How to Spread the Word?

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This essay is a reprint from the December 1967 of Monthly Review. It is dedicated to the revival of the U.S. labor movement after nearly three decades of retreat and inactivity. Leo Huberman was one of the founders of Monthly Review, and a devoted proponent and practitioner of labor education.

—The Editors

In the late 1930’s I sat in on a course of education for trade unionists. That these workers had a desire to learn was evident by their enrollment in a class held in the evenings, after they had done a day’s work. That the teacher knew his subject was manifest from the brilliance of his lecture. That the combination of students’ desire and teacher’s grasp of the material did not result in learning was obvious from the fact that before the hour was over, several members of the class were asleep; it was apparent, too, from the decline in enrollment—the next class was attended by only half the students, and the third time the class met, less than a quarter who had signed up were in attendance.

This, by and large, has been the experience in trade union education in the United States. Union officials, badgered by the pleas of the education director to appropriate the small sum needed for trade union classes, finally yield, reluctantly. The classes are held, and they fizzle. The union officials then declare triumphantly, “See, the workers don’t want to learn.” The teacher, saddened by his experience, agrees. But the conclusion is totally wrong; it isn’t that the workers do not want to learn—that is seldom the case. The cause of the failure is that the teacher does not know how to teach.

This experience is not unique to trade union classes. It happens with radical groups, too. And it happens in under-developed countries where revolutionary ardor fills new classrooms with enthusiastic workers and peasants—and poor teaching, just as quickly, empties those classrooms.

This need not happen. Workers and peasants, no matter how impoverished their previous educational background, will stay the course, and they will learn, if the teaching they get is good teaching.

What is good teaching? What did that teacher in the trade union class do wrong? He had talked for about ten minutes when a hand went up and a student asked a question. It was a thoughtful question. The teacher should have felt flattered—had said something which had stimulated one of his listeners to think. He should have felt like hugging the questioner—instead, he was annoyed. The smooth flow of his carefully planned lecture had been interrupted and he put off the questioner with “I’ll come to that later.”
His mistake was in being concerned only with subject matter; he should have been concerned with students. He was a lecturer, not a teacher. The lecturer teaches subject matter; the teacher teaches people. The difference is crucial.

Obviously, where classes are very large and the lecturer stands before so many faces that he cannot possibly know them as individual human beings, good teaching by definition, is not feasible. Here the lecturer does his job well if he masters his material and presents it in as lively a manner as possible. But that trade union class had only 17 students and in a class that size (up to a limit of 25) it is easy for the teacher to get to know his students as individual human beings with varying backgrounds, and good teaching is possible.

It is possible because the teacher can base his lesson on the background and experience of the students and, by skillful questioning, get them to participate in the learning process. The subject matter is no longer an end in itself but a vehicle for making the students think, for giving them tools for understanding the world and their position in it. From the lecture hall, students emerge with a body of information; from a good classroom discussion in which they have participated actively because the subject matter is keyed to their experience, students emerge with an analytical approach to problems, with a comprehension of underlying forces.

The subject of the first lesson in that trade union course was an introduction to the capitalist system. As I said above, the teacher gave a brilliant lecture beginning with feudalism, the change to capitalism, the words of Karl Marx, exploitation of the working class, the whole bit. But he wasn’t teaching, he was telling. He was telling the working class in words what it had experienced in life, instead of drawing from that experience the analysis he wanted the students to make.

Here below is a summary outline of the way the same subject was taught to a group of trade unionists in a workers’ summer school. It should be noted that in this class and those that followed, no one went to sleep, the lively discussion was enjoyed by both teacher and students, the students were enthusiastic about the school, and tests showed that they had, in fact, learned what was taught them.

No tape recording of the class session is available so it should be understood that the questions and answers are only a fragment of the whole, listed merely to show the approach, to give the flavor of the discussion, to clarify the technique.

Questions

- Where do you work?
- Why do you work?
- Does the man who owns the factory work alongside you?
- Have you ever seen the stockholders of the corporation working in the plant?
- But you all agreed you had to work in order to live; now you tell me there are some people who live without working. How come?
- Then there are two groups of people in our society. One group, to which you belong, lives by . . . ? And the other group to which your employer belongs lives by . . . ?
Answers

- Students give the names of companies where they are employed. (This question serves the additional purpose of helping the teacher get to know his students and the students to know each other in their first meeting).

- Have to work in order to live;  
  Can’t eat without working;  
  Just gotta get that dough each week to pay the rent.

- (Laughter) That’ll be the day;  
  I’ve never seen him;  
  My plant is owned by a big corporation.

- No, they don’t work there;
- Of course not.

- They don’t have to work because they own the factory;  
  They get profits from the business.

- Working.  
  Owning.

(Teacher writes on blackboard)
2 groups
Workers — live by working
Employers — live by owning

Questions

- Have you always had work?

- Mary says her plant was closed down for over a year. But she works in a textile mill. Didn’t people need the shirts her mill turned out? And Henry’s refrigerator plant, he tells us, was shut down for five months; didn’t people want refrigerators anymore?

