

MARXIST

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ASHOK DHAWALE

CONTRIBUTORS

ASHOK DHAWALE is President, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), Member, Central Secretariat, CPI(M).

MADHU PRASAD taught for many years in a college in Delhi University, New Delhi.

ANIL BHATTI retired as Professor of German from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

LI JIE is President of Qiushi Journal Press, China.

For subscription and other queries, contact

The Manager, Marxist, A.K.Gopalan Bhavan, 27-29 Bhai Veer Singh Marg, New Delhi 110001

Phone: (91-11) 2373 8725. Email: pdpbln@gmail.com

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MADHU PRASAD

The October Revolution and the Marxist Concept of Polytechnical Education

The enormous political impact of the October Revolution of 1917 has been conceded even by forces that remained implacably opposed to it. However, those who were open to acknowledging its historic significance were able to see its complex and multifaceted consequences for the future of human society. These consequences remain important and meaningful even though the Revolution that ‘shook the world’, to recall the title of John Reed’s famous account of 1917, faltered and collapsed after more than seven decades. Its success and failures left an indelible mark on the history of the 20th Century. Today as we mark a hundred years since its occurrence, the lessons to be learnt from this unprecedented achievement of the oppressed and dispossessed classes shine as beacons to inspire and guide contemporary and future struggles for equality and social justice.

Dr. Emile Joseph Dillon, an Irishman who lived in Russia from 1877-1914 and re-visited the country in 1918 and 1929, was a leading researcher and linguist associated with Russian universities and also a prominent commentator on Russian affairs for international newspapers for several decades. Familiar with Tsarist Russia’s mediaeval institutions and with the ‘hapless lot’ of an ‘uncultured’ peasantry, Dillon believed that its people could only be restrained by the ‘primitive ideas’ of God and an autocratic

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Ruler.' The people had for ages seen . . . all kinds of crime, political, private, and absolutely wanton outrages perpetrated in the name of God, the Tsar, and the fatherland by their own educated and spiritual guides.' It was to free the people from that 'mighty vampire' that the revolution was conceived by the intellectuals. However, 'the fundamental error committed by its promoters,' he claimed, 'was that they treated the masses as Ivan the Terrible had treated his opritchniki, and offered them a share in the booty – the land – whereupon the people contented itself with reversing the existing system . . . and took to preying on the classes that possessed land, fortune, culture.'

In 1918 he had dismissed the Revolution: 'In the Bolshevik Revolution there is not the vestige of a constructive or social idea. . . . Bolshevism is Tsardom upside-down.' [*The Eclipse of Russia* (1918)]

Returning ten years later he was amazed at what he found: 'Everywhere people are thinking, working, combining, making scientific discoveries and industrial inventions . . . *one could hardly trust the evidence of one's senses*. . . . (The Bolsheviks) have mobilized well over 150,000,000 of listless dead-and-alive human beings, and infused into them a new spirit. They have wrecked and buried the entire old-world order in one-sixth of the globe and are digging graves for it everywhere else. They have shown themselves able and resolved to meet emergency, and to fructify opportunity. Their way of dealing with home rule and the nationalities is a masterpiece of ingenuity and elegance. . . . *Bolshevism is no ordinary historic event* . . . nor could it have come into existence were it not for *the necessity of putting an end to the injustice and inequities that infect our superannuated civilization* . . . To me it seems to be *the mightiest driving force for good or for evil in the world today*.' (emphasis added). [*Russia To-day and To-morrow* (1929)]

At the heart of this revolutionary change lay a process of social transformation that had been articulated in Karl Marx's critique of 18th C materialist writings: 'The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. . . . The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.' [(*Third Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) MECW vol 5 (7)] And again, 'If man is shaped by his surroundings, his surroundings must be made human.' [*The Holy Family* (1845) MECW vol 4 (131)]

The dialectical praxis that follows from understanding what is involved in 'educating the educator' would be clearly stated in Marx's opening intervention as recorded in the Minutes of the General Council Meeting of the International Working Men's Association, August 10th 1869:¹ 'Cit. Marx said there was a peculiar difficulty connected with this question. On the one hand a change of social circumstances was required to establish a proper system of education, on the other hand a proper system of education was required to bring about a change of social circumstances; *we must therefore commence where we were.*' (Emphasis added.)

Marx and Engels did not approach the question of education primarily as an abstract theoretical or even a practical 'professional', and still less a vocational, concern. They provided the first systematic formulation of educational theory as emerging from a radical transformation of society and a radical reassessment of the nature of man and of his place in society. The advent of capitalist society

¹ The discussion had started with the proposition to reaffirm the Geneva resolution (1866) which demanded that mental should be combined with bodily labour, with gymnastics and technological training.

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and its consolidation in the second half of the nineteenth century was the focus of their analysis. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), they highlighted the revolutionary transformations brought about by an ascendant bourgeoisie, but equally exposed the alienating conditions of exploitation to which the working class, including men, women and children, were reduced by their total dependence on a division of labour which produced fragmentation of productive functions and the routinizing of tasks that were constantly threatened with obsolescence. The contradictions of capitalist society, the crisis of over-production, of plenty amidst deprivation, and the historical necessity to overcome it, led to the framing of an overall strategy for bringing an end to the reign of capitalism itself.

