historical accounts often reflected the political legacy of the Narrow Socialist tradition, resulting in comparatively limited attention to the contribution of the Broad Socialists to the development of trade unions and workers' education.

(Sakăzov, 1903: 13; Kalinov, 2010). In his own writings, Yanko Sakăzov identified the young socialist Dimitar Dimitrov as the driving force behind the initiative, an interpretation also supported by the historian Veselin Yanchev (1991) in his foreword to Dimitrov's *Quarrel in the Workers' Party*.

In the opening address of the first school day, Sakăzov emphasised that workers' schools represented a natural continuation of the socialist movement's earlier educational initiatives:

The idea of workers' schools, or schools for the study of socialism, is in our country as old as the socialist movement itself. The small gatherings of a few people in a friendly room, which were a very common phenomenon some nine or ten years ago, were themselves a kind of school. As the socialist movement grows broader and broader with each passing day, these first schools, originating as small circles for self-education, will naturally develop into workers' schools. (*Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1899: 3)

2.4 Educational Aims and Methods

Two lengthy articles published in *Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, the leading newspaper of the Bulgarian socialist and labour movement, discussed the beginning of the academic year, the content of the classes, and its organisations (1899a:3; 1899b,:3).

In his opening speech Sakăzov noted that workers in Bulgaria lived in a 'backward and underdeveloped country' where the social contradictions of capitalism remained hidden 'as if beneath a veil'. Consequently, the school sought to equip workers with the intellectual tools necessary to uncover these concealed realities. The school aimed at the beginning to enable workers 'not only to see the truth beneath this thick covering, but to lift that covering and open the eyes of their brothers who can scarcely see,' thereby preparing 'workers to become future activists of socialist propaganda and agitation' (ibid).

With this objective in mind, the entire programme of instruction has been designed. Above all, attention is directed towards providing workers with the most essential knowledge. Once this foundation has been established, the teaching proceeds to a more detailed examination of individual subjects. (Rabotnicheski vestnik 1899b: 3)

Educational activities extended beyond formal instruction. Early trade unions regarded libraries, reading circles, self-education and cultural associations as integral parts of workers' organization (Iliev 1927). The Sofia Typographical Society, for example, maintained a substantial workers' library and even an amateur orchestra, illustrating that workers' education was understood as a broader process of cultural and intellectual development rather than merely vocational or political training (ibid: 13).

The school held regular evening classes in the 'Denkoglu' Municipal School building, which had been made available by the Sofia municipality upon the request of the organising committee. Instruction took place four evenings per week, from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. The school operated from 25 October until the end of April, after which classes would be suspended until the autumn. Owing to the Easter holidays and the celebration of Labour Day, no classes were held between 12 and 20 April, inclusive (*Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1899a). Every subject consists of twenty lessons (*Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1899b). The curriculum combined political economy, political science, history, Literature and Bulgarian language, German language, rhetoric and natural sciences, reflecting the organisers' intention to integrate general education with political education rather than limiting instruction to socialist doctrine.

Table 1. Curriculum of the Sofia Workers' School, academic year 1899-1900

Discipline	Content

Political economy	The relations of production and the distribution of products in capitalist society.
Political science	Bulgarian history; local self-government; administrative courts; the British Constitution; the Bulgarian Constitution; constitutional law;
History	Class struggles in Ancient Greece and Rome. The Middle Ages; and social and political relations.
Natural history	Formation of solar system; workers' hygiene
Literature and Bulgarian language	Principal literary genres; etymology and syntax; correct speaking and writing.
Rhetoric	Principles of public speaking and practical exercises
German language	

Source Author's elaboration of the report given in *Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1899a: 3; 1899b: 3

The pedagogical approach was remarkably participatory and learner centred. Teachers were instructed to present the essential concepts of each subject before moving to more detailed discussion and were expected to be specialists capable of distinguishing the most important knowledge from secondary information. Most classes were conducted as *besedi* (guided discussions) rather than formal lectures. Teachers regularly questioned students about previous lessons, encouraging dialogue instead of one-way instruction because workers were believed to learn more effectively through questions and answers.

Each student maintained a notebook in which teachers dictated the principal ideas of every lesson, while opportunities for clarification were provided after each class. Rhetoric instruction combined the analysis of famous speeches with practical exercises in public speaking: students prepared and delivered speeches before their classmates and then collectively discussed their strengths and weaknesses. This class aimed at preparing 'worker-agitators' (1899b). The curriculum also remained adaptable, allowing new subjects to be introduced whenever workers expressed sufficient interest - for example, German was included at the explicit request of participants.

The school possessed considerable organisational autonomy. It maintained its own budget through membership fees and fundraising events. Students paid fifty stotinki (half lev) per month for the six core subjects, while those wishing to attend German classes paid one lev (ibid.). For comparison, in 1895 a one-kilogram loaf of bread cost approximately 20 stotinki, while the ordinary daily wage for an unskilled worker in Bulgaria was about 1.78 leva.[67] By late 1899, ninety-six workers had enrolled, with average attendance ranging between sixty and seventy participants per lesson.

A notice published in *Rabotnicheski Vestnik* announced the reopening of the Sofia Workers' Evening School for the 1901–1902 academic year. The programme included courses in Political Economy, Natural History, and History of Socialism, indicating less classes on general education and increasing emphases on socialist political education (Rabotnicheski Vestnik, 1901:3).. The announcement also specified a modest tuition fee of 10 stotinki per month for members and 20 stotinki for non-members. This suggests that the organisers sought to make workers' education financially accessible while encouraging participation in the workers' movement.

67 See Profit.bg, 'Историята на цените на хляба в България,' 24 January 2024, https://profit.bg/article/20240124070254599554.

2.5 Education and Workers' Emancipation

Reflecting on the activities of the Sofia social-democratic group, Yanko Sakazov recalled that their work among industrial workers 'enabled us to establish a Workers' School and lay the foundations of the Sofia trade unions.' This account suggests that workers' education and trade union organisation were conceived as complementary institutions intended to strengthen the social-democratic movement simultaneously (Sakăzov, 1903). We can assume that through the workers' school the labour movement received its main source for recruiting new activists as well as the left-wing parties. Already in the first year, the school attracted 96 workers to join with about 60-70 in average participation in every class (*Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1899b).

