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To cite this article: Stuart Tannock (29 Nov 2023): An inopportune moment: trade unions, climate crisis and the collapse of labour education in England, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, DOI: [10.1080/02660830.2023.2284023](https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2023.2284023)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2023.2284023>



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Published online: 29 Nov 2023.



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An inopportune moment: trade unions, climate crisis and the collapse of labour education in England

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of climate activists and scholars argue that an effective climate movement needs the involvement of the trade union movement, to be able to push forward the radical social transformations required to address the global climate crisis. If workers are to be able to play this kind of role in a global climate movement, a sustained and transformative programme of labour education on the climate crisis will be essential. In England, however, the climate crisis has arrived at a particularly inopportune moment for the trade union movement, when labour education has virtually collapsed – a state of labour education decline that has echoes elsewhere in the world. This article argues that in order to build a labour education programme that can help workers fight effectively against the climate crisis – or, indeed, any other challenge of worker and social injustice – it will be essential to understand and address the root causes of the decline and collapse of labour education more generally. For the union movement in England, this involves attending to three key issues, in particular: the relationship of labour education to the state, to the formal education sector, and to broader labour movement organising strategies and agendas.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; labour education; trade unions; worker education

Union staff can get ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘eager’ about developing a new course on the climate crisis for their activists, says a labour educator who has been working in a Trade Union Studies Unit at a further education college in the northwest of England for the past two decades: ‘But I’m on the other end of it, the one who has to make it happen, who then has to look at the spreadsheets, with the college looking over my shoulder, saying, “How many are on this course? Have you hit your targets?”’ It’s been ‘ten months’ since the union launched their climate and environment course, and since then, ‘nothing has happened’. ‘We all want it to happen’, the educator insists, ‘we’ve not given up on it’. But, ‘it’s just reality, when you’re working in an

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organisation that's strapped for cash', says the educator: 'People don't like looking at reality sometimes, because they like looking at what they want to happen, and what they think should happen'. In a research project looking at worker education on the climate crisis in the UK, this story of frustrated ambition and failure was a theme that came up again and again. In November 2020, for example, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) profiled a three day 'Green Shoots' environment course being run at East Riding College in Hull, that 'aimed at giving union reps not only the latest, up-to-date environmental knowledge but also the organising skills to create change in their workplaces', including 'social media skills, public speaking skills and bargaining skills' (Unionlearn 2020a, 2020b). But just 2 years later, when I tried to follow up on the progress of this course, not only had the course disappeared from East Riding College, so had the entire Trade Union Studies Centre within which the course had been based.

The title of this article is a reference to Naomi Klein's (2014, p. 73) argument, in *This Changes Everything*, that the challenge of tackling the climate crisis has been compounded by 'an epic case of bad timing', as the crisis arrived in the neoliberal era, when ideological commitments to privatisation, deregulation and public spending cuts 'blocked a serious response to climate change for decades'. In recent years, a number of climate activists and scholars have argued that, to make the rapid and radical social and economic changes that the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and others say are needed to address the climate crisis effectively, the participation of the working class, organised by the trade union movement, will be essential (Aronoff *et al.* 2019, Huber 2022, Saltmarsh 2020). The logic is that making such radical, transformative changes 'will require massive leverage over the political and economic system' and 'the ability to force these changes over the objection of broad sections of the capitalist class, who are fiercely unwilling to lose their profits'. Historically, one group that has such leverage is the organised working class, who 'not only [have] the numbers as the majority of society', but also 'a "lever" at the core of the operation of the capitalist system', so that 'if workers stop working, or go on strike, business as usual grinds to a halt' (Brown *et al.* 2019). These writers point to the historical example of the social forces that brought about the New Deal in the United States and call for a mobilisation of a similar set of forces to fight for a Green New Deal to address combined climate, social and economic crisis today.

If workers are to be able to play this kind of role in a global climate movement, then a sustained and transformative programme of worker education on the climate crisis will be essential, an education that can help workers 'connect the dots to see the solutions to all our crises of climate, health care, and housing require building mass social power to combat the industries profiting from these very crises', and 'see their struggle against management as an environmental struggle' (Huber 2019). Worker education, Orr writes (2021, p. 499), 'is a crucial element in the rebuilding of working-class perspectives and organised collective responses to the enormous socio-economic and ecological challenges' of our time. But what I found while researching best practices in worker education on the climate crisis in the UK is that the climate crisis has arrived at an inopportune moment, when labour education, particularly in England, has virtually collapsed. This is a state of labour education decay that has

echoes in other parts of the world and is part of a broad crisis in adult education overall in the country as well. Recent accounts, for example, of the histories of labour education in the UK (Seal 2017), United States (Dolgon and Roth 2021), and South Africa (Cooper 2020) all paint similar pictures of the diminishment and depoliticisation of labour education over the last few decades. Addressing the question of how to develop effective worker education on the climate crisis thus requires also attending to this question of the current parlous state of worker education more generally.