From this perspective, education appeared as a significant force in the struggle for shaping a class of persons (the class-for-itself), that were socially equipped with the capacity to fully develop their human creativity, and not remain subjugated to the domination of capital. 'Modern industry indeed compels society, under penalty of death, to replace the detail-worker of today, crippled by life-long repetition of one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to a mere fragment of a man, by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers. . . . and when the working class comes to power, as inevitably it must, technical instruction, both theoretical and practical, will take the proper place in the working-class schools. There is also no doubt that such revolutionary ferments, the final result of which is the abolition of the old division of labour, are diametrically opposed to the capitalistic form of production, and to the economic status of the labourer corresponding to that form.' [*Capital* (1887) (488)]²

² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1965. All other references from the works of Marx and Engels are from the *Karl Marx*

The scientific and technological revolution ensured that the technical basis of modern industrial production was being constantly revolutionized which demanded the 'variation of labour, fluency of function, universal mobility of the labourer'. However the 'social character inherent in its capitalist form . . . constantly threatens, by taking away the instruments of labour, to snatch from his hands his means of subsistence, and by suppressing his detail-function, to make him superfluous.' This competitiveness results in the creation of the 'reserve army of labour', kept always at the disposal of capital, 'in the most reckless squandering of labour-power, and in the devastation caused by a social anarchy, which turns every economic progress into a social calamity.' [*Capital* (1887) (487)]

The capitalistic form of modern industry reproduces the old division of labour by converting the workman into a 'living appendage of the machine' and hence alienates the worker not only from the product of his labour but even from the act of production itself. It is true that labour produces wonderful things for the rich, but for the worker it produces deprivation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back to a barbarous type of labour, and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence – but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism.' As a result, labour, life activity and productive life itself appears to man only as the means for satisfying a need: the necessity of physical existence.' [*The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* MECW vol 3 (273; 276)]

But the historical development of the antagonisms inherent in a given form of production present the only way in which a given form of production can be dissolved and a new one established. It was, therefore, from the sites of capitalist production itself that

Fredrick Engels Collected Works (MECW), Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975.

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Marx and Engels formulated the theory of how the working class can become capable of overcoming the conditions of exploitation that mutilated and impeded full human formation. 'From the factory system budded, as Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future, an education that will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings.' Marx also drew attention to the work of the Quaker, John Bellers, 'a very phenomenon in the history of Political Economy, (who) saw most clearly at the end of the 17th C, the necessity for abolishing the present system of education and division of labour, which begat hypertrophy and atrophy at the two opposite extremities of society. Amongst other things he says this: 'An idle learning being little better than the learning of idleness. . . . Labour being as proper for the bodies' health as eating is for its living; for what pains a man saves by ease, he will find in disease. . . . Labour adds oil to the lamp of life, when thinking inflames it. . . . A childish silly employ leaves the children's minds silly.'³ [*Capital* (1887) (483-4; 488)]

Engels had pointed out in 1845 [*Speeches in Elberfeld*, MECW vol. 4 (253)] that the 'general education of all children without exception at the expense of the state – an education which is equal for all and continues until the individual is capable of emerging as an independent member of society . . . would be only an act of justice . . . for clearly, every man has the right to the fullest development

³ Robert Owen was given a copy of Beller's booklet, *Proposals for Raising a College of Industry of All Useful Trades and Husbandry* (London 1696), found about 1817 by well-known Radical Francis Place, as a great discovery advocating Owen's own social views a century and a half earlier. Owen had a thousand copies made for distribution, acknowledging in his *Autobiography* that the author deserved the credit of being the parent of the idea, 'although mine had been forced upon me by the practice of observing facts, reflecting upon them, and trying how far they were useful for the every-day business of life.'

of his abilities and society wrongs individuals twice over when it makes ignorance a necessary consequence of poverty.’ The demand does correspond to the potential opened up by the development of productive forces but its socio-political dimensions, with the reference to justice and rights, are also evident. Enlightened sections of the working class become conscious of the conditions of their exploitation within the capitalist system of production.⁴ Capitalism did extend state education to large sections of the working people but even today its class interest ensures that education remains linked to the needs of the market and production for profit. The *Manifesto* had explicitly stated that ‘the influence of the ruling class . . . the action of modern industry’, transformed all family ties and reduced even the children of the working people ‘into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.’ Yet it demanded ‘Free public education for all children and abolition of all child labor in factories as practiced today. Combination of education with material production, etc.’ [*Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), MECW (502; 505)]

The *Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions* which was written by Marx for the Geneva Congress of the International Working Men’s Association in 1866 and was reaffirmed by the General Council (1869) is more explanatory and goes into greater detail on this issue:

4. Juvenile and children’s labour (both sexes). We consider the tendency of modern industry to make children and juvenile persons of both sexes co-operate in the great work of social production, as a progressive, sound and legitimate tendency, *although under capital it was distorted into an abomination*. In a rational state of society every

⁴ Marx cites Bellers reasoning: ‘For if one had a hundred thousand acres of land and as many pounds in money, and as many cattle, without a labourer, what would the rich man be, but a labourer? And as the labourers make men rich, . . . the labour of the poor being the mines of the rich.’

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child whatever, from the age of 9 years, ought to become a productive labourer in the same way that no able-bodied adult person ought to be exempted from the general law of nature, viz.: to work in order to be able to eat, and work not only with the brain but with the hands too.

However, for the present, we have only to deal with the children and young persons of both sexes divided into *three classes*, to be treated differently; the first class to range from 9 to 12; the second, from 13 to 15 years; and the third, to comprise the ages of 16 and 17 years. We propose that the employment of the first class in any workshop or housework be legally restricted to *two*; that of the second, to *four*; and that of the third, to *six* hours. For the third class, there must be a break of at least one hour for meals or relaxation.

It may be desirable to begin elementary school instruction before the age of 9 years; but we deal here only with the most indispensable antidotes against the tendencies of a social system which degrades the working man into a mere instrument for the accumulation of capital, and transforms parents by their necessities into slave-holders, sellers of their own children. *The right of children and juvenile persons must be vindicated*. They are unable to act for themselves. It is, therefore, the duty of society to act on their behalf.

