

Resistance and conflict in the history of the labour movement of teachers: the English case

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There is a great deal of historical literature on the history of the labour movement of teachers in England which seeks to portray teachers and teaching in terms of resistance and conflict. According to Gerald Grace for example, 'metropolitan cities provide the arenas for the making visible of fundamental social contradictions within the wider society and of the ideological and political conflicts associated with such contradictions. State schools within such cities, particularly those situated within inner rings of deprivation and powerlessness constitute a context within which issues of power, ideology and control become unusually salient and thus available for examination' (p. 5). Strategies of 'adaptation' and of 'resistance' were adopted by urban elementary school teachers (Grace 1978, p. 44).

More recently, Martin Lawn has analysed the history of teachers in terms of 'the material and social relations of work in school, through a culture/power lens; exploring curriculum, professionalism and unionism, key words of the time, dynamically, within a perspective which emphasises a struggle over the control and purpose of work in schools' (Lawn 1996, p. 1).

The structures and values of state education in the period immediately after the Second World War were experienced by one idealistic Marxist teacher, Brian Simon, who later went on to be a leading academic and historian of education. Simon was acutely conscious of issues of power, ideology and control in schools, and was concerned to make visible the fundamental social contradictions that he saw within the wider society. However, his strategy of 'resistance' found very little resonance within state schooling.

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This paper is concerned with understanding Simon's aims and approach, and how his attempts to highlight such issues failed. In this way it will build on the biographical approach to investigating the communist and labour movements (see for example McIlroy et al 1981, Linehan 2007), and will use this case-study to help to highlight the social, political and cultural features of teachers and teaching that have begun to be documented in other recent historical research. It makes use of the Brian Simon archive at the Institute of Education which includes his unpublished autobiography, personal correspondence, diary entries, memoranda and newspaper articles.

Brian Simon (1915-2002) was a teacher who had joined the British Communist Party in the 1930s when he was a student at Trinity College Cambridge. He studied for a teachers' diploma at the Institute of Education, London, in 1937-1938, and after serving in the British Army during the Second World War he decided to take up teaching. For five years, he worked as a teacher in urban secondary schools in Manchester, in the north-west of England, before being appointed to a lectureship in education at Leicester University College in 1950. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was a leading member of the Communist Party, while also forging a strong reputation as a historian of education that led in 1966 to his promotion to a professorship (Simon 1998; see also McCulloch 2010).

Testimonials provided for Simon while he was a student at the Institute of Education highlighted his character and his commitment. For example, Professor Ernest Barker, chairman of the University Board of History and vice-president of the University Education Society at the University of Cambridge, noted that Simon had guided and inspired a movement among undergraduates of different faculties in his final year at Cambridge to discuss curriculum, teaching and examinations in their different subjects, including history, economics, languages, mathematics and natural sciences. Barker concluded that this activity reflected well on Simon, and in particular demonstrated his interest in the problems of education, his ability to get things done, and his capacity to enable committees to work effectively (Barker 1937). Professor Maurice Dobb, a likeminded professor of economics at Cambridge, observed that Simon had worked under his supervision during part of his course for Part Two of the Economics Tripos. Dobb pointed out that Simon had a high level of intelligence, was well educated, and possessed a well rounded, pleasing personality, with interests in education and social problems (Dobb 1937).

At the Institute of Education, his tutor, D. Gurrey, and the deputy director, H.R. Hamley, attested that he had spent most of his teaching practice for his diploma course at the City of London School (an independent school), where he taught English and Economics. They commented that he was 'a man of integrity, with high ideals, a sense of humour and engaging personality'. Moreover, they continued, he was a clear minded and effective teacher. Indeed, they added,

He brings a critical and well stocked mind to his work, and the handling of his subject has variety, dignity, courtesy and thoroughness. He handles his classes with dignity, courtesy and firmness. He will undoubtedly be a much valued member of a school staff. His prowess at rugby football, cricket, hockey, and swimming, and his musical gifts, enable him to play a useful part in the general life of a school (Gurrey and Hamley 1938).

Clearly, Simon had strong potential as a teacher.