In this article, I begin by explaining how a research study focusing on trade unions and the climate crisis in the UK turned to a concern with the overall state of labour education in England. I describe the current organisation of labour education in the UK, as well as the immediate causes of the current state of collapse in the sector. I then argue that this recent history raises important conceptual and foundational questions about what the ideal relationship of labour education should be to the state, to the formal education sector, and to broader labour movement organising strategies and agendas. While such questions are longstanding in the field of labour education, they remain essential to address for any effective, sustainable, and scalable labour education programme to be able to re-emerge, whether on the matter of the climate crisis, or any other pressing challenge of fighting for worker and social justice.

The research study: trade unions, worker education and the climate crisis

The research study on which this article is based did not set out to investigate the decline of labour education in England. Rather, the central aim of the study was to identify best practices in climate change education for workers, and to understand key obstacles for developing effective worker education on the climate crisis. The rationale, as noted above, was based on the argument that involving organised workers in addressing the climate crisis is essential, both to ensure that efforts to tackle climate change support the needs, interests and concerns of workers, but also to marshal the power of organised labour to fight against elite, vested interests that seek to preserve the fossil fuel status quo. There is now a growing academic and activist literature on what Vachon (2023) calls the labour-climate movement, both globally and in the UK (see, for example, Hampton 2015, Rätzzel *et al.* 2021). Trade unions, as Kalt (2022, p. 500) points out, are ‘neither natural opponents ... nor are they natural allies of environmental movements’, as they may focus at times on a different set of priorities to climate activists or see climate policy and action as failing to take into account the needs, interests and insights of workers. In the labour-climate movement, the concept of a ‘just transition’ is one of the most important frameworks for linking environment and labour concerns together (Stavis 2023). Education is widely recognised as an essential element for moving towards a just transition (Huber 2022; Vachon 2021); and indeed, the just transition concept itself has been described as ‘a pedagogical tool of workers education’, something to be learned and developed over time through discussion, reflection and campaigning (Azzi 2021, p. 228). However, with a handful of exceptions (e.g., Byrd and Widenor 2011), there has been limited attention paid directly to climate education for organised workers.

Early on in my research, I came to realise that a central issue in England impacting the development of worker climate education was what was happening to labour education more generally. Thus, while my research continued to focus on climate education for workers (and I write about this elsewhere), I made sure in my research interviews to also ask questions about what was happening more generally with labour education. Between October 2022 and July 2023, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 47 union staff, labour educators, union activists and others engaged in worker education on the climate crisis (for example, in worker focused organisations like Platform and the UK Hazards Campaign). This included speaking with union leads on education and/or environment at six of the ten largest unions in the UK (Unison, Unite, NEU, PCS, Prospect and UCU), as well as the TUC and the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which are both umbrella organisations of unions. It also included labour educators running workshops on climate and environment issues, and union activists engaged in climate activism, representing more than twenty different unions, colleges and worker organisations (some individuals were involved with more than one organisation). I identified participants through trade union websites, media and social media reporting on labour climate organising, and snowball sampling. The individuals I spoke with were based across England, Wales and Scotland; and they were engaged in all sectors of the UK economy, including transport, health, education, culture, government, communications, retail, hospitality, manufacturing, and energy. Post-Covid era familiarity of most trade unionists with speaking over Zoom made doing a national study relatively easy; indeed, many unionists in London, where I am based, also chose to speak over Zoom for reasons of convenience.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also collected curriculum materials and documents produced by unions and other groups about workers, trade unions and the climate crisis; I observed labour and climate conferences, workshops and demonstrations; and I collected and reviewed previous research on labour and the climate crisis in the UK and globally. This article draws on a subset of data collected for this broader research study: so, for example, I do not make reference here to specific curriculum materials. The analysis presented in this article is based on a close reading of interview transcripts, media, trade union and government documents, and previous research on labour education history in the UK. In my research ethics agreement with my university for conducting this study, I agreed that while I would take note of the general demographic characteristics of the workforces that a trade union or worker organisation engages with, I would not systematically collect personal data about the identity of individual research participants, as this was not strictly necessary for addressing the original questions of the research investigation. In quotations from research interviews, I generally indicate the institutional role and identity of each speaker, as agreed by participants in consenting to being involved in the research. However, in certain instances, I have chosen to obscure speakers' institutional identities: this is where there seemed reason to take extra caution by preserving institutional as well as individual anonymity and confidentiality. Quotations in this article are drawn from research interviews conducted for this study, unless otherwise specified.