If the middle and higher classes neglect their duties toward their offspring, it is their own fault. Sharing the privileges of these classes, the child is condemned to suffer from their prejudices.

The case of the working class stands quite different. *The working man is no free agent*. In too many cases, he is even too ignorant to understand the true interest of his child, or the normal conditions of human development. However, *the more enlightened part of the working class fully understands that the future of its class, and, therefore, of mankind, altogether depends upon the formation of the rising working generation*. They know that, before everything else, the children and juvenile workers must be saved from the crushing effects of the present system. This can only be effected by converting *social reason* into *social force*, and, under given circumstances, there exists

no other method of doing so, than through *general laws*, enforced by the power of the state. In enforcing such laws, the working class does not fortify governmental power. On the contrary, *they transform that power, now used against them, into their own agency. They effect by a general act what they would vainly attempt by a multitude of isolated individual efforts.*⁵

*Proceeding from this standpoint, we say that NO parent and no employer ought to be allowed to use juvenile labour, except when combined with education.*⁷ (Emphasis added.)

The resolution continues:

By education, we understand three things.

Firstly: *Mental education.*

Secondly: *Bodily education*, such as is given in schools of gymnastics, and by military exercise.

Thirdly: *Technological training*, which imparts the general principles of all processes of production,⁶ and, simultaneously initiates the child and young person in the practical use and handling of the elementary instruments of all trades.

A gradual and progressive course of mental, gymnastic, and technological training ought to correspond to the classification of the juvenile labourers. The costs of the technological schools ought to be partly met by the sale of their products.

The combination of paid productive labour, mental education

⁵ 'Defining by a general law the expenditures on the elementary schools, the qualifications of the teaching staff, the branches of instruction, etc., and . . . supervising the fulfilment of these legal specifications by state inspectors, is a very different thing from appointing the State as the educator of the people! Government and Church should rather be equally exclude from any influence on the school.' [*Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) Progress Publishers 1978 (28)]

⁶ 'Technology discloses man's mode of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them.' [*Capital* (1887) (372)]

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bodily exercise and polytechnic training, will raise the working class far above the level of the higher and middle classes.' [MECW vol 20 (188-90)]

Marx uses the terms 'polytechnic' and 'technological' interchangeably to characterize the quality of 'training' or 'instruction.' The usage of the terms is significant in a resolution on the 'education' of children and youths drawn from the working class as a productive and political force. Equally important is Marx's clarification recorded in the *Minutes of the General Council Meetings* (1869): 'The technological training advocated by proletarian writers was meant to compensate for the deficiencies occasioned by the division [of] labour which prevented apprentices from acquiring a thorough knowledge of their business. This had been taken hold of and misconstrued into what the middle class understood by technical education.'

The term 'polytechnique' was not entirely new in western Europe, but the social and educational philosophies underlying these usages differ from the radical ones and even from the earlier utopian socialists. Engels acknowledges Fourier and Owen as demanding 'training of youth for the most comprehensive activity' but concludes that 'polytechnical education' could only be *realized* within a higher social and economic order: 'The old mode of production must therefore be revolutionized . . . the former division of labour must disappear. Its place must be taken by an organization of production in which, on the one hand, no individual can throw on the shoulders of others his share in productive labour, this natural condition of human existence; and in which, on the other hand, productive labour, instead of being a means of subjugating men, will become a means of their emancipation, by offering each individual the opportunity to develop all his faculties, physical and mental. . . therefore productive labour will become a pleasure instead of a burden.' [*Anti-Duhring* MECW vol. 25 (280)]

Mere skill development was not sufficient if the working class

were to acquire the necessary resourcefulness and creativity to emerge as a force for the revolutionary transformation of society. Their education had to provide 'a thorough knowledge', including the scientific, technological, social and political aspects, of the system of production.

2.

The perspective within which Marx and Engels approached the question of education relates it directly with the existing division of labour in society. 'Social relations are closely interconnected with the forces of production But the very same persons who model social relations in conformity with the prevailing material methods of production also model principles, ideas, categories in accordance with the prevailing social relations. . . .these ideas, these categories are no more eternal than the conditions, the relations they express.' [*The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) (166)].

In class-divided societies the concomitant system of exploitation affects this relation. Conservative political forces and classes invariably devise and develop social systems of education which reproduce and strengthen the existing division of labour and promote the social values that encourage conformity to its strictures and limitations. Progressive tendencies and movements make these relations transparent and consequently are able to critically analyse and expose their drawbacks and failings which are rooted in their conventional moorings. Their momentum lies not only in the direction of initiating new or radical solutions to the old problems, but also engendering completely altered frameworks within which a social sphere/ activity can be conceptualized.

The October Revolution opened up unprecedented opportunities for the revolutionary reconstruction of education. It abolished private property and overturned the old division of labour, creating conditions for initiating an education policy that was no longer aimed at pursuing the interests of an exploiting ruling

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class but was focused instead on emancipating the productive capabilities and talents of the people.

The October revolution of the workmen and peasants began under the common banner of emancipation.

The peasants are being emancipated from the power of the landowners, for there is no longer the landowner's property right in the land – it has been abolished. The soldiers and sailors are being emancipated from the power of autocratic generals, for generals will henceforth be elective and subject to recall. The workers are being emancipated from the whims and arbitrary will of the capitalists, for henceforth there will be established the control of the workers over mills and factories. Everything living and capable of life is being emancipated from the hateful shackles.

There remain only the peoples of Russia, who have suffered and are suffering oppression and arbitrariness, and whose emancipation must immediately be begun, whose liberation must be effected resolutely and definitely. [*Decree on Rights of the Russian People*. 15 Nov 1917].