Simon also won plaudits while he was teaching and subsequently. According to W.T. Stevenson, the chief inspector of schools in Manchester, Simon had a first-class character and was an admirable colleague. He had worked in a mixed school in a difficult part of the city, in a secondary modern school in an industrial area, and in a selective modern school on the outskirts, before going on to work in a grammar school. Simon was responsible for the formation of a branch of the English New Education Fellowship in Manchester and Salford, and had organised several successful meetings. Furthermore, according to Stevenson, Simon was keenly interested in educational research: 'Problems of classification and grouping of pupils, of social studies and social education of pupils' interests, and of teacher-pupil relationships, are among the problems to which he has given thought'. (Stevenson 1948)

E.G. Simon, the headmaster of Salford Grammar School, where Simon was a member of staff from September 1947, confirmed that Simon taught English to all forms throughout the school, including the fifth form and both upper and lower sixth divisions of the school. He had broken new ground by starting Economics as a Higher School Certificate in the sixth form, his teaching of English was viewed as being satisfactory for younger and older pupils alike, and he had worked out an impressive scheme for a social study project to be undertaken with the fourth form involving a study of the life and work of people in Salford. Apparently he was also prominent in the general life of the school. He was a fine cricketer who coached the first eleven. He had helped to build up the Junior Drama Group. He gave advice and counsel, was a splendid colleague, and appeared fitted to a position of greater responsibility (Simon E. 1950).

While working as a teacher, Simon was also formulating radical ideas about educational change, especially in promoting the concept of the comprehensive school for all abilities. Following the Education Act of 1944, secondary schools were free and compulsory for all children in the age range, but different types of secondary schools were established for different aptitudes. Following the typology of the Norwood Report of 1943 (Board of Education 1943), grammar schools were selective academic schools for about fifteen per cent of pupils, modern schools were non-selective schools for the majority of children, and technical schools were intended to prepare pupils for commercial and industrial occupations (McCulloch 1989, McCulloch 1994, McCulloch 1998). Simon strongly preferred the comprehensive school model, and produced articles in the Communist press to support this.

In a CP circular for the Lancashire and Cheshire district, circulated in 1946 under the title 'The education campaign', Simon located the problems of education in a historical context and linked them to the demands of a capitalist society. Although the education system often seemed part of the natural order of things, he argued, 'The Marxist is equipped to analyse and understand the true function of these institutions, maintained and dominated by the ruling class for their own purpose. Thus, he affirmed,

The chief lesson that history has to show with regard to education is that the ruling class has always without exception used education (the social power inherent in the instructing set up) for its own purposes as a buttress to support and perpetuate its dominating position, and have always opposed the extension of education to other classes except to that limited extent which, at certain periods, may have been necessary for its more effective domination (Simon 1946a).

The education system had maintained a rigid class structure since the Education Act of 1870, while the 1944 Act 'reflected the weakened position of the ruling class and the increased strength of the working class'. This, he claimed, was based on a broad campaign led by the labour movement which should be taken forward to make further gains including common schools, an increased school leaving age, county colleges, improved school buildings and more trained teachers (Simon 1946a). At a CP Teachers Conference organised in March 1947, moreover, Simon insisted that the CP should take the lead in a movement for the development of 'new forms of education in the school' (Communist Party Teachers Conference 1947).

In endorsing comprehensive schools, Simon made a close link with the labour movement. He insisted that comprehensive schools would widen educational opportunity, and for this reason were 'strongly opposed by the forces of reaction, ably assisted by the State machine in the form of the Ministry of Education' (Simon 1949). Nevertheless, he pointed out, 'it must not be forgotten that such schools cannot themselves bring about equal educational opportunity in a class society, where the "public" schools and ancient universities remain the preserves of the ruling class' (Simon 1949). They were 'no short cut to Utopia', but 'Their success will depend on the speed with which our society moves towards Utopia.' (Simon 1949).

Despite his strongly held educational and social convictions, however, Simon found it difficult and often frustrating to try to make headway with them as a teacher in the schools. At Yew Tree Central School, in the Lent Term of 1946, he noted that the intake of about 120 children per year were organised into three classes, 1A, 1 Alpha and 1 Beta, mainly in accordance with their marks in the eleven-plus examination, and were tested again towards the end of the first year with the Simpler Junior Tests. The teachers he found to be mainly professional and collegial. However, school subjects were in 'water-tight compartments taught by "specialist" teachers', with the teachers tending to turn into instructors. Classes were too large at about 35-40 pupils in each, and the latest equipment was lacking. It was not possible to give individual at-

tention to children, while every class in all subjects had 'bright, medium and backward' pupils and it was the 'bright children' who suffered most in his view. He was critical of many aspects of the school, but saw it as a good school in general. There was, he concluded, good potential for the future: 'The opportunity exists for a really good young head with ideas to make the multilateral school into something quite unique in the county, providing he gets the necessary facilities (equipment, teachers etc) and support that he will undoubtedly need.' (Simon 1946b). Yet this was hardly the account of a teacher who had made a strong impression on the ideas and practices of the school, and he appears to have been rather isolated in his thinking.