The organisation of labour education in the UK

Labour education (or worker education) refers to ‘education for workers, controlled by workers and their organisations for their own needs and purposes’ (Orr 2021, p. 498). For the past sixty years, formally organised, classroom-based labour education in the UK has had a number of key features (labour education also encompasses a wide range of informal education sites and practices – see Nicholls 2017 and Tannock 2023). With some exceptions, this kind of labour education is provided predominantly by the Trades Union Congress – the umbrella organisation of most trade unions in the country – as well as by individual unions for their own members and activists. It has been extensively subsidised by the state. It is often offered in partnership with trade union studies centres or units in the country’s further education colleges – although some courses are offered by the TUC and individual unions ‘in house’. It is primarily aimed at and accessible to rank and file union reps (or shop stewards), rather than the broader union membership. It also has tended to focus on pragmatic issues of collective bargaining, union casework, and organising around core trade union concerns, with a relative neglect of broader, more political or liberal arts orientations to education (Bridgford and Stirling 1988, Fisher 2005, 2007, Ross 2012, Seal 2017, Spencer 2017).

The framework for today’s system of labour education was put into place in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964, the TUC took over the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) labour education programmes, that for much of the twentieth century had been the primary focus of labour education in the country. In 1976, the UK state began funding labour education courses for union reps (or shop stewards), whether offered by the TUC or individual unions, with ‘a view to using training of stewards as part of a planned move to more orderly industrial relations’ (Fisher 2007, p. 173). The government at the time ‘recognised the real value of having trained [union] reps’, explains a labour educator from Stockport College, reps who would understand the details of collective bargaining and industrial relations law and policy and could be hoped to ‘follow the law as what the law is, rather than taking things into their own hands’. Statutory recognition was extended at this time, initially to union reps and then to health and safety reps, both of whom were given the right to paid time off from work (facility time) in order to attend labour education courses related to their trade union duties. It was also at this time that the TUC worked to construct a network of regional trade union studies centres based in further education colleges, to offer labour education courses (McIlroy 1980, Fisher 1984, Smith 1984, Bridgford and Stirling 1988, Ross 2012). Since the 1990s, the courses run by these centres have been accredited through the National Open College Network (NOCN) in a number of distinct ‘pathways’, including pathways for union rep education and health and safety education, as well as a more generic ‘trade unions today’ pathway: this shift towards formal accreditation was driven by a change in government policy, as unions sought to retain state funding for labour education courses (Capizzi 1999). In the late 1990s, this core framework was extended by the Labour government, working in partnership with the TUC, with the establishment of the Union Learning Fund, and granting of statutory recognition and paid facility time to attend courses for union learning representatives,

a new union position for rank and file activists that had the role of ‘generating demand for learning amongst trade union members; giving them advice and guidance; identifying learning needs; and supporting and then delivering learning opportunities via providers, employers and through government initiatives’ (Moore and Ross 2008, p. 425).

From the beginning, this system of labour education has been shrouded in controversy and plagued by a sense of impending crisis. Concerns have been raised throughout this era about the impact of state funding and control on the independence of labour education, and in particular, the disappearance of overtly political education from the labour movement – an issue that will be discussed below (Fisher 1984, Smith 1984). There have also been concerns about the vulnerability introduced by the dependence of labour education on state funding. Already in the early 1980s, worries were rife that the Conservative government would eliminate state funding for labour education, and new restrictions and reductions in state support for labour education in the UK began to appear (Fisher 1984). Such pressures were exacerbated by declines in union membership during this period, and by the introduction of anti-union legislation by the UK government, which in many trade unions led to declining ability and willingness to support and invest in robust programmes of labour education (Holgate 2021). While devolution during the late 1990s meant that the fortunes of labour education in Scotland and Wales have recently taken on different turns, the collapse of this system of labour education in England set in during the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is this recent history that is the primary focus of this article.