Tsarist Russia's education service had functioned as a restrictive class-system on traditional lines producing doctors, lawyers, teachers, clerical officials etc., for the requirements of Court, Church, government, the nobility and the wealthy. Shiskov, Minister of Public Instruction (1824), had famously stated in the presence of Tsar Alexander I that, 'Knowledge is useful only when, like salt, it is used and offered in small measures according to the people's circumstances and their needs... To teach the mass of the people, or even the majority of them, will bring more harm than good.'⁷ A circular 'on the children of cooking women' was issued in

⁷ A major proponent of the conservative push in 19th century Russia, Admiral Alexander Shishkov exerted influence as Minister of Public Instruction. His attempt to promote Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality took the form of educating the Russian elite and replacing Polish and Catholic educational institutions for being of non-Russian origin. Valentin Astrov (ed.), *An*

1887, raising fees for secondary schools. It recommended a purge of pupils, 'without due regard' to existing rules and regulations, and required school administrators to give a firm refusal to any requests from 'persons without sufficient means' for their children to be accepted in classical secondary schools. 'Given unwavering application of this rule,' the circular noted, 'the *gymnasii* and their preparatory departments will be spared the presence within them of the offspring of coachmen, footmen, cooks, washerwomen, small shopkeepers and suchlike persons, whose children it is not at all desirable- with the possible exception of those gifted with special abilities - to bring forward out of the sphere of life to which they belong.'

Not surprisingly, at the close of the century, in 1897, the first universal census of the Russian population showed that only 3 persons out of 100,000 coming from the rural classes had higher education, and only one out of a thousand had secondary education.

Days after it assumed power, the Bolshevik government committed itself to an extraordinary long term program for completely free, secular and universal educational reconstruction for the training of its younger generations for a new life. Almost unnoticed outside the country, they aimed at 'the complete sweeping away of this autocratically limited, pedantically inspired, class system of pedagogical dogmatism, in order to substitute for it a universal and classless provision of both enlightenment and training for life in all its fullness and variety. . . avowedly based on the latest science in every branch, and free from every kind of mysticism.' [*Soviet Communism: A new civilization*. Sydney and Beatrice Webb (1935) (718-9)]

The *Decree on Education*, issued on 12th November 1917, by Anatoly Lunacharsky, First Commissar of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narodnyi Kommissariat Prosveshcheniia or

Illustrated History of the Russian Revolution (New York: International Publishers, 1928).

Narkompros), announced the new government's goal:

Every genuinely democratic power must, in the domain of education, in a country where illiteracy and ignorance reign supreme, make its first aim in the struggle against this darkness. It must acquire in the shortest time universal literacy, by organising a network of schools answering to the demands of modern pedagogics: it must introduce universal, obligatory, and free tuition for all. . . . However needful it may be to curtail other articles of the people's budget, the expenses on education must stand high. A large educational budget is the pride and glory of a nation.

An outstanding and far-reaching proposal was the universal adoption of *co-education in all subjects and at all ages*, in a ten years' regular course of schooling without rote-learning, examinations or punishments. The latter features did not only correspond to the most emancipatory pedagogical theories developed in the advanced countries of Europe and America at the time, but were essential *foreengaging* and involving a predominantly illiterate population and youngsters exposed to extremely unstable life conditions in the vast national project of learning to transform themselves and their diverse communities. This factor is most frequently ignored by even the most well-intentioned 'disciplinarians', whose down-to-the-last-detail plans and methods for measuring 'outcomes' fail to yield desired results. Indiscipline on the part of teachers and students, and disinterest on the part of parents are the usual scapegoats then brought out for blame, when in fact the so-called 'indiscipline' and 'disinterest' only reflect the failure of policy-makers to engage with those who should be most involved.

The term 'anarchy' has been used by many commentators to describe the early years of *Narkompros's* functioning under Lunacharsky's leadership, with M.N. Pokrovsky and Nadezhda Krupskaya, 'the soul of *Narkompros*' as Lunacharsky called her, as important members. Apart from the conditions of famine, civil war and foreign interventions which devastated the country, the

policy decisions taken at the time⁸ – education to be in the hands of educational soviets at every level; self-management and self-organization to be carried out *collectively* by students aided by the teachers; important role for student Pioneers at elementary level and the Komsomol from secondary school onwards – did create some friction, frustration and much confusion but informed Russian and foreign observers like Emile Dillon and John Dewey were enormously impressed by the enterprise and imagination displayed by the community and the students in particular. In fact given the sheer uniqueness of the almost insurmountable task before Narkompros, the collective freedom and limited bureaucratic control over the process of creating a new system literally out of nothing was probably the best thing that could have happened. ‘There is no more sublime and beautiful vision than that of which the coming generations will be both the witnesses and the participants: the building up by collective labor of their own communal, rich and free life of the spirit.’ (Lunacharsky, *Decree on Education*)

The provision of appropriately graded ‘pre-schooling’ from age 3 years onwards was made soon after, and a four-year course of specialized professional and scientific training introduced for 18 to 22 year olds. This was not only for a select minority but, with provision for appropriate stipends and maintenance allowance, for all students who desired or showed themselves capable of it. The four-year programme of the *rabfaks* (*rabochikhfakultet*, or Workers Faculty) was set up as a transitional programme in 1919 and continued till 1940 to prepare workers for university-level education. It was the one completely new feature of education in

⁸ ‘The State Commission on People’s Education is in no sense a central power governing the teaching and educational institutions. On the contrary the entire school system must be transferred to the organs of local self-government. Full autonomy must be given to the independent work of the workers, soldiers and peasants establishing educational class organizations on their own initiative.’ (Lunacharsky, *Decree on Education*)

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the Soviet Republic, for there was an urgent need to prepare worker specialists to manage factories and government departments, as well as to 'proletarianize' the institutions of higher education. Consequently, trade union representatives, communist party members, children of workers and peasants were given preference. Private persons wishing to enter higher education found that numbers were limited and the costs high.

