

J POSADAS

The Marxist conception of learning and teaching

J. Posadas

***Extract from The Revolutionary State,
its transitory role and the construction of Socialism***

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Presentation

The government's attacks on State education in Britain forms part of the counter-revolutionary reorganisation of the world by the privatising domination of high finance capital.

The abolition of EMA for the 16-19 year-olds and the trebling of the higher education fees show that capitalism does not trouble with the future; deep down, it does not think it has one.

Beneath its policy of cuts and austerity, capital demonstrates its bankruptcy and antagonistic disdain for human need. In its parallel world, human need does not exist because it cannot be seen or heard. Its attacks on education are part of its strategy to intimidate and silence the population.

The government is building the growing private sector in education with the funds it removes from State education. There is no law to punish this abuse, because the law punishes only those who stand against it. It is to intimidate and force acquiescence that soldiers are invited to become teachers.

The post-war State education system is being dismantled by 'reforms' whose undeclared aim is to protect capitalist competition, profit-making and war. There is violence in the principle that the advancement of the government's 'reforms' must depend on the teachers being defeated.

The text *The Marxist conception of learning and teaching* which we publish here is an extract from *The Revolutionary State, its transitory role and the struggle for Socialism*¹ - a book written in 1969 by the Trotskyist theoretician and revolutionary organiser, J. Posadas.

¹ "Countries like Bolivia, Libya, South Yemen, Mali and Ghana are Revolutionary States. They are part of the capitalist system, certainly, but their structures and socio-economic relations have given up on any large or concentrated reproduction of capital. This invites socialist and revolutionary solutions. It does not invalidate capitalism but it helps to disintegrate it." J. Posadas, 28-29 Sept 1969.

We submit this document to the attention of the teacher-comrades in their struggle against the deepening cultural barbarism engulfing Britain and the capitalist world. Pupils, parents, students, teachers and schools can only recover from this attack through social transformation.

The author says that teaching must not be divorced from what it is for. In the Revolutionary State, or the Workers State, knowledge is used to build the new State. In capitalism, it is used for war and to make the insanely rich even richer.

The degradation of the conditions for teaching and learning is accelerating. The use that capitalism makes of technology has an anti-human, anti-teacher and anti-personnel intent. What it calls 'education' is only rote learning, regimenting and training. Society will be asphyxiated or it will transform itself.

The document we publish here highlights aspects of the necessary battle of ideas in the field of education, as a complement to the teachers' industrial struggle. The fight against austerity by parents, students, pupils and teachers requires *Workers control* and *Organisms of Popular Power*.

The NUT's² insistence on decent human relations in education is part of the fight for civilisation. Civilisation and culture cry out for social transformation. As the *Peoples' Assembly* supports the NUT and other strikes, the industrial strength of the teachers is reinforced by this wider force against fees, cuts and austerity. Now this needs to operate through the creation of permanent committees of solidarity and coordination.

In the matter of teaching and education, capitalism has yielded as much as it ever will. With its debacle drawing near, it turns education into a weapon for its survival. Venezuela shows that the way forward is the *Revolutionary State*, and from the Revolutionary State to the Workers State. We ask the comrades to invite us in their debates.

The Posadists in Britain - 20 March 2014

² National Union of Teachers

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Extract from *The Revolutionary State, its transitory role and the construction of Socialism,*
J. Posadas, 28 - 29 September 1969

Scientific and technical understanding are aspects of knowledge, and knowledge is above all the form given to it by the use of intelligence.

The leaderships of the Workers States view the University much as is done in capitalism: a place where cohorts of students are educated. In China however, recent educational experiences show that this is anachronistic. The manner and the scope of the Chinese education system is not the most adequate, but with limitations, it is progressing in these matters.

What is the University for? It teaches how to use the experience of the past and how to transmit it. Granted, but are Universities needed for that? Is a University-mode of teaching required to achieve this? Why not a Factory-mode of teaching instead, or a Neighbourhood one?

In the Workers States³, the leaders generally consider that University education is best delivered by bearded and bespectacled professors. This highlights a lingering submission to capitalist pressure and oppression. This tells the students: 'Stop! You want knowledge? It is outside you! We have the power to give it to you, in this Learning Centre, this ten-storey building'. But why this particular building? Why not a field with two trees, if these could suffice? What do the ten-storey teach?

Teaching must not be divorced from *what it is for* - that is to say,

³ The Workers States in 1969 were the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and the 'Socialist countries' of Eastern Europe, amongst others.

from the actual *use* of science and intelligence. The Workers States are places where science and intelligence are really in use because what people are taught is in their direct interests. This makes people feel that they contribute to, and determine the development of society. This is why they learn in one week what takes years in other parts of the world.