- You mean to say that even though people needed shirts and wanted refrigerators, unless the owner made a profit, he closed up?

- What you are saying, then, is that in our system of production, goods will be produced only if there is a profit?

- Was that always true?

- Why don’t they make shirts, and refrigerators, and washing machines, and autos for themselves now?
Answers

• Yes.
  I was laid off for five months once.
  My factory was closed during the depression for over a year.

• Sure, people needed shirts but they couldn’t pay for them because they didn’t have any money, so the boss had to shut the mill down.
  When Henry’s boss couldn’t sell his refrigerators, he closed the plant.
  If I were him I’d have done the same thing. He’s gotta make a profit or he must go out of business.

• Yes, he’s in business to make money.
  If he doesn’t make money, he shuts down the plant.
  It doesn’t matter if he’s a good guy or bad guy, unless he makes a profit, he has to close up.

• That’s right.
  Unless there’s a profit, there’s no production.

• Guess so.
  No, there was a time when people made what they needed for themselves, when they needed it.

• Don’t have the money.
  You need factories and raw materials and expensive equipment to make the things people want nowadays.

Let’s sum up what we have discussed so far. You say that in our system of production there are 2 groups (teacher points to blackboard):

Workers — live by working
Employers — live by owning

The employers live by owning (teacher writes on blackboard).

The employers own:

  the factories
  equipment, machinery
  raw materials

  the means of production

The employers own what is necessary to produce goods in our society. This system of production is called (teacher writes on blackboard):

CAPITALISM

Object — not to produce goods as needed but
to make a profit

Now lets continue.
Questions

- The owners of the means of production, the employers, are also called capitalists. Which of the two groups, workers or capitalists, have more power? Why?

- What gives them more power?

- Which group has the most power with the government?

Answers

- The bosses have the most power because they have more money.
- The capitalists have the most power because if they don’t give you a job, you can’t pay your bills.
- The capitalists have the most power because if you don’t work you starve, if they don’t go to work they have enough money to live on.

- They own the means of production.

Let me answer that question by reading a quotation from a book written a long time ago:

   The facts of the situation amount to this: that a comparatively small number of men control the water power... that the same number of men largely control the railroads; that by agreements handed around among themselves they control prices, and that same group of men control the larger credits of the country... *The masters of the government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States.*

   The man who wrote that was in a position to know. He was the president of the United States when he wrote it. His name was Woodrow Wilson.

In our next lesson, we will discuss what the working class can do to protect itself from the power of the capitalist class.

It is apparent from this lesson that a discussion does not mean merely aimless talk leading here, there, and everywhere. The good teacher must know his subject as well as the lecturer; he must have the same mastery of his material but, in addition, he must give thought to the best ways of presenting it in terms of the experience of his students. He must have a lesson plan. This does not mean such strict adherence to his plan that he won’t be quick to pick up and pursue this or that interesting point arising from the students’ response—but it does mean that he must not be sidetracked indefinitely. His lesson must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. He must know before the discussion begins the basic points he is going to make and he must make them.

A key point to remember is that the discussion must never be allowed to become a dialogue between teacher and a student with the other students feeling that they need not listen until a question is directed specifically to them. The students must listen carefully to other student responses as well as to teacher questions. There are
techniques for establishing this continual participation. "Do you agree with what John just said, Philip? No? Then what's your answer to the question?"

In this connection, the good teacher never makes the mistake of calling upon students in order. When the first question is directed to Student A, the next to Student B, and the next to Student C, there is no need for Student Z to pay any attention because he knows precisely when he will be invited to participate; until that moment arrives the discussion can become irrelevant to him.

There is an even more important reason for not calling upon students in a set order. The good teacher is concerned less with subject matter than with the people he is teaching. He wants them to learn to think. If he is alert and has done his job well, all the students will have participated in the discussion before it is over and he will then be aware of their background and capabilities. He will know his students, and consequently he can direct questions to them in accordance with their varying ability. The easy questions will go to the less able students—it is important for them to get a feeling of accomplishment—and the more difficult, more subtle questions will be directed to the brighter students—they must be extended to the utmost or they will lose interest.

The good teacher never teaches a lesson without using the blackboard, and he should insist that the basic points he writes on the blackboard should be recorded by the students in a notebook, along with other notes they choose to take themselves. There is a sound reason for the blackboard and the notebook: some people learn by hearing; some people learn by seeing; some people learn only by using their muscles; and almost everybody learns best by a combination of all three. Thus, the discussion itself will be suited to those who learn by hearing; the basic points on the blackboard will help those who learn by seeing; and writing in the notebook will drive the points home for those who must use their muscles to learn. The notebook with the fundamentals of each lesson therein recorded will be of use to the student for review purposes and, for the brightest ones, it can become a tool for teaching others when the need arises. And the need already exists for more classes for workers, newcomers to the radical movement, and peasants in the underdeveloped countries.