The Sofia Workers' School rapidly became a model for similar educational initiatives across Bulgaria. By 1902, ten workers' schools had been established by local parties branches in towns including Sofia, Plovdiv, Ruse, Gabrovo and Kazanlak, enrolling more than 400 students. Local adaptations expanded the model further through Sunday schools, free public lectures and educational societies that promoted scientific socialism and prepared future labour activists (*Bulgarian Workers' Party – Communists in Resolutions and Decisions*, 1947, cited in Kodžejkov & Lambrev, 1955: 128).

In Plovdiv, the workers' school organised regular discussions (*besedi*) during 1901, attracting approximately seventy regular participants. The educational programme combined systematic instruction with public lectures delivered by leading left-wing intellectuals. Educational activities continued to expand in Plovdiv. In October 1902, the local party organisation established a Sunday Workers' School for the Study of Scientific Socialism within the workers' club *Razvitie* ('Development'). The initiative offered free admission, demonstrating the organisers' commitment to making political education accessible to all workers regardless of financial means (*Rabotnicheski vestnik*, 1902:2).

The same issue of *Rabotnicheski Vestnik* also reported a range of educational initiatives elsewhere in the country, including an evening vocational course for carpenters in Sofia and regular workers' discussion circles (*besedi*) for self-education in Svishtov. Together, these initiatives demonstrate that workers' education had expanded beyond formal workers' schools into a broader educational infrastructure combining vocational training, political education, and self-education in support of the labour movement (ibid.). The spread of workers' education extended beyond the larger industrial centres. In Vratsa, a workers' school opened in 1903 on the premises of the Tailors' Trade Union. Classes were held twice weekly, every Thursday and Sunday evening, and were attended primarily by tailors, shoemakers and printers. Approximately twenty-five students initially enrolled, and no tuition fee was charged. The curriculum reflected the increasingly comprehensive character of workers' education, including the history of the labour movement, political economy, cultural history, civic education, geography, Bulgarian language, modern literature and arithmetic. These subjects combined political education with broader civic and cultural instruction, preparing workers for participation in both trade union activity and public life (article by *Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1903, cited in Kodžejkov & Lambrev, 1955: 322).

A similar initiative emerged in Vidin, where an Educational Workers' Society organised a series of public lectures designed to introduce members to scientific socialism and prepare future party activists. Around forty members, the majority wage workers, enrolled in the programme. The first lecture, delivered by H. Rozanov, examined the materialist conception of history (article by *Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1903, cited in Kodžejkov & Lambrev, 1955: 333).

Beyond their numerical expansion, these schools strengthened the organisational capacity of the labour movement and the left-wing parties by building politically educated workers capable of participating in trade unions and political organisations.

The workers' schools established between 1899 and 1903 demonstrate that education occupied a central place in the early Bulgarian labour movement. Rather than viewing education as simply the transmission of knowledge, the first left-wing intellectual circles and activists understood it as a means of political empowerment and workers' emancipation. Their participatory teaching methods anticipated several principles associated with contemporary critical pedagogy by encouraging dialogue, discussion and collective learning.

Although most of these initiatives disappeared after 1903, following the political divisions of the socialist movement, they established the first systematic tradition of workers' education in Bulgaria. For this reason, the experience of the Sofia Workers' School remains relevant for understanding both the historical development of Bulgarian trade unionism and the broader tradition of labour education.

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3. Workers Education in the Free School of Social Sciences (1906-1910)

Tibor T. Meszmann

In the early 20th century, in a historical period when only around six percent of the population had voting rights, the key issue driving the development of the Hungarian labour movement was the introduction of universal adult suffrage for men. This struggle took place amid turbulent political circumstances. As we will see, the period in which 'radical' social scientist took the lead in designing programmes for worker education (Szapor 1985: 124-125) coincided with an overall and deepening crisis and splits in political and intellectual life in Hungary.

Namely, in the 1900-1906 period, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was affected by several economic and political crises. The most contesting issues were extended financialisation and the operation of joint military.[68] Resentments led to the strengthening of an opposition party in the Hungarian parliament which demanded real Hungarian independence, and as such it represented a systemic threat to the dualist system itself.[69] To divide the Hungarian independence party that won the 1905 elections, and prevent it from forming a government, the Austrian ruler and the Hungarian interior minister made a cunning strategic reformist move: promised reforms, including a thorough electoral reform with the introduction of universal suffrage. As it turned out, such a move created a dividing line between 'nationalist-patriots' and 'progressives'. The latter group included the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (SDPH), which was growing in popularity but did not have the right to participate in elections.

During this deep political crisis, the SDPH was offered concessions and the promise of extending the right to vote to all men, as it had happened in the Austrian lands in 1906, in return for supporting the loyalist government. Following mass demonstrations organised by SDPH on

68 Since 1867, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had been a constitutional dual empire comprising two sovereign states ruled by a single monarch. Foreign and military affairs, as well as enabling finances, were matters of common concern, but also of periodic contestation. In theory, Austria and Hungary were equal. In reality, however, the empire's elites were subordinate to the Austrian elite, especially in matters of military and grand politics, which further fuelled the general animosity among the population against the 1867 compromise.

69 In 1904, the loyalist party's government amended the legislation on military expenditure in an authoritarian way, breaking the house rules on voting procedure. This led not only to the opposition demolishing the interior of the parliament, but also to a crisis within the ruling loyalist party itself. Soon after, the parliament was dissolved, and elections were held in early 1905, which, for the first time the non-loyalist independence party won by a landslide. However, the sovereign Hungarian king did not appoint a prime minister from their ranks, but extended the previous interim loyalist government's mandate, and worked to install a minority government. (Csunderlik, 2017)

15 September 1905, with hundreds of thousands of participants calling for universal and secret voting rights, a pact was made between the Hungarian Minister of the Interior and the leader of the social democrats. This pact softened the nationalist-independence party – which was against such electoral reforms, leading to its secret compromise with the Austrian counterpart in 1906 and a new government. The result was that universal suffrage was not introduced, the SDPH remained outside the parliament – but it received higher autonomy in the organisation of workers. As Kabos (1977: 47) highlights, the relationship between the party and the union was unique in contemporary Europe. While an association such as a trade union could only function with the permission of the Ministry of the Interior, a political party could be started without permission or approval. Conversely, a party was not permitted to build up a membership or collect dues, and could only use its premises for administrative purposes, and also required a police permit to hold meetings. These rules clearly disadvantaged a mass workers' party based on membership. The outcome was that the SDPH decided that members of associations, most importantly trade unions and craft societies, would automatically become SDPH party members too. (See also Šumichrast, 2025).

