

# THE PLEBS

"I can promise to be candid but not impartial."

Vol. XII.

January, 1920.

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No. 1

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## SOVIET VERSUS DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

**I**N a recent debate between an advocate of "democracy," pure and simple, and a spokesman of the proletarian revolution, the latter put forward the argument that the Soviet system was particularly superior to the "democratic" system in that it ensured direct contact of the deputy with his constituents, while "democracy" did not either guarantee such contact in theory or produce it in practice. He did not develop or explain this perfectly justifiable proposition, and failed to reply adequately to the "democrat" when the latter retorted that when *he* was an elected representative, he invariably devoted at least one evening a week to a street-corner account and explanation of his activities in the Council. This retort really quite missed the point; and, as the question at issue was a very important one, one may be permitted to imagine that it had not hitherto presented itself in concrete terms to the Soviet advocate. However that may be, as it is a point that is not directly touched on in any of the published literature on the subject, it might be worth while to consider a little more definitely what is the basis of the Bolshevik attitude.

The representative on the ordinary democratic town council is elected, first of all, by universal suffrage. That is, on a certain fixed day, which may or may not be a day of leisure for the working-class, certain schoolrooms, public buildings, etc., which may or may not be accessible to the tired proletarian after his day's work is done, are assigned as polling booths. Here he, and his wife, if she can spare the time from her housework or shopping, may or may not repair before the closing of the poll, to be confronted with a list of candidates of whom they very rarely know anything except by local repute or by the careful attentions of the canvasser. They choose their man—possibly even the socialist,

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## PLEBS IN COUNCIL

**A** CONFERENCE which may well prove to be a landmark in the history of Independent Working Class Education in this country was held at the Manchester Labour College on Saturday and Sunday, January 17 and 18, when, at the invitation of the Plebs League, a number of lecturers, class organisers and secretaries from various districts met to discuss and exchange ideas upon the needs of the classes and the most useful ways of co-ordinating and developing their work. It was a meeting which should be fruitful of good results, and one hopes that it may be practicable to hold such conferences at regular intervals in future. If for no other reason than that we work together better when we know each other, they would be well worth while.

Tom Bell occupied the chair, and there were representatives present from the Manchester, Liverpool, North Eastern (Northumberland and Durham) and Scottish Labour Colleges; from classes in all parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, London, Cardiff, Derby, Notts, Kent, and from the Plebs Executive. The Board of Governors and the Staff of the Labour College (London) were also—unofficially—represented.\*

The agenda, drawn up by the Plebs E.C., was as follows:—

*Saturday*

Chairman's Opening Address.

*Resolution.*—"That this meeting endorses the policy of the organisation of Plebs League membership into branches (wherever possible) as the most suitable method of securing the maintenance and development of Working-Class Education on independent class lines; by the promotion of classes, propaganda among trade unions and other working-class organisations, and the sale of the Plebs Magazine and other suitable educational publications.

"Further, it endorses the policy of classes so organised becoming affiliated to independent Labour Colleges, local or national."

\* The above list is incomplete, since this report is perforce written without reference to the report of the Credentials Committee.

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### DOWN WITH THE PIONEERS!

**T**HE greatest foe of all progress is the superannuated pioneer. . . . After us the deluge, so far as progress is concerned, is the attitude of the pioneer who has done his work." Thus Belfort Bax in an essay with the above title written in the '90's of the last century. It sounds a terrible long time ago, but it is less remote than the relation between the revolutionary movement of those times and the present, judged by the position of living participants. Who nowadays thinks of Hyndman, Blatchford, Will Thorne and John Burns as revolutionaries? Yet in the "nineties" they were rightly regarded as of that proud order. The continental movement affords similar evidence in justification of Bax's war-cry; Kautsky, for instance, whose *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* has just been published by the I.L.P.

The book seeks to prove the anti-Marxian character of the Russian Soviet Republic on the grounds that it is a violation of the "principle" of "free democracy" (1) by the forcible suppression of a section of the Russian people—*i.e.*, the supporters of property and privilege, and (2) that even within the working-class it forcibly suppresses opposition, even when that opposition comes from supporters of "Socialist ideals."