The collapse of labour education in England

‘Since I’ve been here’, says a senior labour educator at Stockport College, ‘we’ve seen an awful lot of colleges abandoning trade union education’. In the northwest of England alone, ‘we’ve seen Preston go, Blackpool go, Blackburn go, Burnley go, and Crewe go’. There has been a stunning collapse of college-based trade union studies centres in England during the first decades of the twenty-first century. In the late 1980s, Bridgford and Stirling (1988, p. 238) reported the existence of 150 trade union studies centres in the UK; by 2013, this number had shrunk to 60, and in 2023, there are only about a dozen such centres left in England (TUC 2013, 2023). This is a collapse that has gone relatively undiscussed in the academic literature, as the bulk of research writing on labour education in the UK during the century so far has focused on debates over the merits of the increased investments in labour education made during the New Labour government, with the creation of the Union Learning Fund and introduction of union learning reps (e.g., Rainbird and Stuart 2011, McIlroy and Croucher 2013). Part of this collapse is connected to a broader collapse of adult education and further education colleges more generally. Since 2010, Coalition and Conservative governments have cut almost one billion pounds of funding from the adult education budget in England, which has led to a massive decline in adult participation in further education and closure of about half of the almost 500 colleges that existed in the early 1990s (Clancy 2019, Sibieta *et al.* 2022, Staufenberg 2022).

Critics speak of the ‘dismantling’, ‘demise’, ‘crisis’, and ‘collapse’ of the adult education sector in England writ large (James and Boeren 2019, Staufenberg 2022, Wallis *et al.* 2022).

But this collapse is also more specifically about labour education. In 2010, the Coalition government cut the state subsidy for labour education from covering the full cost of trade union courses to covering just half of the cost. Since unions and union reps often don’t have funding available to cover the other fifty percent, colleges are running labour education courses at half the income as previously. As one labour educator says, many colleges have opted out of labour education altogether, ‘as they just don’t see the reason behind it’. In England, the Adult Education Budget, which funds labour education courses, has been devolved to mayoral combined authorities. This has created what educators describe as a ‘postcode lottery’, as funds will only cover learners living within each devolved region. ‘Prior to devolution’, a labour educator at Warrington and Vale Royal College says, ‘I was able to do [labour education] diplomas with people from all over the country, but I can now only pick them from Greater Manchester’. If particular courses – for example, on the climate crisis – are not being run in the local area, union activists living in devolved regions are no longer able to access funding to take these courses elsewhere. State funding is also restricted in relation to the NOCN accredited labour education pathways. If a union rep has already completed the different levels in a particular pathway, they will not be supported in participating in further courses in that pathway. Complicating all of this is national data protection legislation that makes it difficult for colleges to know ahead of time which students are eligible for funding. ‘We could have a classroom of twelve people sat in front of us’, says the educator at Warrington College, ‘that can quickly become a classroom of seven students’ for whom the college will receive income. It also means that if a union wants to create a new course on an issue such as the climate crisis, options can be limited in finding a pathway to put the course in; if this can’t be sorted out, no funding will be available to support union reps taking the course.

All of this has been compounded by other factors as well. In 2021, the government shut down funding for the Union Learning Fund in England (Benn 2021). Austerity, wage erosion and job insecurity have made it more difficult for workers to get employers to give them paid time off work to attend labour education courses or be willing or able to take on any of the costs of learning time themselves. Not only have further education colleges shut down trade union studies centres, but labour leaders and activists in smaller unions, like the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), say they have had to shut down their education programmes, at least temporarily, while some larger unions have also had to trim down their educational offer. Several of the union leaders and labour educators interviewed for this study say that there has been a loss of experienced labour educators, who have been pushed into retirement or other forms of education and work; as well as a failure to recruit significant numbers of younger, more diverse educators into the trade union movement. Most staff in the sector, says one labour educator, ‘are worryingly like me: stale, male and pale’, and while ‘what we’re after is a younger, more diverse group of tutors, who’s going to leave their job to come into this industry, because it’s not reliable’.

Many labour educators say that college centres are less willing to run ‘generic modules’ that bring together unionists from different unions to learn about an issue like the climate crisis; as a safer financial option is to run specialist courses, like basic union rep training for a union such as Unite. All of the union leaders and labour educators who I spoke about these changes with in this study believe that the reason for these struggles is political and ideological. The challenges we face are ‘fixable quite quickly, and not that expensively’, says one such educator, but the government ‘won’t do it’ since ‘it actually serves them better if [unionised workers] are not that educated, because then we’re easier to control’.