In early 20th century the importance of union membership and worker self-organisation, in the struggle for universal suffrage was propagated in public discourse via the category of „organised worker' by both socialdemocratic and unionist circles. As Jolán Kelen reports:

In my day, the term 'organized worker' was a real catchphrase. 'An organized worker doesn't get drunk!' 'An organized worker respects and supports his wife!' 'An organized worker sends his children to school regularly!' They were people who had awakened to their own dignity, with their own new demands. The harbingers of a new world. (Kelen 1976: 53, translation TTM)

3.1 Hungarian social democrats, trade unions and the question of worker emancipatory 'sociological' education

In accordance with the directives of the Second International, the SDPH was formed in 1890 by members of the disbanding General Workers' Party of Hungary. Organised along similar lines to the German social democratic model, the party adopted the more reformist, centrist and opportunist approaches of Lasalle, Kautsky and Bernstein (Kabos 1977). The party's main goal was to become a mass and parliamentary party by introducing universal male suffrage and social and welfare reforms for workers. Under the influence of key anti-militarist and anarcho-syndicalist theorists, particularly Ervin Szabó, the SDPH adopted anti-nationalist and internationalist views. To become a mass party, the SDPH relied heavily on simultaneous establishment of a system of trade unionism. This trade unionist system, formally organised under the Council of Trade Unions (CTU). The latter operated continuously since 1898, but officially it could deal only with economic matters (Sipos 1984: 17).[70]

The party and the CTU supported establishment for a myriad of professional and trade associations, as well as associations of related professions (*rokon szakmák egyesületei*). As already mentioned, union membership automatically translated into membership of SDPH. Supported by the daily *Népszava*, and provision of various health and safety-related insurance services, trade union membership grew significantly in the early 20th century. It increased from 10,000 in 1901 to 71,000 in 1905, reaching 130,000 by 1912. (Csunderlik 2017: 27, quoting Romsics 2001: 78)

70 As Sipos (1984: 15) explains, political parties were granted the right to be established, but other than that, no other rights were granted. In contrast, associations operated under the civil code, and could not deal with political matters.

At its 1900 congress, SDPH realised that party and union rank and file, as well as leadership lacked education. Critical education was furthermore seen as a prerequisite for organisational stability and development, but also necessary to dissemination of the basics of socialism and class consciousness. Until then, worker education had taken the form of producing leaflets, sporadic organisation of lectures, meetings and read-alouds, as well as workers' educational circles for the very basics. By 1900, there were 43 workers' educational circles, 11 of which were in Budapest. (Schlett 1970: 31). Between 1900 and 1903, self-learning circles boomed: 178 new self-education circles were formed, 86 of which dealt only with educational activities. More than 2,000 workers' meetings were summoned, shifting increasingly from the capital to other urban areas (Schlett 1970: 33).[71]

Recognising the lack of educated party and union leadership cadres, the SDPH leadership delegated the task of creating a programme for critical education of workers and the development of socialist ideas to a group outside the party and trade union. In contemporary terminology, the goal was to enable workers to recognise the natural and social environment, and the opportunities for change (Schlett 1970: 68, based on Kégl 1903: 57). The involvement of the two public intellectuals was especially important in this deal, but their subsequent contribution to the conceptualisation and realisation of the idea was pivotal. One of them was the humanist-anarchist worker organiser Ervin Szabó, at the time close to the SDPH. The other, Oszkár Jászi was the informal leader of the emerging reformist "radical" intellectuals, and editor of the journal 20th century (*Huszadik század*). The Association for Social Sciences (Társadalomtudományi Társaság - TT) came into being, as a fruit of an alliance between the SDPH and Jászi's group. TT had two sections: the Department for Workers' Protection (*Munkásvédelmi Szakosztály*), responsible for health and social welfare, and the Committee for Organising Courses for Workers (*Munkástanfolyamokat Rendező Bizottság*). While the former became part of a more liberal Association of Economy and acted as a think tank cooperating with the government in preparing social welfare legislation, the latter group comprised social scientists who, in Hungarian historiography, are known as "radicals" and who propagated fundamental changes in political and social life. In cooperation with the trade unions, the main task of the TT was to move beyond organisation of literacy and basic emancipation, but to organise advanced, critical education to organised workers in both the social and natural sciences (Schlett 1970: 68)[72].

The TT started its workers' courses in autumn 1902 in agreement with the SDPH. The Committee for Organising Worker Courses (*Munkástanfolyamokat Rendező Bizottság*) was formed, designing curricula with the involvement of organised workers' representatives (*Népszava* 1902::1-2) as quoted in Schlettl 1970: 101). Based on the *Association for Social Sciences*' previous educational activities and organisational experience, the *Free School of Social Sciences* (*Társadalomtudományok Szabad Iskolája* – Free School) was established as an independent institution in autumn 1906. Its leadership consisted of 'radical' sociologists from TT who were close to Jászi. The key catalyst was Jászi's travel to Paris in 1905 where he learnt about new critical educational institutions. There was a strong belief in the power of rationalist science and in spreading ideas and scientific truth to workers, but the aim was also to satisfy the thirst for knowledge of an increasing number of critical university students. Following and

71 Based on police and socialist worker movement reports, Jelentés (1901), Szocialista Mozgalmak (1903).

72 The main approach of this intellectual group was positivism, based on a belief in science and hard facts, as well as historical materialism and critical scholarship (Schlett 1970, Csunderlik 2017). In the social sciences, sociology was the overarching discipline responsible for the emancipation of workers and ensuring general progress.

applying Comte's ideas, the main integrative science was sociology: a systematic social science that is then inserted into the system of natural sciences.

3.2 The Courses for Workers at the Free School of Social Sciences (1906-1909): outlook and methodologies

From the French *Université Populaire*, the Free School took over a series of short lectures from various fields, while from the English ''university extension'' model the School offered regular courses tailored to workers on basic scientific knowledge. From the *Ecole Libre des des Sciences Sociales* and the *Université Nouvelle* higher-level courses were offered to teach and develop sociology at university level. The focus was not so much on popularisation of science, but on scientific demonstrations (Szapor 1985, based on Dienes 1906). Finally, following the Lyon educational model the main goal was to provide an integrated education.