Universalization of education in the USSR was advanced through two additional and important features. Firstly, children of every community or region were given access to *teaching in their own vernaculars* and education was imparted in more than 70 languages. Alphabets were developed for languages that had never had a written form. Primers and other schoolbooks were written in the languages of the people. In 1928 books were being published in seventy national languages, and by 1934, the number of languages in print was 104. As a result, it was precisely the most backward sections and districts which made the greatest proportionate progress. Primary-school enrolment in 1929-30 was double that of 1914-15. In 1914 only seven millions were in school; in 1935 the aggregate total on the school and college registers for full-time education of all grades had grown to over 26 millions, or one person in six. The number of students in kindergartens or other schools of 'pre-schooling' had reached 6 millions, making in all 34 millions, that is, one in five of the census population under full-time instruction of one or other grade.

Secondly, no schools were designed only for children of the privileged classes. *All children of school age and all adolescents obtaining higher education, classified merely by age or grade of study, attended the same schools and colleges.* Krupskaya distinguished this characteristic from the varied provisions made for 'mass education' in bourgeois societies. Capitalist societies conspicuously multi-layer schools on the basis of status, so that they are marked by privilege on the one hand and, on the other, by the restriction of facilities and opportunities for the disadvantaged and deprived

sections. 'In a bourgeois state – whether it is a monarchy or a republic – the school serves as an instrument for the spiritual enslavement of broad masses. Its objective . . . is determined not by the interest of the pupils but by those of the ruling class, i.e. the bourgeoisie, and the interests of the two often differ quite substantially. The school's objective determines the entire organization of school activities, the entire structure of school life and the entire substance of school education.' She perceptively noted that socialist schools were 'not socialist by the fact that they are directed by socialists but by the fact that their objectives correspond to the needs of a socialist society. In individual cases schools could emerge in a capitalist society that also set as their goal the education of comprehensively developed people with pronounced individualities and social instincts, who are equally capable of engaging in both physical and mental labour. But in a capitalist system such schools could only be isolated, hardly viable phenomena. As the young man educated in such a school left it, he would encounter an atmosphere that quickly reduced all the fruits of his education to naught. . . . And since socialist schools could not be viable institutions in a capitalist system, they could at best only be interesting pedagogical experiments. They could only be private institutions, not public, for the physiognomy of public schools was determined by the ruling class, the class of the bourgeoisie, and the objectives that it set were altogether different.' [*Concerning the Question of Socialist Schools* (1918)]

Against this background one can assess the claims that the post-1917 educational achievements of the Soviet Republic were conceptually drawn from the classical thinkers of the western world, and based on the most advanced pedagogical theories of modern bourgeois society. The Marxist approach to education, the class analysis of society, the class antagonisms generated within capitalist society, and the class struggle that led to the formation of the first workers state in 1917, it has been suggested and argued, are merely ideological adjuncts to conceptions that had been in

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circulation among educators for decades and even the Unified Labour School was not the 'invention' of the Bolsheviks. There was, it was claimed, an 'universal awareness' that classical models designed for elites were irrelevant for a system of mass public education aimed at producing a workforce sufficiently educated for an industrial economy. Similarly, the principle that knowledge arises from interacting with objects and processes was said to have been 'empirically arrived at', seeing that students gained far more understanding through scientific experiments, field trips, participation in work, etc., than by sitting through lectures.

It was, of course, true that the leading figures at Narkompros, all well-educated émigrés who spent years abroad under the Tsarist regime, were indeed familiar with the ideas of thinkers like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Friedrich, Froebel, and Tolstoy, etc.⁹ However,

⁹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712-1778) – French philosopher of the Enlightenment, writer and educator. Rousseau's educational philosophy found its fullest expression in the novel *Emile or On Education*. He criticized the feudal aristocratic system of education for crushing the individuality of the child. Considering freedom to be a natural right of man, he advanced the idea of free education which would bring out the natural good latent within the child. Rousseau condemned authoritarianism in education; children should not be taught to obey blindly. He stressed the need to develop the power of independent thought and education through work. A precursor of the French Revolution, Rousseau's ideas had a great influence on the development of bourgeois educational theory and practice in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Pestalozzi, Johann (1746-1827) – Swiss educator and one of the first theorists on primary and pre-school education, Pestalozzi argued that elementary schooling should include all-sided mental, moral, physical and labour education aimed at developing children's powers of thinking. He favoured schools accessible to the general population.

Herbart, Johann Friedrich (1776-1841) – German idealist philosopher, psychologist and educator. Herbart saw the main purpose of education as bringing the individual into harmony with ethical ideals, inculcating 'moderation' and dependence on higher forces. Herbart's successors used these conservative elements to justify authoritarianism in education.

Froebel, Friedrich (1782-1852) – German educator and disciple of Pestalozzi. In 1837 he opened an establishment, 'for the play and occupation

the transformation that occurred after the Revolution could only have been possible with a profoundly original perspective.