This is the context that meets current moves to develop climate education for trade unionists in England. In the research conducted for this study, I found that over the last couple of years, since the Covid pandemic, new climate and environment courses have been developed by many of the major unions in the UK, including Unite, Unison, NEU, UCU, PCS and so on. These efforts have been motivated by the impact of the 2019 student climate strikes, climate action by groups like Extinction Rebellion, increasing evidence of significant climate disruption in the UK itself, and a growing sense among union members and activists that the climate crisis is a priority concern. While this turn to climate education in the UK trade union movement is hopeful and promising, it faces real limitations of scope and scale, with relatively small numbers of unionists participating in union climate courses so far. Even those unions that have been most active in climate education and organising speak of the challenges of building and maintaining impactful labour climate programmes in the current environment. As a young climate activist who recently became a union rep for his workplace in the southwest of England observes, though his union does run modules on the climate crisis, labour education on climate and the environment ‘hasn’t felt very consistent’ and ‘there’s no clear programme to follow’ in the way that there is for basic union rep training, where ‘you can build up and go from level one to level two, more complex issues, and then there’s the twelve week certificate’. The current state of collapse of labour education in England is one reason for the sense of there being, as this newcomer to the trade union movement puts it, ‘a bit missing’ when it comes to labour education on the climate crisis today.

The question of state funding, public colleges and labour education

One central issue raised by the recent collapse of labour education in England is the relationship of labour education to state funding and the formal education sector. Some trade unionists argue that it is not just the loss of state funding that has created problems in labour education, but the acceptance of state funding in the first place. The argument is about both increased vulnerability and decreased independence. ‘The creation of [state] funding for trade union education completely depoliticised it’, says an educator with the GFTU, an umbrella organisation of smaller, specialist unions in the UK: ‘Because all of the learning outcomes were agreed between government and the TUC, there could be no political education contained within that framework’. In the context of the climate crisis, the concern is that the kind of (political) education

that is most needed to address the root causes of the crisis would not be readily available in state funded labour education.

This argument goes back to the origin of the current labour education system in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, that McGrath (2017, p. 102) describes as ‘a Faustian pact which meant that the provision of publicly funded trade union education, while permitting access to provision for thousands of workplace representatives over the years, disabled educators from engaging in political and economic analysis’ (see also Fisher 1984). It is an argument that resurfaced in debates in the early part of this century over the political significance for unions of the Union Learning Fund, with some warning that acceptance of this Fund risked turning the TUC into ‘an arm of the state’ (McIlroy 2008, p. 297). This is why some union staff and labour educators I interviewed for this research suggest that the current collapse of state funding, though difficult and painful in the immediate term, could end up liberating labour education in England. The government introduced state funding for labour education to get rid of ‘the mavericks’, says one college-based labour educator, and if they keep cutting funding now, ‘we will have a return of the mavericks, ... people who will just say, “We’re not interested in what the law says, we’re going to create new laws.”’ As Fisher (1984, p. 214) argued in the 1980s, one reason why the Conservative government decided not to cut funding for labour education at that time ‘might be that the government is frightened of a flowering of political education if the unions pay the full cost themselves’.

Problems of dependence and state control are real. ‘During the 1980s and 1990s’, writes Ross (2012), state funding for labour education ‘was reduced and strings were attached to the grant’, as ‘the Tories paid closer attention to the content of publicly funded courses and materials, to ensure they were free of “bias.”’ Employers took legal action to restrict the right of union reps to educational leave for courses that were directly tied to a narrowly defined set of shop steward responsibilities (Salmon 1983). Some unions and worker groups have deliberately decided not to take state funding for labour education for this reason – for example, the NCLC in the early twentieth century and the GFTU today. However, concerns of control and depoliticisation can be overstated. Despite the historical opposition in the early twentieth century between the WEA, which accepted state funding, and the NCLC, which refused to do so, in the name of providing an ‘independent working class education’, Fisher (2017, p. 54) notes that ‘philosophical differences between [these] organisations mattered less at the local level, and many of the student debates on [WEA] or NCLC courses would have been very similar’. Many union activists at the time, writes Fisher, would attend courses run by both the WEA and the NCLC (p. 54).