The first programme of TTSZ stated that it cannot start at the basics and remedy what the unjust educational system missed, but that educational work is additional (pótló) and supplementary (kiegészítő). The aim was:

'„[to] provide what is most urgent and what is already possible today through free social means.. not detailed knowledge, but rather tools that will enable them to pursue further education autonomously. … We see these tools as a means of familiarising them with the most important findings and facts of the natural and social sciences - that is, with the fundamental questions and directions of modern science - so that they may read and enjoy the literature to which general education provides the key.' (Report, 1907: 1-2)

Such an approach reveals the rudiments of an exemplary pedagogy: a concentrated effort to teach both practical skills and theoretical models. At the same time, the programme was also very ambitious in its goal of educating 'cultivated workers', akin to cultured workers in the Gramscian sense - individuals who can view the ever-changing findings of life and science with a critical mind, but who are also able to be practical and political:

A worker educated in this sense must be familiar with all the facts, findings and relationships upon which this worldview is based, such as the mathematical order of the celestial bodies' orbits, Earth's place in the universe and its stages of development; the fundamental laws of physical and chemical phenomena; the positive theories of biology and evolutionary theory; Darwinism and Lamarckism; the stages of development of human society; historical materialism; the relativity of social values and truths; and the role of religion, law, morality and the arts in human coexistence … We want our students to know where to expect trouble and where to hope for an improvement in their circumstances. We want them to be dissatisfied with formulas and dogmas and to view the interests and struggles of all humanity and of individual classes as part of the interconnected processes of life. (Report, 1907: 21-22)

In developing the programme for the first 1906/7 lecturers were asked to indicate the title, number of class hours and the most suitable period for them. The school was open to „organised workers' i. e. trade union (and party) members who could attend two one-1 hour long courses per week, organised in two main colleges: one in natural sciences and one in social sciences. As a second step, less comprehensive elective courses were also offered to workers, and as a third step, advanced courses were provided primarily for the benefit of university students. In addition, starting in 1909, smaller seminars were also organised. (Szapor 1985: 139–140). Regular worker classes started from 9 pm, while elective and advanced courses were offered from 8pm to 9pm, or 7 pm to 8 pm.

For example, the programme syllabus of 1907 winter semester included two obligatory courses: The History of Modern Capitalism, comprising 12 lectures, including on the origins and

emergence of large commercial capital and the accumulation of agrarian profit in towns; colonisation; manufacture as a large enterprise; machines and modern factories; emergence of city life; the victory of large factories over small and medium enterprises. Second, in natural history a course titled „Circulation of matter in the household of nature'' was offered in 12 lectures, to demonstrate the law of conservation of energy.

Among advanced courses, among many, we could find the following: The position of women in society and the aims of the women's movement (4 lectures); The sociology of death (3 lectures); Social hygiene (6 lectures); The development of ownership (6 lectures); The role of cooperatives in social development (6 lectures).

Lectures took place at a permanent location in rented rooms. Completion of the school meant attending 4 semesters, a semester lasting 3 months, with 2 classes per week. The capacity was calibrated to 400 students, but often the audience was even larger.

Originally, students were to finish the course after taking colloquia after four semesters. The idea of these exams was to enable the most talented individuals from the working class to enrol on the school's advanced sociology courses.

Evaluation of the first year stressed that teaching was provided within the narrow bottleneck of limited resources at the free school and the little time and energy remaining to workers. Nevertheless, experiences were very positive. A specific feature of the Free School was a joint evaluation, which was based on normative ideals.

'Our school strives to promote the ideals of future society, not only in spirit, but also in its organisation.' We ensure that the operation of the Free School is a collective effort, based on a cooperative partnership between teachers and students. For this reason, at the end of the school year, we gave teachers and students the opportunity to share their experiences and express any suggestions, comments or complaints. We specifically sought their opinions on issues on which even the administration itself had been unable to reach a final decision. (Report, 1907: 21–22).

In this spirit of participatory approach, the first end-of-year public evaluation on 14 May 1907 gathered about 100 lecturers and students. They agreed that obligatory courses should only be on Tuesdays and Fridays, and that workers can attend higher courses too. A statistical assessment of students attending all courses was made in the report of the academic school year too. Among many other details, it showed that 261 students attended the two main workers' courses. Most of the students were male (255), but the ratio was better in the higher courses (113:40).

3.3 Conclusions

The start of the school confirmed the euphoric expectations of its founders. „The Free School can now continue its work on a solid foundation and, year after year, explore ever-broader fields of scholarship while promoting the ideas of modern social science, sociology and social policy to ever-wider circles of Hungarian society' (Report, 1907: 22). The school, nevertheless, operated within significant constraints. 1910 seems to have been a watershed crisis period for further development of the TTSZ. Already for the 1910–1911 school year, we have no evidence of what happened (Szapor 1985). We know that starting from 1909, the trade union requested greater autonomy from the party – insisting especially greater power in economic, class and other struggles (Sipos 1985). In such context, it is likely that the role of the centralised school, which operated via an agreement between the social democrats and the emancipatory intellectuals gathered in the TT, was weakened. On the other hand, a less institutionalised, new generation of young scholars and students emerged to take over the role of workers' education: the Galilei

Circle. Unlike the TTSZ, the new youth zealously sought contact with workers, abandoning the centralised educational institution and travelling to workers' circles or homes instead.

The TTSZ's significance was twofold: it established a new model of critical, emancipatory education, an early version of public sociology, that grew quickly in both form and scope. Retrospectively, its main founder Oszkár Jászi declared that the aim was „to teach people our beautiful, clean and simple truths' (Jászi 1910)… but also the creation of an „intellectual and moral elite', which, „like a lighthouse, can withstand wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions' (Rab 1921, Jászi 1981[1933]). Since 1910, TTSZ overlapped, and increasingly gave way to the more famous Galilei Circle (led by Karl Polányi) in workers education. It was the latter then, which launched and maintained a large-scale political initiative centred on anti-militarism and socialist revolution. Thus, the emancipatory and revolutionary educational practice that initiated TTSZ ultimately formed the basis for various forms of agitation and political action, leading to the 1919 revolution and the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919. During this period, many emancipatory educational ideas were implemented in practice.

What lessons can Hungarian trade unions learn from this historical case? Firstly, at a political level, a cross-class coalition was essential for launching, conceptualising and establishing a hub that would provide critical education for organised workers. A process of educational revolution was started by circles of radical intellectuals, supported by social democratic intellectuals, and this developed further with the Galilei Circle, culminating in new educational practices in the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919–1920. The TTSZ experimented, and introduced unprecedented novelties in critical education, some of which still resonate with critical pedagogy today, such as jointly evaluating every school year with students to search for improvements.