The influential American educationist and philosopher John Dewey (a prominent contributor to the development of labour/work/activity based pedagogical theory himself) analyzed the Russian situation in the following words: 'In trying to satisfy my mind as to how and why it was that the educational leaders have been able in so short a time to develop a working model of this sort of education, with so little precedent upon which to fall back, I was forced to the conclusion that the secret lay in the fact that *they could give to the economic and industrial phase of social life the central place it actually occupies in present life.* In that fact lies the great advantage the Revolution has conferred upon educational reformers in Russia, in comparison with those in the rest of the world. I do not see how any honest educational reformer in western countries can deny that the greatest practical obstacle in the way of introducing into schools that connection with social life which he regards as desirable is the great part played by personal competition and desire for private profit in our economic life. *This fact almost*

of younger children' to which he gave the name 'kindergarten.' Child were growing plants and the aim of the 'children's garden' was to assist the development of their natural powers, individual characteristics, and to satisfy their need for activity among their peers. Froebel carried on active propaganda for setting up kindergartens, and trained women teachers for work in them. Kindergartens, and the system of pre-school education by means of play and exercises of various kind, elaborated by Froebel, spread to many countries throughout the world.

Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910) – his disciples developed a quasi-religious, Utopian social trend in Russia at the close of the 19th century, under the influence of the great Russian writer. The Tolstoyans proposed to transform society through moral self-perfecting and teaching 'universal love,' 'non-violent resistance to evil' and moral purification through physical labour. Gandhi was very influenced by his ideas. Lenin, however, found the glaring contradiction of powerful protest against social falsehood and misery being combined with preaching submission to be 'a mirror of the weakness, the shortcomings of our peasant revolt' ('Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution,' September 1908).

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makes it necessary that in important respects school activities should be protected from social contacts and connections, instead of being organized to create them.' ['Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World', chapter in *New Schools for a New Era*(1929). Based on a visit to the USSR in 1928.]

3

A society which accepts as inevitable the divorce between work and leisure, and cultivates its leisure as the only time for real living, is a sick society. (Anonymous Quaker)

The Marxist concept of 'polytechnical education' expresses and comprehends the central role and value of labour in both social life and educational theory. It is a concept of education for the future, for empowering the working masses and for overcoming the division of labour based on class exploitation. It displays no nostalgia for a past based on artisanal handicraft and manufacture in spite of according respect and appreciation for the creative flair and talents of the artisan; nor does it advocate a moralistic desire to return to 'nature' and the proverbial 'simple living and high thinking'.

'The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. . . . and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the *idiocy* of rural life.' [*The Communist Manifesto* (1848) MECW vol 6 (488)] The use of the term 'idiocy' emphasizes the fact of its having been derived from the Greek for 'separate' or 'isolated'. *Modern industrial production allowed for the development of human potential along with the development of science and technology and intellectual and cultural production, reaching heights which were not objectively possible under production conditions based on onerous and extended labour taking place in relative isolation. The integral development of the individual, an inconceivable 'ideal' in feudal conditions, emerged as a real and necessary possibility. Capitalism*

objectively socialized world production but under social relations which concentrate ownership of the means of production in private hands. Therefore it ensured that the potential which it opened up could not be realized within its confines.

As a result, capitalism both requires and resists the new form of education. 'Education will enable young people . . . to pass from one branch of industry to another according to the needs of society or their own inclinations. It will therefore free them from the one-sidedness which the present division of labour stamps on each one of them. Thus the communist organization of society will give its members the chance of an all-round exercise of abilities that have received all-round development. With this the various classes will necessarily disappear. . . the very establishment of this society furnishes the means to do away with these class differences.' [Engels, *Principles of Communism* (1847) MECW, vol. 6 (353)]

Speaking at the Second All-Russian Conference of Internationalist Teachers (January 1919) Lenin put this understanding before the assembled delegates: 'One of these bourgeois hypocrisies is the belief that the school can stand aloof from politics.... The bourgeoisie themselves, who advocated this principle, made their own bourgeois politics the cornerstone of the school system, and tried to reduce schooling to the training of docile and efficient servants of the bourgeoisie, of slaves and tools of capital. They never gave a thought to making the school a means of developing the human personality. And now it is clear to all that this can be done only by socialist schools, which have inseparable bonds with all the working and exploited people and wholeheartedly support Soviet policy.' [*Collected Works*, vol. 28 (407-8)]

The Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik), March 1919, resolved that the school must be a source of knowledge, of labour education and of civic education and in its new programme indicated, among other things: 'In the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the period of preparation

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of the conditions required for full realisation of communism, the schools must be not only a means of communicating the principles of communism in general, but also of bringing the ideological, organisational and educative influence of the proletariat to bear upon the semi-proletariat and the non-proletarian strata of the working masses, in order to bring up a new generation capable of finally achieving communism.'

Confronted by the alarm of the peasants – 'There you are, they took the icons away, they don't teach you what's what any more, they stopped teaching Scripture, now they spend the whole time singing and dancing. . . . They're going to turn out good for nothing, that's no good to us, we don't want that sort of school and we're not going to feed that teacher.' – Narkompros decided that 'Every village school must be a centre of education not only for the children, but for adults as well, i.e., every school -this is our aim – must have a small bookshop and a library/reading-room, and a small extramural centre where lectures are given for the adult population . . . it must strive to do one better than the priest, to kill off religious prejudices, to fight the power of the kulak, to combat prejudices of all kinds including those of the Social Revolutionaries; to lay out before the peasant a correct understanding of what the Communist system is, what the Soviet Republic is, what the revolution is and how it happened.' [Lunacharsky: On the Class School]

The October Revolution removed all privileges in the matter of education. On the General Regulations for the Unified Labour School in the Russian Socialist Federated Republic,' issued on 16 October 1918, the Unified Labour School, divided into two levels of five and four years each, was created to provide free and mandatory nine-year schooling for all children from 8 to 17 years of age. All school workers including teachers and school doctors were to be elected; differentiation of teachers by category was abolished; teaching of any religion whatsoever and holding

of religious ceremonies within the schools was prohibited; mandatory homework, punishment and examinations – entrance, advancement, graduation – were abolished.