In China and Cuba, people learn in one year what takes years in capitalism. If the Workers States were to push this advantage more fully than they do into the teaching of science and technology, they could remove all administrators, magistrates and managers. Those people live off the masses.

There is no need for administrators, magistrates and managers; their roles can be played by Factory Committees. This was started in some of China's enterprises, but China's development remained unequal and combined when this most advanced experience failed to be generalised. The Communist Party should have helped to generalise it more. As it did not, the uneven and combined aspects in China's development were given an unwarranted pre-eminence over the generalisations made by the Party.

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In building a society, whoever focuses solely on the *productive capacity* of the country ends up making a taboo of production - as Marx says. Productive capacity is entirely a matter of social capacity! This is why technicians and scientists are very much better formed on the shop-floor than in Academies.

Faculties and Universities inculcate the notion that the individual stands at the centre of the relationship production-society-individual. It is the wont of institutions not to trust in the ability of the masses, only in their own.

Even in the Workers States, the technicians and leaders move with an arrogance rooted in a sentiment of property. Such people value status and they look for it in their functions. They defend their property, i.e. their knowledge and their status, which they sell. This warped comprehension blinds them to the fact that what they learnt at the University, the workers can learn in one year, one

week or one day.

The Soviet and the Soviet Plan of production⁴

In Revolutions where no weapons can be found, people get hold of whatever else. In the Russian, Chinese and Cuban Revolutions, the working class proved to be utterly resourceful and ingenious, with an inexhaustible capacity to find ways and means. The working class is quick-witted and versatile in the handling of weapons, elements and machines. In those Revolutions, the working class proved that it could bring down and build everything.

Why is it, then, that the workers are not doing this in the daily life of the Workers States? The reason is that their leaderships divert the course of their intervention, regulate it and make it fall in line behind managers, foremen and administrators. What are all the managers, foremen and administrators for? What do they do? What do they know? They coordinate production, but this is not needed because the workers do it on the shop-floor.

With *Soviets* and a *Soviet plan of production*, economic programming is easily centralised and decentralised. Decentralisation in the Workers State demands much less concentrated capacity than in the capitalist system because the managers, administrators and overseers of capitalism must protect private exploitation at all times. They are not employed to seek the best return from the productive effort, but maximum return from the outlay in wages.

In a Workers State where there is workers control, the effort to regulate and plan production decreases to the extent that the technical and scientific ability of the masses increases.

A serious Factory Committee that improves daily soon becomes irreplaceable. At this point, who needs managers and administrators? They become unnecessary, redundant.

⁴ Read by J. Posadas: "What is a Soviet", £3 p&p included. "Through parliament, capitalism diverts the political action of people away from the direct defence of their interests. The masses are unable to express themselves in capitalist society. Parliament prevents them from doing so because it is a ruling class instrument. The Soviet represents the will of the exploited masses. It is the organ of the masses. In it, people discuss, decide and apply their own decisions", J. Posadas, 10 Oct. 1968.

Workers control is an economic conquest because it improves production, but it is a social conquest above all because it eliminates inequality. Workers control is the only way to eliminate unequal appropriation and unequal distribution. Where this is achieved, the sentiment of equitability and justice spreads among the masses. The equitable distribution of what has been produced fills society with a deep sense of justice. This actually happens in the world; and where it does, it leaves a mark that no power or fury can erase.

Soviet functioning allows cross-training in any technical branch, no matter how particular. The workers cannot know all about mathematical equations, vehicle-building, steel-making or architecture, but give them a month and they will. Construction workers are very good architects even when they don't know all about gravity, weight, force relations and material resistance. Formal knowledge alone does not stop houses falling down!

The workers learn the theories quickly, the way they learn everything. Of course knowledge and study are needed, but simple studies. You only want for basic knowledge to lead a factory. Besides, technical and scientific ability are much better acquired at work than at a University.

Why train only groups of technicians and engineers? To exploit knowledge! To make these people appear above the common cut. In society, the training of no more than groups stimulates the private interest. It promotes the private sale of knowledge and the sale of existing knowledge.

The solution is to bring these trained persons into socially useful schemes. Since they are bound to be with us for some time, they must be enrolled in tasks that raise the level of everyone until the general level of society overtakes that of the Universities.

**The role of the Party in
the Revolutionary State**

Since Universities and Learning Centres are bound to be with us for

some time, one must oppose their *in cathedra* ways of teaching. The Party⁵ must intervene in what is taught there. The Party must open its functioning to the students, and organise them militantly to stop the practice of *studies chasing after status* in particular branches of the economy.

The assessment of students must rest on the repudiation of the private use of knowledge, and on the students' disposition to put their knowledge at the service of the whole of society.

The capitalist forms and methods of teaching aim at creating categories of individuals to work in the capitalist bureaucracy. As these individuals feel above the rest, they help to partition society and segregate it. The more socially backward they are, the greater their tendency to social segregation. They either live off the sale of their knowledge, or derive a profit from the assets of society.