Now what is all this but a recognition of the fact that, hitherto, political Socialists have been mainly engaged in discussions, with supporters and opponents alike, as to the *ultimate* conditions of existence in a fully established Socialist society. In those discussions Socialist propagandists have been concerned to show that the oppression of one class by another has its basis in the passion for private property and wealth accumulation in all historical societies; that with the development of Capitalism all the pre-existing barriers against the establishment of conditions guaranteeing ample wealth for all have been removed; that the social ownership of the means of life and the sources of culture will necessitate a radical break with the existing forms of social control; and that

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## FOREWORD

**W**E need make no apology for holding over many of our regular features in order to devote most of our space this month to preliminary sketches of the important subjects to be discussed at the next Plebs Conference (at Bradford on the 17th and 18th of this month). The urgent need for a series of adequate, well-considered textbooks is apparent to us all. Their precise scope, and the method of presentation to be adopted, are the next points to settle. And discussion of these points at a conference of teachers and class-organisers is an ideal way of ensuring that every possible aspect of the subject has been taken into account before any one style or method is finally settled upon. Much time can be saved at such a conference if those attending have all had an opportunity of considering some rough suggestions and broad outlines beforehand.

That is the reason for this Special Number—that, and the desirability of giving Plebs unable to attend some idea of the matters to be discussed, and thereby enabling them to send along any suggestions in writing. Every one of the contributors has sent in an apology for his or her inadequate treatment of the subject along with his article. It should therefore be made clear that these articles make no attempt to be final statements. They are simply rough notes, to serve only as a basis for discussion.

The agenda of the Bradford Conference, it is suggested, should be somewhat as follows:—Saturday, April 17, 2.30 to 6.30 p.m.: Appointment of Credentials Committee; Chairman's Address; other preliminary business. Then one hour devoted to each of the following subjects:—Biology, Science of Understanding, Economic Geography. The speaker introducing each subject to be allowed a quarter of an hour, other speakers five minutes each. Sunday, 10.30 to 7.30 (with lunch and tea intervals): morning, Industrial History; afternoon, Economics. Election of Textbook Editorial Committee would probably fit in between these two subjects.

The following speakers will introduce the respective subjects:—*Biology*, L. T. Hogben. *Science of Understanding*, Alice Pratt (perhaps better known to Plebs as Alice Smith). *Economic Geography*, J. F. Horrabin. *Industrial History*

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## THE "TEXTBOOK" CONFERENCE

**I**F the Conference held at Bradford, April 17-18, was not quite so breathlessly busy as the Manchester Conference in January, it none the less settled the matters it set out to settle, and marked another stage in the task of organising and co-ordinating the movement for Independent Working-Class Education in this country. True, many of the speakers who we had hoped would be able to introduce the subjects to be discussed were—for various reasons—unable to attend. That was a pity, if only because "the more, the merrier"! But if not present in person, their views were before the Conference in the pages of the current Magazine, and were duly taken into consideration. And the important job of planning and putting in hand the new series of Plebs Textbooks (on Economics, Industrial History, Economic Geography, The Science of Understanding, and Biology) will be immensely simplified by the fact that the scope and contents of each has been fully discussed by a gathering of class tutors, organisers, and students.

In the unavoidable absence of Tom Bell, the chair was taken by George Sims. Representatives attended from the Labour College (London), the Scottish Labour College, the N. Eastern (Newcastle), Notts, Manchester, and West Riding Labour College Districts, the classes at Liverpool, Leigh, Bury, Sheffield, Bradford, Halifax, Middlesboro', Ashton-under-Lyne, Chesterfield, Doncaster, Leeds, Elland, Mansfield, Wakefield, Shipley, Bingley, Fleetwood; and the Labour College Students' Plebs branch. Dr. Dessin (Bradford) and W. Pickles (Ashton-under-Lyne) were appointed as a Credentials Committee.

It is, of course, impossible in the space at our disposal to give more than the main points of a discussion which altogether lasted some nine or ten hours. On the general need for *simplification* of technical terms and phraseology, and for concentration on *essentials* and omission of details throughout all the textbooks, there was complete agreement.

The two subjects dealt with on Saturday afternoon and evening were Economic Geography and Industrial History.

In the case of the former, discussion centred mainly upon the relative

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### SYMPOSIUM ON "THE HIGH COST OF LIVING"

(A) *To what main causes would you attribute the rise in the Cost of Living during the past thirty years, and especially during the past five years?*

(B) *What in your opinion is the relative importance in this connection of:—*

- 1 *Variation in the value of gold;*
- 2 *Increase in use of credit instruments;*
- 3 *Inflation of currency;*
- 4 *Excess of demand over supply resulting from abnormal war conditions.*

The above Questionnaire was recently sent out from the Labour College to well-known writers on Economic and Social questions. We give a first instalment of the replies received this month, and shall publish the remainder in future issues.