The same was true of his experience at Abbott Street School in the summer of 1946. This was an unreorganised all age school that took children from seven to fourteen years of age. The environment, he noted, 'could not have been much worse'. It was located in a derelict slum area of the city: 'The lights have to be used in summer in some of the classrooms because of the closeness of the nearby buildings and the smoke and dirt which settles daily on the windows'. The school building had been erected in 1875, and the playground was very small, and surrounded by a high brick wall. On the other hand, he found the teachers to be keen, devoted and professional, and mainly traditional in their methods of teaching. In his own teaching, he concentrated on class management, but was conscious of his own inadequacy, and more broadly the 'lack of a clear and concrete lead from the educational world generally on the whole question of basic educational theory and its concrete application in the schools' (Simon 1946c). It was this sense of frustration that may have led him eventually towards a university position. Again, though, there is evidence here that even in these depressed conditions, he was something of a lone voice as a teacher in challenging the underlying approach of the school.

This is most evidently the case in his experience at Salford Grammar School, reflecting in his surviving diary notes from July 1948. He was frustrated first of all by the emphasis on examinations: 'Here we rely on marks, marks, marks to keep them going. Frighten them with School Certificate and Higher School Certificate. The modern school lacks objectives, ours are the wrong ones.' (Simon 1948, 10 July). He complained bitterly about the 'obtuseness of the traditional teacher'. One of these, he notes, 'exults (almost) over the fact that 3S gets an average of 16% in German. "They're hopeless"'. When Simon suggests that the subject is too difficult, meaning that it is not taught in the right way, the other teacher 'erupts'.

A few days later, Simon finds himself finishing off the 'clerical work' at the school following the examinations and marking. With reports and comments to be completed on all of the pupils: 'All this rush happens at the end of each term, but particularly at the end of this one. Most of it could, of course, be done by clerical labour. Our teaching tends to suffer'. (Simon 1948, 15 July).

An incident in a staff meeting held later the same day further exposes Simon's isolation as a teacher: 'In the evening, a staff meeting, which, like most others, scarcely touches on "education", but is concerned with arrangements about next year's exams etc. and included a diatribe by Simon against the SSEC proposals'. He continues: 'It does not occur to these people that it may be them that is wrong, or rather the whole colossal system of which they are small cogs'. Indeed, he laments,

It is surely clear enough 1) that they are failing to teach these boys because they teach in the wrong way i.e. too didactically and solely verbally, 2) that a totally different approach to learning is necessary in the case of the C stream and even some of the B stream as a necessity. Probably better results would be achieved if there were a different approach to the A stream as well (Simon 1948, 15 July).

Simon's arguments however appear to have been little heeded at the school.

The teaching experiences of this teacher should help us to address the issue of 'resistance and conflict' in the labour movement of teachers'. In theory, Simon might have expected to find greater support from among his fellow teachers especially in the difficult conditions of the later 1940s. That he failed to do so reminds us of the competing demands of professionalism and the fundamentally conservative culture of the school. It is these features of the teacher's workplace that recent historical literature has begun to throw into relief. The research in Britain of Cunningham and Gardner (Cunningham and Gardner 2004), in the USA of Rousmaniere (1997) and Tyack and Cuban (1995) and other internationally work (for example Rousmaniere, Dehli and de Coninck-Smith 1997) has begun to document in detail the lives of teachers and the cultures of teaching. These have highlighted resistance and conflict, but in many forms.

The British historian Ross McKibbin, in an essay entitled 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', has called attention to the issue of why it was that Britain, alone among the major European states, failed to produce a mass Marxist political party (McKibbin 1991). Perhaps it is time to ask why, in the English case at least, teachers tended to be non-Marxist and their resistance and conflict often did not associate itself with the labour movement, and why teachers such as Brian Simon were so often the exception rather than the rule.

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