Today, many labour educators who insist that state funding depoliticises labour education will also acknowledge that much depends on the particular union and educator. ‘In reality, if you [go] to the right trade union studies centre with the right tutor’, there can be a ‘significant political element within the programme’, says a labour educator with the GFTU, who recalls taking a ten day state funded union health and safety course in the 1990s run by a ‘Marxist tutor’, in which he ‘learned more about politics than I did about health’. While overt political education is difficult to get state funding and employer consent for paid time off to do, it remains

possible to embed political education as a core part of any labour studies curriculum, when there is the will to do so. Much also depends on the particular government in power. Today, for example, Wales offers a striking contrast to England, as it has retained the Union Learning Fund, continues to provide full funding for labour education, and has a Labour government that sees union partnership as an essential part of the social contract (research interview with labour educator at the Wales TUC). As a result, labour education on climate and environment, funded and supported by the state, tends to be more developed in Wales than in England at the moment. A labour educator who spends much of his time developing and running courses on the climate crisis for Unison reps and activists in Wales, and who is supported by the Wales Union Learning Fund, says ‘there’s nobody [from the Welsh government] inspecting the content of what I’m delivering’, but acknowledges that ‘none of what I’m delivering is particularly controversial’ from a government point of view, as it essentially supports the ‘agenda that our government in Wales is trying to work on’.

Accepting state funding and running labour education courses in further education colleges need not be an either/or argument for unions. As McIlroy (1980, p. 198) notes, unions in the UK have long campaigned for expanded educational provision in the country’s schools, colleges and universities that is equitable, accessible, and beneficial for workers and their families, while also seeking to ‘more directly’ provide labour education for their members ‘as trade unionists’. Unions can commit to developing, funding, and running their own educational programmes in addition to engaging in labour education courses that are funded and supported by the state, and run through further education colleges – even if many will face challenges of scale and scope due to their limited resources. Indeed, unions have argued for public funding for labour education as an important principle to fight for, on the grounds that increasing the availability and accessibility of labour education to workers serves broader public interests, even if they have also been conscious of the importance of maintaining independence from the state in shaping the core content and political aims of labour education (Capizzi 1999, Fisher 2005, p. 201). State supported education in the formal sector, at any level, never functions solely as ‘an arm of the state’, but is always contested terrain (Gounari 2019). An important vision for trade unions here is provided by the Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2019) in the UK. Calling adult education ‘a permanent national necessity’ that is vital for a democratic and sustainable society, the Commission calls for increased state funding of adult education to reverse the severe cuts of recent decades (p. 50). But it also calls for a new governance structure for adult education. ‘To strengthen the democratic accountability of Further Education colleges to their local communities’, writes the Commission, colleges ‘should be mandated to have representation on their Boards from the local authority, community organisations, and trades unions’, so that college programmes are ‘properly connected with, and responsive and accountable to’ local communities, and can be focused on ‘enabling people to work out responses to issues that matter to them’ (p. 27).

The question of mobilisation, organising agendas and labour education

While the collapse of state funding for labour education poses a major challenge for the trade union movement in England, it also risks distracting from another important set of problems. Many of the labour educators, union staff and activists interviewed for this research say that one of the difficulties with running labour courses on climate and environment issues – or political and economic education more generally – is that few unionists are willing to turn out for these courses, even if funding were available. In other words, it is not just state control and interference that limits political education offered by trade unions; it is also often limited by a lack of worker interest. In the past, we used to run a course on ‘contemporary trade unions’ that ‘was hugely popular with [union] reps’, says a labour educator at Stockport College, where ‘we’d go back into the history of trade unions’, ‘we’d do a bit on economics as well’ and ‘the differences between socialism and capitalism, and the reasons why we are living the way we are’. But now ‘in this country’, the educator says, many union reps ‘haven’t got the time to be bothered, they don’t even have the first thoughts about’ these kinds of educational subjects. ‘There is a significant number of [union] reps, particularly newer reps’, agrees an educator with the GFTU, ‘that if you said, “We’re going to look at political economy, or we need to understand things more structurally and politically, come to this training,” they wouldn’t get the reason why it was relevant to their role’.