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4. Educating the Socialist Movement: The Workers' Academy (1896-1938)

Adam Šumichrast

The Workers' Academy (WA) was one of the most important educational and cultural institutions of the Czech (and later Czechoslovak) social democratic movement. It was founded on 27 September 1896 in Prague under the Czech Social Democratic Party (from 1918 the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party) and was closely linked to the trade union movement. It served as an independent umbrella educational institution of the party.

The Workers' Academy emerged in the 1890s, during a period shaped by the rise of the mass labour movement. Its formation was embedded in a political and ideological background formed at the unification congress of the Austrian Social Democratic Party in Hainfeld at the turn of 1888 and 1889, which adopted the so-called Hainfeld Programme. Trade unions were no longer to remain exclusive organisations defending only the interests of skilled workers but were to become mass organisations open to unskilled workers and women workers alike. This development was to take place in close cooperation with the party. At the same time, trade unions increasingly organised along industrial lines, reflecting the broader shift towards a mass labour movement outlined at Hainfeld, and culminating in the establishment of the Austrian Trade Union Commission in 1893 as the highest central body of the Austrian trade union movement. This organisational development also affected the Czech Social Democratic movement, which became organisationally independent in the same year, creating a new framework for its further development.[73] Although Czech trade unions participated in the establishment of the Austrian Trade Union Commission, a separate Czech Social Democratic trade union centre was ultimately founded in 1897 under the name Odborové sdružení československé (renamed Odborové sdružení československé in 1918). This period was characterised by frequent organised strikes demanding shorter working hours, particularly the introduction of a ten-hour working day and Sunday rest. At the same time, trade unions experienced substantial membership growth during the 1890s and gradually transformed into mass organisations.

Workers' education within the Workers' Academy (WA) built on the established tradition of educational activities carried out by workers' associations, while seeking to extend and systematise these efforts on a broader scale. Its aim was to bring workers' education across multiple fields under the direction and organisation of the working-class movement itself. These ambitions, however, were initially constrained by limited material resources: the WA had no premises of its own. As early as 1898, it applied to the university rectorate for permission to use university premises for its courses, but the request was rejected. As a result, until 1906 the WA

73 Šumichrast, Adam. Z tovární do ulíc a na tribúny: Zrod masového odborového hnutia. In Kapitál, Bratislava, 2025.

operated mainly in inns and other rented or public spaces.[74] Owing largely to these informal and ad hoc conditions, relatively little documentation of the WA's educational programme from its first decade has been preserved.

4.1 Foundation of Workers´ Academy

The full original name of WA was *Dělnická akademia – jednota československých spolků dělnických v Království Českém* ('Workers' Academy – Union of Czechoslovak Workers' Associations in the Kingdom of Bohemia'), although the abbreviation WA was used from the very beginning (National Archives).

Josef Steiner and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk were among the key figures behind the establishment of the Workers' Academy. Steiner served as chairman of the Czech Social Democratic Party between 1893 and 1905. He first used the term 'Workers' Academy' in 1895 in *Právo lidu*, the party's official newspaper. Steiner also became the first chairman of the WA committee.

Masaryk, who later became the first President of Czechoslovakia, drew inspiration for the project from the positive experience of workers' educational initiatives in England, which were intended exclusively for the working class. He envisioned the Workers' Academy as a systematic educational institution at the level between secondary and higher education, with a programme lasting two to three years. Unlike in England, however, the Czech intelligentsia did not develop such a systematic educational programme, and many of those initially involved in the project gradually withdrew.[75] In his 1900 speech on the eight-hour working day, Masaryk emphasised not only working hours and wages, but also criticised the generally inferior social status assigned to the working class. He regarded education, in a broader sense, as one of the means of overcoming this situation.[76]

Masaryk's initial concept envisaged the WA being financed through workers' contributions combined with subsidies from the state and municipalities, but no public funding materialised during the Academy's first ten years. From its establishment, the actual financing model rested on entrance fees and regular membership contributions, differentiated by membership type: the system distinguished between collective members (workers' associations) and individual members, with more favourable conditions for organisations already affiliated with the Academy. Founding members provided additional support through higher voluntary contributions. The model was based on the principles of membership solidarity, differentiated contributions, and cost-sharing for common educational and social services.[77] From 1911 onwards, trade unions began making regular contributions, which became a primary source of funding. Membership numbers fluctuated, reaching up to 10 000 paying members in some years.

During the interwar period, one of the leading figures of the Workers' Academy was František Tomášek, its long-serving chairman, a historian and journalist by training, and the first Speaker of the National Assembly (the Czechoslovak parliament). Other prominent individuals

74 Třicet let dělnické výchovy. Praha: Dělnická akademie, 1926, pp. 89-90.

75 Ibid., p.p. 90.

76 Ibid., p.p. 96-97.

77 National Archives, Prague, JF fonds, inventory no. BI4.

associated with the WA included Josef Fischer, Volfgang Jankovec, Ludmila Jankovcová (later the first female minister in the Czech lands), Václav Patzak, Josef Macek, and Karel Bondy.

After the First World War, funding was broadened to include subsidies from the Social Democratic Party, the state, and students' fees. Nevertheless, financial difficulties persisted: during the 1920s the Academy repeatedly applied for state subsidies because membership contributions alone were insufficient, and it frequently operated with budget deficits.[78] By the end of the 1930s the WA had approximately 12 000 members and 81 local branches – 58 in the Czech lands, 16 in Slovakia, and 7 in Subcarpathian Ruthenia.[79]

4.2 Workers Academy as an educational institution

The WA´s statutes defined its objective as the 'comprehensive education of its members and the provision of assistance' through meetings, publications, libraries, lectures, educational institutions, exhibitions, petitions, shelters, the promotion of the arts, employment mediation, and recreational activities (Malinský, 2017). Membership was open to everyone aged sixteen and above. The WA consisted of several specialised organisational sections, including library, economic, cultural and recreational, drama, lectures, social affairs, women's, choir, and physical education. Its principal activities centred on its library, which contained 143 books shortly after its establishment and around 5000 volumes before the First World War. In addition, the Academy organised courses and lectures on political economy, history, social education, foreign languages (French and German), as well as stenography, bookkeeping, public speaking, and health education. Its cultural activities included theatre performances and workers' exhibitions. The Academy also maintained its own publishing house, issuing *Věstník Dělnické akademie* from 1907 and *Dělnická osvěta* from 1909 (Ptáčková, 2013).