The centerpiece of Soviet pedagogy, the Unified Labour School, was designed to establish the Polytechnic nature of general education. It effectively swept away the gap, created by the division of labour and reflected in educational curricula and types of schools in bourgeois society, between abstract theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and skill-based vocational training on the other. Therefore distinguishing, as Marx had done, between polytechnical education and vocational training was essential. ‘The difference between polytechnical and vocational schools is that the former’s centre of gravity is in the comprehension of the processes of labour, in development of an ability to combine theory with practice, to understand the interdependency of certain phenomena, whereas in vocational school the centre of gravity is the acquisition by pupils of working skills.’ [Krupskaya: Polytechnic Education]

The goal was the creation of a polytechnical ‘horizon’ within which all forms of learning, and all forms of activity, within the school and its extended arenas – the factory, farms, public utility enterprises etc. – and in society, through the activity clubs and the urban ‘palaces’ for children and youth, were aimed at an experience of labour as non-alienating and non-exploitative. The methods adopted combined labour, collaboration and critique so that all work was interesting, creative and designed always to educate not just technically but socially and organizationally. The polytechnical approach did not confuse the unity of education with uniformity; centralization only outlined the ultimate aim and approach. Each province had its own experimental school, supplementing the work of the central or federal experimental stations, studying local resources, materials and problems.

Diversification was encouraged by the very method itself. The

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principle of the method required that work by pupils on every topic would begin with observations from their own environment, natural and social. 'The stability of socialist society is based neither on a barracks-like monolith of people, nor on artificial drilling, and nor again on a religious or aesthetic deception; rather, the foundation thereof is a real solidarity of interests. And that is why we have allowed ourselves the principle of a more profound unity combined with a maximum of variety.' [Lunacharsky, *The Basic Principles of the Unified Labour School*]

'Productive labour not only prepares children to become useful members of society in the future, but also makes them useful members of society today, and a child's awareness of that fact possesses an enormous educational significance.' [Krupskaya: *On the Question of Socialist Schools*]. The 'complex system' of the polytechnic approach was often identified with the 'project method'. However, the complex system involved a unified intellectual scheme of organization, connecting work with natural materials and energies, but also with social and political history and institutions. An educative assignment following the complex system allowed the discovery of the principle of some 'complex' or unified social whole. Its criterion of value was its contribution to some 'socially useful work' so that actual studies always varied according to special conditions, particular needs and deficiencies of the local environment. In a rural school, for example, students carried on what in a conventional school would have been separate studies of botany and entomology, cultivating flowers, vegetables, fruits, etc., observing their relation to insects, noxious and helpful, and then alerting and interacting with their parents and other farmers with the results.

However, inventing unreal, unwanted work for schools was discouraged. Work had to be educationally justified and had to be done in amounts which enabled children to learn. 'Work had no right to exist in a school for even one hour, unless through it

the child became more knowledgeable'. [Lunacharsky] As a result, polytechnical education was conceived of as harmonizing aspects related to the development of society (production and organization) and the individual (full human development) which, given the long history of the division between material and mental labour, could not be conceived of when they were taken separately.

'The unified school is not merely the ideal of every advanced educator, but it is the only possible type of school in a socialist society, that is to say, in a classless society or in one that is striving to abolish class. Socialism alone can realize this ideal of the unified school, although certain bourgeois educators have entertained aspirations towards it. For communist society, the labor school is absolutely indispensable . . . so that the child learns from the very outset to look upon labour not as a disagreeable necessity or as a punishment, but as a natural and spontaneous expression of faculty.' [N. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (1922).]

Lenin, a firm advocate of polytechnical education, criticized attempts to 'theorize' rather than tackle the practical difficulties being encountered in carrying forward this radical agenda: 'The question of polytechnical education has in the main been settled by our Party Programme. . . . Paragraph 1 deals with polytechnical education up to the age of seventeen; and Paragraph 8 speaks of 'the extensive development of vocational training for persons of the age of seventeen and upwards *in conjunction with general polytechnical education*'. *The arguments about "polytechnical or monotekhnical education"* . . . are fundamentally wrong and downright impermissible for a Communist; they betray ignorance of the Programme and an idle inclination for abstract slogans. While we are *temporarily* compelled to lower the age (for passing from general polytechnical education to polytechnical vocational training) from seventeen to fifteen, 'the Party must regard' this lowering of the age 'as only' (point 1 of the Central Committee's

Instruction) a practical expedient necessitated by the ‘country’s poverty and ruin’. . . . In spite of these defects, the Soviet Republic is making progress in public education; there is no doubt about that. There is a mighty urge for light and knowledge . . . among the mass of working people whom capitalism had been hypocritically cheating out of an education and depriving of it by open violence. We can be proud that we are promoting and fostering this urge. But it would be a real crime to ignore the defects in our work.’ [Lenin. *The Work of the People’s Commissariat for Education*, February 7, 1921. Collected Works, vol. 32 (123-4; 127)]¹⁰

‘The Unified Labour School is different from even the best schools of Western Europe. When our *Declaration of the Unified Labour School* was translated into foreign languages, the newspaper *Norddeutscher Allgemeine Zeitung*, a paper which is bourgeois in the highest degree, wrote: ‘For the first time a government is mapping out a programme for a school genuinely of the people. If the Bolsheviks succeeded in achieving this, then of course they would have a school incomparably higher than in any other country. . . . But this is, of course, a chimera, it is of course utopian – they cannot do it. . . .’ [Lunacharsky: On the Class School]

‘But they did achieve it and recognition came even from the some of the most unlikely quarters.