This concern directly impacts current efforts to develop and run labour education courses on the climate crisis. A labour educator with Unite, who recently helped to develop a new multi-day course on climate and environment for Unite union activists, says that one of the problems ‘we have come up against is just people not applying for courses, or not in the numbers we’d like’. While this is due partly to the difficulty union activists face in getting time off work and accessing funding support to attend labour education courses, it is also about limited interest. ‘How do we publicise this?’ the educator asks, ‘How do we get that message out? How do we make [our members] think this is important for me?’ Our union ran a national climate and environment course, says another labour educator, and we only had ‘six or seven people on it, ... and they would have been the diehard people, who probably half of them were part of developing’ the course. ‘Sometimes you advertise’ a course on climate and environment issues for union activists, the educator says, ‘and then people just don’t come on it, there doesn’t seem to be the interest out there’.

When labour educators and other trade unionists point to a general lack of interest among union reps and activists in signing up for climate, environment and political education courses, it is important to recognise that worker interests, like class consciousness more generally, ‘are not given, but are social constructs shaped by a wide range of factors’, and can be learned, unlearned and relearned through well-constructed programmes of political education (Thomas and Pulignano 2021, p. 529). One of the issues here is that, since the 1960s, labour education in the UK has been tightly linked with supporting an institutional trade union apparatus comprised of union representatives (shop stewards) and collective bargaining, and thus has focused on providing union reps ‘with skills in bargaining and representation of members’ (Holgate 2021, p. 285). As one labour educator interviewed for this study points out,

this means that when unionists take a union rep or health and safety course today, they can generally see a direct link between their learning on the course and the actions they are going to take afterwards:

Going on a reps course, I can learn how to do a disciplinary grievance, I can learn how to make a difference that could save somebody's job ... I'm going to make changes, I'm not going to let them bully people ... I know what their laws and policies say now, so I'm all switched on to where I can make a difference.

However, when it comes to taking a labour course on climate and environment, such direct links between learning experiences on the course and subsequent actions that are clear, practicable, worthwhile, and effective are not always so immediately evident. At the moment, says a labour educator with the GFTU, 'unions tend to struggle with where to position climate action and what the demands and asks are of the employers'. During the New Labour government, there was a wave of greening the workplace initiatives among UK unions, in which unionists learned to work with employers to 'reduce the environmental impact of the workplace' (BIS 2010, p. 1). But these initiatives were limited in a number of ways, as they tended to be localised in individual workplaces, apolitical and technical, dependent on state and employer support for success, and not always tied to immediate worker interests (Farnhill 2018, Zbyszewska 2021). Greening the workplace remains on the agenda, notes a TUC educator interviewed for this study, but many basic greening practices – such as turning off lights and computer screens, recycling waste, and cycle to work schemes – are 'fairly well embedded now in most unionised workplaces'. Moreover, another labour educator points out, as the climate crisis worsens, many unionists don't feel that 'me throwing cardboard in a bin and switching the lights off and turning the heating down' at work is 'going to make the difference' that is most needed now. While unions can train more green or environment union reps, says the TUC educator, 'we're still struggling to frame what it is we want [these] reps to do'.

The core problem with the current apparent lack of union activist interest in climate, environment and political education courses has to do with the particular characteristics of labour education as an embedded form of education (Tannock 2023). Labour education, writes Orr (2021, p. 503), 'is a distinct form of education' that 'is oriented towards building working class and worker organisation for the purpose of social transformation' and 'to advance workers' struggles'. As such, the value and significance of labour education courses depend on how these are embedded within a wider union structure or worker movement and linked to other kinds of education and action occurring across the union, movement, or struggle. As Allais (2021, p. 496) observes: 'The possibilities offered by workers' education, whether more radical, workerist or professional, can only benefit workers collectively if they are linked to and part of worker struggles and organising and not a separate, or add-on, to these'. However, while labour education in the UK has been connected effectively to supporting regular union representative and collective bargaining practice, something that is 'noticeably absent', argues Holgate (2021, p. 283) and others, is the embrace of labour 'education and training as an embedded element of union strategy' related to organising and campaigning. This is a form of 'political education' that is directly focused on 'strategic or theoretical issues relating to organising', on 'getting workers

to figure out collectively how to build power to resolve their own issues and to act accordingly’, and on developing ‘alternative forms of action workers can take’ to fight for change in the workplace and society beyond (Holgate 2021, pp. 54, 284, 285). As Fisher (1984, p. 221) writes, this is a labour education that would develop ‘an explicit analysis of the interrelated economic and political developments’ that have led to the current climate crisis, as well as a clearly articulated ‘response which the working-class movement as a whole can make to these developments’. For unions to tackle a problem like the climate crisis effectively, labour education needs to be linked to precisely such an organising and campaigning model, one that is focused on pushing for social, economic, and political transformation.