The initial concept for membership was open both to individuals and to collective members in the form of workers' associations. For these associations, membership primarily provided access to extensive educational, organisational, and methodological support. The WA trained public speakers and arranged lectures on a wide range of topics, while the associations covered only the lecturers' travel expenses. It also recommended educational and specialist literature, facilitated its acquisition under favourable conditions, and offered portable libraries on loan to associations that did not have their own library.

The WA also supported the cultural and associational life of workers´ organisations. It recommended plays for amateur theatre performances, supplied the necessary materials, prepared programmes for association events, and provided guidance on organising activities. It presented itself as the central advisory and coordinating institution for workers' associations. Membership also offered publishing benefits, including favourable access to Academy publications and participation in the distribution of major socialist publications.[80]

78 National Archives, Prague, PVS fonds, inventory no. 311.

79 Malínský, Jiří. Masarykova dělnická akademie. Dějiny a vize. In Argument, Praha, 2017.

80 National Archives, Prague, JF fonds, inventory no. BI4.

4.3 Pedagogical philosophy and methods

The WA´s represented a systematic and philosophically grounded approach to educating workers, aiming to develop independent critical thinking, an understanding of socialist ideas, commitment to democratic principles, and active participation in public life. Its objective was not only to produce 'fighters for workers' rights' but also informed, morally responsible officials, propagandists, and political leaders of the social democratic movement.[81]

Central to this mission was what WA representatives themselves termed the 'propaganda of democratic socialism.' This did not refer merely to the general education of the workforce, but specifically to the training of propagandists – individuals equipped not only to understand the shortcomings of capitalism, but also to argue persuasively how socialism would remedy them (26 let, 114). Guidance for practical engagement with ordinary audiences anticipated that most people were not prepared to engage with deep theoretical argument but could readily grasp well-presented facts and figures connected to their immediate surroundings. Propagandists were accordingly advised not to open with an idea in its full ideological abstraction, but with a concrete, related story, on the premise that concreteness was far more persuasive than abstraction. A further practical insight held that people were rarely capable of bold, independent initiative on their own, but tended to follow example; it was therefore considered essential to point to concrete instances elsewhere in which people had collectively changed their own conditions.[82]

This pedagogical outlook also shaped the WA's approach to its library and publishing activities, which extended beyond technical and general-educational literature to include socialist poetry, novels, music, and works of visual art. The emotional register of persuasion was treated as no less important than the rational one – a stance illustrated by the practice of singing the 'Píseň práce' ('Song of Labour') at the funeral of a deceased comrade. As one contemporary account put it, too little attention was generally paid – even by artists themselves – to the social significance of art, with many reformers assuming that a statistical table carried more weight than an artist's depiction of social poverty and injustice; socialism, it was argued, had not emerged through the 'cold path' of rational exposition, but had sprung from a sense of justice and sympathy for the insulted and the humiliated.[83]

A further methodological concern addressed how to reach ideologically 'indifferent' audiences. WA representatives recognised that attendees at organised lectures on socialism were overwhelmingly already convinced socialists – a pattern reinforced, particularly in the Czechoslovak context, by the fact that social democracy had built its own extensive ideological and political subculture, encompassing not only trade unions but also cooperative societies, gymnastics associations, and reading, choral, hiking, and chess clubs, among others. Reaching beyond this existing base called for a distinct strategy: lectures were to be delivered within ideologically neutral organisations, and articles placed in the non-socialist press. In these settings, however, explicitly socialist terminology was to be avoided; propagandists were instead advised to build on the moral convictions the person already held, leading them toward conclusions they had not reached on their own. The underlying assumption was that resistance to socialism would dissolve once an individual accepted one foundational principle – that no

81 Malínský, Jiří. Masarykova dělnická akademie. Dějiny a vize. In Argument, Praha, 2017.

82 Třicet let dělnické výchovy. Praha: Dělnická akademie, 1926, p.p. 118-119.

83 Ibid., p. 120.

person should live by exploiting another – a principle considered difficult for anyone to reasonably reject.[84] (26 let, 120-121).

4.4 The institutional development of the Workers' Academy

The First World War marked a decisive turning point in the WA's development. In the post-war period, the Academy significantly expanded and institutionalised its activities as an adult education institution, primarily through evening courses, under the public adult education legislation of 1919 and 1926 and subsequently implementing regulations. It was funded by the Social Democratic Party, state subsidies, and students' fees, and cooperated with the Masaryk People's Institute and the Central Workers' School.[85]

The WA´s educational programme consisted of at least 200 teaching hours per year. Approximately two-thirds of the curriculum was devoted to general subjects, including history, philosophy, law, economics, and civic education, while one-third focused on vocational subjects such as foreign languages, bookkeeping, and technical training. Theoretical and political education focused on the philosophy and theory of socialism and non-dogmatic Marxism. The curriculum also included dedicated courses on Marx's work, class struggle, and social legislation. Additional activities included discussions, study visits, cultural events, travelling exhibitions, and film screenings.[86]

The WA also ran schools specifically aimed at officials and public speakers. These consisted of two parts. The first covered subjects such as the history of the labour movement, the cultural movement and its goals, the nature and aims of trade union, cooperative, and political organisations, association law and assembly law, and association bookkeeping. The second part focused on the mother tongue, the use of foreign words, public speaking, and the political programmes and platforms of various socialist tendencies and major parties. This 'school' amounted to 50 hours in total. There was also a separate socialist seminar, running at 4 × 25 hours, which covered the following areas: history from a socialist perspective, social elements in Czech literature, the cooperative movement – its history and organisation – and an analysis of Marx's Capital. A special holiday socialist school also operated, with an even more specifically focused curriculum.[87]

The WA's influence extended beyond education. Its programme document document *Co chtějí socialisté* ('What the Socialists Want', 1934) gave voice to the aspirations of the younger intellectual generation within the social democratic movement, while the Academy also actively supported Spanish democratic socialism during the Civil War. Its journal *Dělnická osvěta* served both as a platform for the left wing of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party and as a broader forum for intellectual debate reaching beyond the party's original political framework. It

84 Ibid., p.p. 120-121.

85 Ptáčková, Iva. Vznik lidových škol pro vzdělávání dospělých v období první republiky. Master's thesis. Univerzita Jana Amose Komenského Praha, Praha, 2013, p. 25, 44.