“Whatever else Communism has done, it has re-created Russian childhood.”¹¹

¹⁰ This was a response to the report on a 5-day Party Conference held in December 1920, included in the Supplement to the Bulletin of the Eighth Congress of Soviets on the Party Conference on Education, published on January 10, 1921. Lenin found all resolutions, reports and articles, barring two by Lunacharsky and a Com. Grinko, to display a wrong understanding about polytechnical education.

¹¹ Sir Bernard Pares (1867-1949) Professor of Russian History, Language and Literature, official observer to the Russian army in 1914 and later assigned to the British Embassy in Petrograd, he set his hopes for Russia with the Provisional Government and, after the Bolshevik revolution, moved to Siberia to support the White troops. Until 1935, he was banned by the new government from re-entering Russia.

‘Never since the world began has any government set out to give such chances for culture to its people.’¹²

‘It is a typically Russian combination: a gorgeous plan and an utterly backward people, and a handful of young enthusiasts who intend that the thing shall be done. How are they managing it? Last year in Russia proper, not counting the Ukraine, 120,000 teachers out of a total of 150,000 took special courses to prepare themselves for this new form of school.’¹³

‘But the spirit of the change is well indicated in the words of one of the leaders of educational thought: ‘A school is a true school of work in the degree in which it prepares the students to appreciate and share in the ideology of the workers – whether country or city.’ And by the worker is here meant, of course, the worker made conscious of his position and function by means of the Revolution. This transformation of the earlier ‘bourgeois reforming idea’ through emphasis upon the ideology of the labour movement thus continued and reinforced the earlier emphasis upon the general idea of the connection of the school with industry. . . . I can only pay my tribute to the liberating effect of active participation in social life upon the attitude of students. Those whom I met had a vitality and a kind of confidence in life – not to be confused with mere self-confidence – that afforded one of the most stimulating experiences of my life. Their spirit was well reflected in the inscription which a boy of fourteen wrote upon the back of a painting he presented me with. He was in one of the schools in which the idea just set forth is most completely and intelligently carried out, and he wrote that the picture was given in memory of the ‘school that opened my eyes.’ All that I had ever, on theoretical grounds, believed as to the extent to which the dull and dispirited attitude of the average school is due to isolation of school from life

¹² A teacher from Gomel who was not a communist, but an ‘intellectual’ who had fled to the villages to get food during the harsh winters of the revolution.

¹³ Anna-Louise Strong, *The First Time in History*, Chapter XI, *Education in Soviet Russia*.

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was more than confirmed by what I saw of the opposite in Russian schools. . . . In view of the prevailing idea of other countries as to the total lack of freedom and total disregard of democratic methods in Bolshevist Russia, it is disconcerting, to say the least, to anyone who has shared in that belief, to find Russian school children much more democratically organized than are our own; and to note that they are receiving through the system of school administration a training that fits them, much more systematically than is attempted in our professedly democratic country, for later active participation in the self-direction of both local communities and industries.

Fairness demands that I should say in conclusion that the educational system so inadequately described exists at present qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Statistically considered, its realization is still highly restricted – although not surprisingly so when one considers both the external difficulties of war, famine, poverty, teachers trained in alien ideas and ideals, and the internal difficulties of initiating and developing an educational system on a new social basis. Indeed, considering these difficulties, one is rather amazed at the progress made; for, while limited in actual range, the scheme is in no sense on paper. It is a going concern; a self-moving organism.¹⁴

4

Today, at the same time that the possibility exists for human beings to finally become free from the labour of Sisyphus, ‘the miserable routine of endless drudgery and toil in which the same mechanical process is gone through over and over again,’¹⁵ severe socio-economic inequality plagues society as concentration of wealth

¹⁴ John Dewey: ‘Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World’, chapter in *New Schools for a New Era* (1929). Based on a visit to the USSR in 1928.

¹⁵ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).

and power in the hands of small elites continues unhindered. In addition, the marketization of all areas of human activity which are being rapidly commercialized is increasing the control of Capital over all social relationships at a scale never before experienced in society. As this restructuring of capitalist production occurs, the attack upon the entire structure of education, all over the world and now spreading like a scourge across India, is being intensified with strategies of rampant privatization being promoted. Public funds are being withdrawn from the education sector, including schools and higher education institutions. The limited social justice programmes of reservation, scholarships and hostel facilities for Scheduled castes, tribes, OBCs, minorities, etc., are being withdrawn or being contracted so that education is simply being placed out of reach of the oppressed and disadvantaged masses. At the same time so-called 'reforms' being autocratically imposed without democratic debate or consultation are threatening the possibility of educational institutions remaining as sites where knowledge can be acquired or generated. Schools, colleges and universities are being geared up to meet market needs for cheap low-skilled labour, for docile lower rung employees to serve the bureaucracy and the corporations, and finally for an elite corps of fiercely competitive market 'honchos' who for a good price are willing to gamble away the nation's assets which have in fact been created by the people's labour.

Today India's schoolchildren and students in institutions of higher education are rising up in protest against policies that are arbitrarily altering and depriving state-funded institutions so that due to increasing privatization and commercialization, students are denied even the limited access they have to education. These policies and practices are bartering the future of the vast majority of young persons in the service of national and international finance capital. The Marxist analysis of the historic struggle for education by the working classes, of the role of education in the

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social transformation of an unequal and unjust social order, and of the victory and achievements of 'Red October' in emancipating human beings from the oppressive division of labour between leisure class theoreticians and the toiling producers, still guides and holds out the promise of success in the struggle against the forces of darkness and irrationality.