The remedy? Organisms of mass control! And in the workplaces, social organisms where all the branches of science can be studied by anyone and all the problems can be discussed scientifically. This type of organisation must be replicated in the countryside.

The Chinese Workers State started this kind of transformation. It became able to train surgeons in 6 months. And good ones, capable of operating! And if you think that 6 months is short, the Vietnamese managed to do this in 2 days! This can only happen in a society socially convinced that surgery is as simple as it is necessary. It is society that prepares the conditions for a surgeon to acquire the two key qualities of *determination* and *ability to concentrate*.

The task of the surgeon is to observe properly, and then - the most delicate part - to make the correct incision at the right place and time. In simple operations not requiring much anatomical knowledge, the Vietnamese⁶ created surgeons in 2 days. This happened because the State supplied template, confidence and social acknowledgement. For the student, all the rest was a simple

⁵ By 'the Party', the author generally refers to the Communist Party. Depending on context, he may be referring to the Party of the masses in a given country, or to the need to build *the Party* that represents exclusively the interests of the workers and masses.

⁶ Vietnam was at the centre of actuality when the author wrote this document.

matter of learning.

**Scientific progress
takes the edge off egoism**

Capitalism creates groups of the selected few, and to the masses it says: 'Pull back! Careful! Not this way! This is a mystery!' But scientific advance creates growing layers of people who tear all this down. Scientific progress takes the edge off egoism; it inspires sentiments other than the wish to exploit and usurp. It invites the love for calibre, the wish to be objective and the desire to impel the progress of humanity. This can be observed continuously in the workers and peasants who prove it in their political life, their mass organisations, in demonstrations, public meetings and assemblies.

The Revolutionary State must set up simple socialist means of education to explain the need for the socialist programme. People will respond to this, but they need social 'organs' where to express themselves. It is true that the masses can take to the streets without those social organs, but it is generally due to rights or historic conditions previously conquered. Even then, their lack of social organs keeps them dispersed and their unification is slowed down.

One must not live in the expectation that the masses are going to suddenly rally, support and intervene with a miraculous spontaneity. They need prepared organs for that purpose, organs with an impact on power. They need to have looked into the possibility of themselves intervening and deciding. The role of the revolutionary is to help them set up the relevant organisations, starting with the Trade Unions. The Trade Unions must operate independently from governments, and the idea of mass action and mass power must figure in their programmes.

The Trade Unions must support the Workers States and the Revolutionary States. They need to have workers' plans of production, distribution and control; let the Unions call demonstrations and assemblies for the purpose of electing their sectors' representatives! Let each Union link up with wider workers' organisations, in the cities and in the countryside. And in the Unions themselves, let there be a constant life of deliberation and

consultation to stimulate the Party, to ensure that the Party has cells, and that these cells live politically without interruption.

This is the true University, the Faculty of Humanity.

J. Posadas⁷
28-20 September 1969
Extracts

⁷ This text is translated from Spanish.
All sub-titles and highlights are from the Editorial Board

About the Author ...

J. Posadas was born in Argentina in 1912 and died in Italy in 1981. He started his activities as a Trade Union leader in the shoe industry. He soon adopted the ideas of Trotsky and joined the IV International. He then developed as a writer, theoretician, political leader and revolutionary organiser.

In view of the process of Peronism and revolutionary nationalism, he created a movement in Argentina and in Latin America based on texts such as: *'Five-Year Plan or the Permanent Revolution'* (1947), *'Peronism'* (1963) and *'From Nationalism to the Workers State'* (1966).

Those who belonged to the leading group of the IV International in those days greeted his ideas with incomprehension. J. Posadas separated himself from them as they were abandoning the Marxist principles needed to analyse the Soviet Union, the Communist parties and various mass parties like the Labour Party. In 1962 he organised the Trotskyist-Posadist IV International.

A flurry of his fundamental texts followed, such as: *'The Construction of the Workers State and from the Workers State to Socialism'*, *'Partial Regeneration, Historic Re-encounter and the Process of the Permanent Revolution in this Stage'*, *'The role of the USSR in History'*, *'The Living Thought of Trotsky'* and *'The Revolutionary State'*.

In the more general field of Art, Science and Culture, J. Posadas has left many other writings. They incorporate into the Marxist analysis subjects ranging from 'human relations' to 'the Communist future of humanity'. It all forms part of his *History of the Human Civilisation* which remained unfinished due to his unexpected death.

The works of J. Posadas and the example of his life champion the confidence and security of humanity. As he used to say: *"Socialism is not only a necessity of history, but of life itself"*.

His following last words give food for thought: *"Life has no sense without the struggle for Socialism, whatever the consequences"*.

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