#### PHILIP SNOWDEN

(a) The increase of credit without a corresponding increase of marketable goods.

(b) (1) Very slight; (2) Main cause; (3) Important cause; (4) Important cause.

#### G. BERNARD SHAW

All these I believe to be negligible up to 1914, when the last two came into play. Leaving the war years out of the question, I explain the rise by the substitution of commercial combination for commercial competition, and the consequent blockade of the consumer by Capitalism.

#### PROF. A. C. PIGOU

A reply to your questions in summary form, I think, can be given as follows:—

The facts are these. Roughly speaking a £ sterling will now buy as many commodities in general as 7s. would buy before the war. A £ sterling will buy as much gold as 14s. would buy before the war; and the gold contents of a £ gold will buy half as many commodities in general as it would buy before the war. The fall in the purchasing power of the £ sterling is, then, due to two

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## OUR NEW VENTURE

**6<sup>d</sup>.** is to be the price of the new and enlarged series of the PLEBS starting with the October number. "It's a lot of money," say some of our friends. But is it? Sixpence a month in these days is not more than equal to the 2d. a month which the PLEBS used to cost you in the dear dead days beyond recall. The 7d. novels you bought in those days cost you 2s. now—a 250% advance. The 1d. Socialist weeklies are now 2d., which works out at more than 6d. a month. *And we shall increase our size*—to as near double our present bulk as YOU, by supporting or not supporting us, decide.

Our aim is to produce a magazine which every working-class student *must* buy. We're already getting together material for the first issues. We want *every student of every Labour College or Plebs class in the country* as a regular subscriber. If we get them, we shall pay our way—and give them value for money. At present we haven't got them all, or even anything like the proportion of them we ought to have. We regularly receive reports from this or that area—100 students enrolled, 200, 350, and so forth. And the magazines sold in that area will sometimes not be more than 25% of the number of students mentioned.

Now we may be flattering ourselves unduly, but we don't think this is *our* fault; that is to say, we think we issue a magazine which all keen students would buy, *if it was put in front of them*. And for that part of the business we have to rely on you. So if we do our share, will you do yours? If we provide *the goods*, will you see that the new PLEBS is shoved, and held, in front of *every* student in your area? If we do the producing, will you do the distributing? We want active canvassers. Classes will have got going by the time the first number of the new series is ready. Will you send us, *NOW* (or *as early as possible*) your orders for a good parcel, and see to it that No. 1 has a record sale? *We'll* see to it that No. 1 is good enough to make every purchaser anxious for the time when No. 2 is ready.

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[ The third instalment of J. T. Walton Newbold's series, "Production and Politics," and the "Students' Page" are held over until our next issue. ]

## THE SAME OLD SLOGAN

**T**HERE are stages in the history of every movement when the discussion of new ideas, of fresh applications or modifications of accepted principles is necessary. There are other times when simple reiteration of first principles with insistent emphasis becomes of vital importance. Such a time we have assuredly now reached in our own movement. Our plain duty to-day is to reassert, uncompromisingly and unflinchingly, with greater emphasis than ever before, the principle which for us is fundamental—*Independence* in Working-Class Education.

The Northumberland resolution carried at the M.F.G.B. Conference (proposing that the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. should take over and run the Labour College and Ruskin College) may be the first step towards a full realisation by the Labour Movement of the importance of Education. It may, on the other hand, be a first step backwards—a step which may lead (whether so intended or not) to the undoing of all the work the Central Labour College and the Plebs League has accomplished during the past ten years. Which it proves to be depends upon ourselves. Let us get busy in time.

The discussion at the Conference, on the resolution and on the defeated S. Wales amendment, very quickly centred on the vital point at issue—the question of Labour's complete *control* of both Colleges and of the curriculum of both. It is quite true, as Frank Hodges pointed out, that the time has come to make provision for an ever-increasing number of colleges. *But they must be colleges of the right kind.* Ruskin College buildings, and the accommodation they afford, may be well worth taking over. But if taking them over means taking over also the educational policy for which Ruskin College has hitherto stood, then their acquisition would be a bad bargain for labour. *We want to know whether it does mean this or not.*



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## WE'RE LOOKING TO YOU

**W**ITH our next issue we inaugurate the PLEBS New Series—a magazine enlarged in size and with the price increased to 6d. monthly (8d. postpaid). It is hardly necessary for us to repeat what Mark Starr, on behalf of the PLEBS Executive, put with point and vigour in last month's issue; the sum and substance of which was—*We rely on you*. We can afford no extensive advertising and no free distribution of specimen copies. If we're to pay our way we need a bigger circulation. Will you do your bit towards securing it for us? Can't we break all records this coming winter?