At its best, labour education should produce a guided movement for learners through a process of ‘anger, hope and action’, says a labour educator based in Manchester, where there is ‘a strategy and plan’ and ‘clear vision of what we want to achieve’, so that when it comes to fighting the climate crisis, unions can say to rank and file activists, ‘your part in this strategy and plan is this, and this is what you need to know, so you go [on the trade union climate course], find this out, and then you will plug it into this’ larger campaigning strategy afterward. The educator gives the example of running an organising course in the town of Crewe recently, to support a local campaign by care workers represented by Unison against exploitation and underpayment at work. The course was immediately filled up with sixteen union reps without any problem of recruitment or retention, because ‘they were rallied around a flag, ... they could see something was affecting them, and they could see how [coming on the course] would improve their lot’. If unions had clear organising and campaigning agendas on the climate crisis, and if labour courses on the climate crisis were directly linked to these agendas, the educator argues, ‘then you’d find people becoming environmental reps, you’d find people coming on [climate] courses, you’d find them going on marches down to Parliament, or whatever it is that they decided to do’.

Conclusion

Matt Huber, towards the end of his book, *Climate Change as Class War*, writes that ‘my students often ask me what they can do to save the climate’. ‘I imagine they’re used to hearing things about lightbulbs or electric cars’, says Huber (2022, p. 282), ‘but they need to hear something different: *join a union*’. Others have said similar things. ‘Want to save the climate justice movement?’ asks Saltmarsh (2018): ‘Join a union’, because unions are ‘the essential collective vehicle through which we will win justice for all affected by the climate crisis’. This is the logic of building social power to be effective in fighting the climate crisis that was referred to at the beginning of this article. But, as Huber and others making this argument generally recognise, joining a union is not actually enough: authors writing in this emergent labour-climate movement literature talk of the importance of ‘revitalising labour militancy’ and ‘rebuilding the power and confidence of the labour movement’ (Aronoff *et al.* 2019, p. 92, Saltmarsh 2020, p. 86). In places like England, at least, there is a need more specifically to join a union and then work to revitalise and rebuild labour education. For, despite the major changes and challenges facing labour education in the country

– and adult education, more broadly – there has been relatively little attention paid to this issue. When trade union studies centres started closing up around England during the 2010s, there were scattered protests by unions, local politicians and others. But labour educators interviewed for this research say these were rarely effective and never amounted to a mass mobilisation.

There is a larger, strategic, and substantive issue at stake here in thinking about questions of education, social power, and social change. Today, the focus of climate change education tends to be on children and youth in schools and universities – so much so that climate change education is sometimes defined as the practice of ‘preparing children and young people’ to live, work and act in a rapidly changing climate (Tannock 2021, p. 180). This work, of course, is terribly important. But there is another perspective that is too often neglected. Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School – a school that played a significant role in helping to facilitate the rise of the US Civil Rights Movement – used to argue that if we want to do education for radical social transformation, it is adult education that is essential, more so than the education of children and young people:

The idea of the Highlander Folk School ... was to try to use adult education as one of the main mechanisms for changing society. I had come to see that it was wrong for adults to always say: ‘The younger generation is going to change society’, and then for them to go ahead and fix it so that it would be impossible for the young to do just that. I decided that if you’re going to do anything about changing society – through education – it has to be with adults. (Horton 2003, 11)

This was not about ignoring or disparaging children or youth as legitimate and serious political actors, as both groups played a central role in the Civil Rights Movement, alongside adult allies (Franklin 2021). Indeed, Horton himself helped to develop the philosophy and curriculum behind the Freedom Schools for African American children that were created by the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi in 1964 (Hale 2007). But too often, the turn to children and youth, while appearing to be hopeful, inspiring, and empowering, can serve as a way to defer action on social issues indefinitely into the future, and make it more difficult to achieve real change by failing to engage directly with adult learners, who (potentially) hold the most cultural, political and economic power in society. If it is the case that addressing the climate crisis is urgent and radical change is needed, adult education is vital to this task. And if there is a need to rebuild and revitalise the labour movement to help push through the radical changes needed to address the climate crisis, a renewed labour education programme, focusing on climate and the environment, will need to be at the heart of this agenda.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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