86 National Archives, Prague, PVS fonds, inventory no. 112/1; Malínský, Jiří. Masarykova dělnická akademie. Dějiny a vize. In Argument, Praha, 2017.

87 National Archives, Prague, PVS fonds, inventory no. 112/1.

is worth noting that Dělnická osvěta also placed considerable emphasis on young people, their problems, prospects, and efforts to organise.[88]

4.5 Conclusions

The WA became one of the most enduring educational institutions of the Czech and later Czechoslovak social democratic movement. Beyond its primary educational mission, it gradually developed into an important intellectual centre that contributed to political debate, civic education, and the formation of democratic political culture within the labour movement. Its influence extended beyond formal education through publishing activities, public discussions, and the preparation of programme documents addressing major social and political issues of the time.

During the 1930s, the WA increasingly responded to the growing threat of fascism, producing educational materials and public statements defending democracy. Following the Munich Agreement in 1938, many of its leading members became involved in the resistance movement through the Petition Committee *Věrni zůstaneme* (PVVZ), one of the most important non-communist resistance organisations during the Second World War. In this respect, the WA evolved from an educational institution into an important centre of democratic civic engagement.[89]

Although its activities were terminated after the communist takeover in 1948, the institution was re-established in 1991 as the Masaryk Workers' Academy and has operated since 2009 under the name Masaryk Democratic Academy. While its role has changed considerably over time, the institution continues to build on the tradition of linking education, public debate, and democratic political thought established by the original Workers' Academy.

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88 See, for example, nos. 2, 4 and 5, vol. XVIII, 1932 of Dělnická osvěta. The articles analyse congresses of social democratic youth and note that educating young people and encouraging their political participation is no longer enough. Young people themselves seek practical social action: they focus on a social programme, work at the regional level, intervene in matters concerning social conditions, and inform apprentices and young workers about their rights.

89 See Šustrová, Radka. Demokracie a socialismus: Dva programové dokumenty demokratické levice z první poloviny 20. století. Olomouc 2018.

Třicet let dělnické výchovy. Praha: Dělnická akademie, 1926.

5. The influence of critical educational practices on trade union training within the CCOO trade union

Luis de la Fuente Sanz

5.1 Introduction

Historically, the revitalization and strengthening of the labour movement in Spain have been deeply interlinked with critical educational practices and programs. This text focuses on one specific example-the development of training within the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) trade union- but provides also a further contextual information on the role of critical education in Spanish labour movement

The aim of this text is to examine the CCOO Juan Muñiz Zapico Confederal School´s training methodology. CCOO's training constitutes an active, participatory and cooperative training practice for adults, drawing on certain perspectives of critical pedagogy developed in Spain. For this reason, this text also presents some strands of critical pedagogy that have emerged in relation to the historical development of the labour movement in Spain, in contrast to traditional training.

The first section of this text presents the various strands of critical pedagogy that have developed in Spain. The second section contextualises the trade union situation and trade union training, covering the period from the Franco regime to the subsequent transition to democracy, during which trade union training and awareness-raising played a significant role in advocating for workers' rights and promoting democratic values. The third section examines the creation of the CCOO's Juan Muñiz Zapico Confederal Training School as an example of the influence that the various strands of critical pedagogy have had on trade union training in recent years.

5.2 Origins and evolution of critical pedagogy in Spain

Critical pedagogy in Spain has historically been linked to its political and social context, seeking to move beyond the traditional school model through active methodologies, democratic structures and openness to the wider environment. However, these movements have constituted what the literature defines as a 'movement of individuals', without achieving widespread integration into the reality of schools (Pozo, 2004).

Its historical development can be divided into three main periods:

- From the late 19th century to the early 20th century: Pioneering initiatives emerged, such as the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Free institution of Teaching)* (led by Francisco Giner de los Ríos, which was secular and bourgeois in character and had a major impact on formal education); the *Escuela Moderna (Modern School)* (founded by Francisco Ferrer i Guàrdia, with a rationalist and anarchist ideology, which had a lesser subsequent impact and was

concentrated in Catalonia); and the *Escuela Nueva (New School)*, promoted by the PSOE in the mould of British Labour.

- From the first third of the 20th century until the Dictatorship (1939–1975): Following an initial phase aligned with the European New School movement in Madrid and Catalonia, the Civil War and the dictatorship led to a serious regression in education. Despite the repression, minority practices persisted and, towards the end of the regime, clandestine movements for educational renewal emerged in defence of a public, democratic and equitable school system (Esteban Frades, 2016).
- Democratic period (1975–present): Although innovative projects have continued to emerge within formal education, they have largely developed on an individual basis and have had a limited impact on the dominant educational model.

In short, despite the constant presence of critical pedagogy initiatives in Spain since the 19th century, their actual impact on formal and informal education as a whole has historically been limited.

5.3 The evolution of trade union presence and trade union training during the dictatorship in Spain

During the dictatorship (1939–1975), existing trade unions were outlawed and strikes were banned, with offences punishable as sedition. In 1940, the state established an official, single and vertically integrated trade union with compulsory membership for workers and employers. However, between the 1950s and 1960s, the first workers' mobilisations emerged through spontaneous workers' committees. From these developments emerged clandestine communist organisations – the forerunners of Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) – as well as the Catholic Workers' Youth (JOC) and the Catholic Action Workers' Brotherhood (HOAC). These organisations employed the strategy of 'entryism' to participate in the elections of the official trade union.

As an outcome of this duality, in the final years of the Franco regime, two models of trade union training coexisted:

- Official training, provided by the vertical trade union. From 1974 onwards, it included an advanced course for negotiators. However, participation was low, and it was characterised by hierarchical and authoritarian instruction, aligned with the official ideology, opposed to pluralism and detached from trade union action (Fierro, 1997).
- Clandestine training, developed between 1971 and 1975 by clandestine movements (CCOO, UGT, CNT, CIG-INTG, ELA, USO). Despite the risk of repression and imprisonment, they organised courses in venues offering some form of legal cover, such as church premises, labour law offices or cultural centres. It is noteworthy the figure of Marcelino Camacho, founder of CCOO and a political prisoner, who wrote letters from prison; these were copied and distributed clandestinely with the aim of raising awareness, promoting democratic values and fostering class consciousness.

