

Adult Education and Socialism

Historical perspectives for a revived lifelong learning

CALL FOR PAPERS



**Birmingham
Newman
University**

In Britain, prior to the Elementary Education Act 1870, few working-class people had any formal education; even after that opportunities were limited. In response, a diverse range of non-statutory voluntary adult education organisations emerged. These included the Mutual Improvement Societies, the Young Adult Schools, the Education Settlements, the Mechanics' Institutes, the Working Men's College, University Extension, Co-operative Education, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and Independent Working Class Education and the Labour College Movement. Some were deeply linked with socialism – others more tenuously, if at all – but together they made adult education in literacy, technical skills and knowledge, the liberal arts and politics accessible to many adults.

Through the twentieth century, at least until the neo-liberal era, the influence of socialist ideas and movements on adult education was deep. In the 21st century, however, the forces of global capitalism have systematically sought to marginalise socialist (and democratic) thought. As jobs, and much work that rewards the human spirit, are threatened by the advance of Artificial Intelligence, adult education is more and more expected to meet the objectives of “the economy” and the labour market. Wider educational purpose is ignored.

How have we come to this? The marginalisation of socialist perspectives is by no means confined to adult education. Yet so central was adult education to the emergence and growth of socialism – and the reverse is also true – as to pose essential and urgent questions. In what ways did adult education contribute to the development of socialism? Why did socialist perspectives play so central a role in the practice of adult education – and did they enrich or constrain it? What can we learn from examining the part that socialism, and socialists, played in adult education's rich history?

We aim to revisit the topic of adult education and socialism in Britain in the 21st century through a special issue of the journal *Socialist History*. It seeks to revive the field of study, and to explore the idea to meet the diverse needs of a multi-cultural society more – rather than less – adult education

is needed – and that the adult education needed should be broad rather than narrowly job-related. This is especially relevant to consider in connection with the new Lifelong Learning Entitlement which has the potential to transform how post-18 students fund and approach their studies throughout the course of their lifetimes.

What new research perspectives can academics – and scholar-practitioners and activists – from all disciplines bring to the history of adult education, and to the understanding of socialist approaches to improving economic, social and cultural welfare?

We invite submission of abstracts of approx. 300 words. They may explore any aspect of the interlinked history of adult education and socialism. We welcome contributions relating not only to Britain, but to Europe (western, central and eastern) and other locations around the world. Topics may include (but are not limited to):

- The experience of tutors and students of different forms of adult education
- The politics of adult education
- Organisations that provided adult education
- The impact of adult education on socialist ideology and movements
- Key figures in the adult education movement – tutors, students and organisers
- Gendered perspectives of adult education
- The buildings and spaces of adult education
- The organisation and delivery of adult education
- The content and curriculum of different forms of adult education
- Biographical and autobiographical accounts of adult education
- Local and regional case studies of adult education
- The consuming of adult education
- The role of socialism in colonial adult education
- The financing of adult education initiatives
- State support for adult education
- Local government and adult education provision

Please email abstracts with your affiliation, a short biography and contact information to john.holford@nottingham.ac.uk and p.kumbhat@staff.newman.ac.uk. The deadline for submission of abstracts is Friday 30th October 2026.

We hope to convene a symposium on this theme on Wednesday 7th April 2027 at Birmingham Newman University, where contributors can discuss their draft papers and ideas. The symposium will provide an opportunity to share work in progress, receive feedback, and develop papers to be considered for publication in the Socialist History special issue in autumn 2027. The April symposium will be an in-person event, although authors based outside the UK will have the option of presenting remotely via Microsoft Teams.