If you're a class teacher, organiser, or secretary will you urge every one of your students to become a subscriber to the PLEBS?

If you're in touch with Literature Secretaries or can in any way influence the display of literature at local meetings, &c., will you put in a word for the PLEBS, and see that it gets a show?

If you've any surplus Bradburys—we said *if*—will you remember our Special Publication Fund; or perhaps you'd prefer to order, and pay for, a parcel of PLEBS, and distribute them among your friends?

We ask you to make some sacrifice, some little extra effort on our behalf during the next two or three months. *And you'll help us by letting us have your orders in good time in the month*, so that we know just how we stand, and neither have to print copies to waste nor lose customers by not printing enough. If we haven't heard from you lately please let us have a word from you now.

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## OUR POINT OF VIEW

**I**N a recent number of The PLEBS we urged on all our friends the present need for concentrating on the old, old issue—Independence or Co-Partnership in Working-Class Education. We cannot do better than begin this first number of our new series by saying again that we are out with "the same old slogan." Eleven years ago, when the Plebs League was founded, it needed more courage than it does to-day to make that Declaration of Independence. It was a fight then against big odds, though it must be set down to the credit of the enemy that they were wide awake enough to realise the seriousness of the Plebs' challenge. To-day, things have changed. The odds are on our side now, and we are fighting a winning battle. The other side has been forced to withdraw from position after position. But a good many victories have been weakened, if not lost altogether, for lack of the final decisive blow. It is our job to see that there is no slackening until the Co-Partners and the Impartialists have been driven right out of the field.

\* \* \*

They don't fight now as they did in the early days. Having felt the force of our artillery—or should we say, our snipers?—they have discovered the saving virtues of Camouflage. Their present strategy is to fake their position to look as much as possible like ours, and to steal our watchwords. They are shouting loud, for instance, for "Workers' Control" of Education. They still, indeed, mumble "Non-Political," yet more and more they are driven to rely on the power of the Labour Party to realise certain of their ambitions. And no longer do they

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## OUR POINT OF VIEW

(Which is Prejudiced, Partial and Partisan)

**W**E got a heap of compliments on our first sixpenny issue, and along with them some criticisms. A criticism, to be exact; for every one of our correspondents concentrated on a single point. We included no feature (they pointed out) appealing specially to the beginner, and our contents generally were a little too “advanced” for any but those who had grown grey—or bald—in the study of Marxism. New readers (our critics continued) are mostly beginners; if, therefore, we aim at an increased circulation, it is up to us to provide reading-matter which does not demand a previous course of class-training for its enjoyment.

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Our critics were right, and we will waste no space making excuses. If there is one job which more than any other we of the Labour educational movement need to set our hands to, it is the job of Simplification. *Simplification* of style and treatment; *elimination* of unnecessary detail and technical phraseology; *concentration* on broad essentials, and on making these rightly understood. We have done our best to mend our ways in the present issue; and we urge our critics to let us know how far, in their opinion, we have succeeded.

# THE PLEBS

"I can promise to be candid but not impartial."

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ONE cannot—even if one wished to—get away from Mr. H. G. Wells. Years ago in the PLEBS we illustrated an article on G. B. S. with a portrait of that accomplished tympanist performing (*solus*) on the big drum, outside an exhibition of his wares. Mr. Wells can hardly be said to have taken over Mr. Shaw's mantle; but he appears to have borrowed the drum. Long before the tumult and the shouting over the *Outline of History* has died away, he is once more in everybody's mouths—as the author of the vividest, liveliest and—to our side—most encouraging account of Things as They Are in Russia which has yet appeared. He may qualify his praises of the Soviet Government in all sorts of ways—and the *Sunday Express* may promote his little qualifications into half-page headlines ("Blundering Bolshevism," "Planless Communism," and so forth); but the fact remains that, taking his articles as a whole, they constitute as handsome a compliment to the present rulers of Russia, and as hard a blow at the Churchill gang, as either has yet received.