Prior to legalisation in 1977, CCOO did not operate as a trade union confederation but as a unitary, assembly-based movement. Many of its members held responsibilities and positions within the official trade union, to avoid reprisals. After legalisation, CCOO established itself with a strong socio-political, democratic and grassroots orientation, where the assembly system allowed the distinction between members and non-members to be overcome.

This entire process was influenced by intense internal migration of low-skilled rural populations towards urban industry and services. Consequently, at the first CCOO congress (1978), it was

recognised that training and the development of class consciousness were the driving force behind the organisation's cohesion, leading to the design of a trade union training programme for leaders and activists, conceived as a genuine 'guide to action'.

5.4 Methods and methodologies used by CCOO from a critical perspective: The case of the CCOO confederal training school

Originally, CCOO's trade union training was geared towards recruitment. It consisted of a series of trade union training leaflets, short publications and magazines aimed at raising awareness amongst the working class. This approach was more ideological, cultural and values-based, going beyond specific workplace demands and economic issues (Miguélez, 1980; cited in Fierro, 1997)

In 1988, there was a shift in CCOO's trade union training policy. This change sought to provide members and members of the governing bodies with the ideological resources to challenge the dominant discourse. The training was tailored to different categories of participants: a) union members, b) trade union delegates, particularly those newly elected, c) senior officials, and d) the union's salaried staff. However, in 1992, a distinction was subsequently made between training aimed at delegates and that aimed at senior officials. This dual structure has been maintained to the present day.

The four-year programme for delegates was structured to progress from the most basic level to more specialised theoretical training and an understanding of socio-labour realities, whilst the two-year programme for union executives focused on common issues relating to social, trade union, economic and political realities.

In 1978, the CCOO trade union established its national training school, known as the Central Training School, although it was not until 1991 that it became fully operational under the name Juan Muñiz Zapico Confederal Trade Union Training School. Since its inception, this school has been tasked with training trainers and union officials, in collaboration with the CCOO's regional and sectoral secretariats for organisation and trade union action.

In 1989, CCOO laid the foundations for a methodology for its trade union training (CCOO, 1989). These foundations are based on the principles of community pedagogy and Francisco Gutiérrez's 'total language' method (1986), a model that emerged in Latin America. This method was trialled prior to its implementation in trade union training over a period of 10 years through a participatory action research project at an adult education centre in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Madrid.

The methodology of CCOO's trade union training courses has, from the outset, been geared towards achieving maximum participation and teamwork. The training method is based on teamwork, debate and the development of alternatives. Participants are thus encouraged to read, discuss and reflect, comparing the concepts covered in the course with their own lived experiences. (Miguélez, 1980, cited in Fierro, 1997). This method directly links trade union training with trade union action.

Training is guided by the following considerations (based on CCOO, 1989): Trade union training must be geared towards addressing the real needs of practical action. To achieve this, it is essential to replace one-way teaching with a group-based, participatory methodology that enables a critical assessment of what is being done, how it is being done, and for what purpose. This approach seeks to examine practice in order to return to it with new knowledge capable of transforming social reality. In this way, learning goes beyond theory and fosters individual awareness through a dynamic process of reflection and action, in which personal development and collective interaction reinforce one another to consolidate a genuine social commitment.

Among the methodological steps identified by CCOO for group work are the following:

1. a situational analysis of the group;
2. the organisation of working groups;
3. the identification and analysis of the problem;
4. research, conclusions, an action plan;
5. an evaluation of the training.

This methodology aims to use group dynamics to accelerate the process of getting to know one another and group integration, so that each member is aware of the expectations or objectives of the other members and operating rules are established. Once the group has been integrated, it is proposed that the group be divided into smaller sub-groups to facilitate the work of all members, ensuring individual work, space for shared reflection within a small group, and, in a plenary session, a sharing of ideas and debate. The aim is to reach consensual agreements that reflect the views of the whole group, without a significant minority being excluded from the agreements. It is important for the group to be able to identify the most pressing aspects of the issue, and those requiring an immediate solution. To this end, group activities or exercises are carried out, enabling the problem to be analysed from a critical perspective whilst taking into account each individual's subjective view. The groups' conclusions will be presented in a clear, specific and valid manner for all groups. The group must then be able to draw up an action plan to address the problem at hand. Finally, the group's formation and functioning must be evaluated in terms of the objectives achieved, the tasks carried out and the methods employed.

The aim of this participatory methodology is to convey the trade union's values: equality, solidarity, cooperation and shared responsibility. This is why discussion in working groups is encouraged and why the conclusions are intended to be the result of collective reflection (Paz, 1980, cited in Fierro, 1997).

In recent years, this active and participatory methodology, based on cooperative learning amongst adults, has gradually evolved to incorporate values such as respect for diversity, equal participation and a commitment to responsibility, both individual and collective (CCOO, n.d.). It draws on pedagogical theories developed by authors such as Paulo Freire, Ettore Gelpi and Edgar Dale, amongst others. The aim is for all training activities to follow the SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) and Spencer Kagan's cooperative structures (PIES – Positive Interdependence, Individual Responsibility, Equitable Participation).

Furthermore, in recent years, the training programme has been undergoing a transformation. On the one hand, there has been an increase in online training, which is more specialised and focused on specific knowledge. On the other hand, there is an expansion of the content and skills covered in training for trade union leaders, delving deeper into issues such as socio-political values and knowledge of the history of the CCOO trade union, as well as highlighting the union's most recent political stances, using a methodology based on a combination of lectures and workshops.

5.5 Conclusions

Trade union training, as exemplified by the CCOO Juan Muñiz Zapico Confederal School, goes beyond the creation of a training institution to establish itself as an emancipatory training project linked to trade union action aimed at securing social rights. Its main objective has been to equip trade union representatives with tools for ideological struggle, transforming education into

'training for action' that fosters critical awareness and the questioning of established power structures.

This approach is inspired by various critical pedagogies. It aims to break with the traditional educational hierarchy by implementing an active and participatory methodology in which knowledge is constructed collectively from lived and subjective experience. By integrating values of solidarity, equality and shared responsibility, it also promotes 'transformative reflection-action' that empowers individuals to intervene in and change their social environment.

For the reformist movement as a whole, this trajectory, which carries on the legacy of the Free Teaching Institution (Institución Libre de Enseñanza) and the New School (Escuela Moderna), demonstrates that education is an indispensable driving force for the attainment of freedoms and the development of a participatory socio-political trade unionism.

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