



**Frank Tobias Higbie.** *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019. 234 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08402-7.

**Reviewed by** David Kidd

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**Commissioned by** Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Tobias Higbie has written an important book detailing the development of educational programs, institutions, culture, and media that were used by the American working class in its struggles for equality, power, and respect. Though Higbie addresses union educational programs, *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* aims to uncover this history for the broader working class. It examines self-education and the development of formal and informal educational programs by reviewing cultural products such as novels, cartoons, plays, and other print-based publications. Anyone interested in the wider field of adult learning and the role of education in movement building will find this book a useful resource.

When I was about seven years old, my father took me and my siblings on a road trip from Toronto to the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. What I remember most is the school's Fourth of July celebrations. Soon after the festivities began, a Roman candle inadvertently hit the cache of fireworks assembled nearby, and they all went off at once. It made quite an impression on me. My father was an adult educator, engaged in bringing literacy and basic education to Canadian adults, both rural and urban, many of whom had not completed elementary school or who lacked basic English-language skills due to recent immi-

gration. He often showed us the work he did and the learning and teaching techniques he used. Later in life I was inspired by the civil rights movements in Canada and the United States and learned of Highlander's role in training civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks and developing the anthem *We Shall Overcome* in a workshop with students. I revisited Highlander during the 1980s when it was engaged in action research among the peoples of Appalachia.

Each chapter of Higbie's book narrates someone's life story in order to introduce and illustrate the content of this history. I started this review with one of my own narratives to underscore Higbie's point, especially since I was trained with methods developed by Marshall Ganz when working with the United Farm Workers in Canada and have served as a working-class organizer for most of my life. Highlander Folk School is only one of the many community- and labor-based educational institutions that this book looks at. *Labor's Mind* speaks to me due to my father's influence and my own experiences as a member of the Left and trainer of union activists in basic stewarding and labor history.

The book starts with one of my all-time favorite stories—Ralph Ellison was organizing tenants in Harlem when he stumbled upon an intense discussion among four black men on the

performances of two sopranos at New York's opera house. This story illustrated the degree of worker self-education in the early part of the last century. These were highly informed working-class men who educated themselves about a topic that is often assumed to be beyond their areas of interest and expertise.

Higbie jumps right into the debate that has reverberated within working-class circles for many generations: what is more important for self-education, book-learning or experience? In the 1920s, union educational programs emphasized self-learning from everyday experiences as a means to enhance self-awareness and collective action. Not lecture-style training, but discussion among participants was the prime emphasis. This explicit critique of the existing education system's patronizing teaching methods of rote and obedience prioritized workers' life stories.

The organizations that published workers' life stories did this strategically, as experience was "not unique but common to all" and telling these stories drew out lessons and gave leadership and direction to workers (p. 114). Higbie makes an important contribution with his phrase "pedagogy of the organized" to describe a technique that predated the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and also the significant future role of "consciousness raising" in the 1960s (p. 63). *Labor's Mind* also looks at the role of intellectual workers within this process and reviews commentaries on the topic. John Reed is only one of the many journalists and writers of the period who wrote stories for the working-class press. In the 1930s, some of these journalists criticized other movement journalists as intellectuals, as removed from "the class struggle" (p. 106). Today, the populist Right uses a similar term of reference criticizing intellectuals and professionals as elites.

Reading was an important learning tool for activists in the pre-World War II period. Higbie highlights the sheer number of newspapers, mag-

azines, novels, plays, autobiographies, and agitational pamphlets that were available, and he provides an excellent bibliography of them. He contends that the pervasiveness of anticapitalist content in working-class media of the early twentieth century meant that in later years, Madison Avenue and the advertising industry had to intensify their efforts in order to promote the benefits of the capitalist system. He also illustrates how reading was a subversive activity—from the days when slaves were denied reading materials and the living and working conditions of most workers provided few opportunities for them to read. The Left and working-class movements contributed many accessible publications and these agitational materials contributed to movement building just as Thomas Paine's materials contributed to the mobilization associated with the American Revolution. Higbie produces personal anecdotes about how novels and life narratives were influential despite cultural, ethnic, and racial differences regarding the exploitive situations that all faced. In the 1970s, these materials inspired activists in the feminist, African American, and leftist movements as they republished many of the proletarian novels of the earlier period (for example, from Tillie Olsen, Alexander Saxton, and Agnes Smedley) to show the history and long-term nature of these struggles. It is important to add that a new tradition of working-class history writing exists today through graphic novels, some historical fiction, and many mystery writers, such as Walter Mosely.

Higbie also explores the use of public space such as parks, street corners, community centers, social clubs, and more, all of which served as centers for debate and education. These spaces were subject to "free speech" struggles from the 1910s to the 1930s and on various campuses during the 1960s. Depending on the agitational content and situation, speakers were often harassed and sometimes arrested by the police. After the United States committed to sending troops during World War I, antiwar speakers were arrested for "hin-

dering the draft” (p. 52). Speakers’ corners have now been replaced by social media. One aspect not reflected in the book is the public campaigns against the rise of right-wing politics and fascism that existed in the US in the 1930s and since. I cannot cite US locations or sources, but in Toronto, the debate on whether White Power advocates and the Right have a right to assemble or speak in the public sphere has been continually discussed since the Depression.

Higbie evaluates whether educational and cultural programs contributed to the growth of working-class organizations and whether there were tangible gains. *Labor’s Mind* reflects well the ebb and flow of victories and defeats. Educational programs played a role in building a bigger and broader labor movement and improving work conditions. But capital also responded in the postwar period and developed their own strategies. Labor peace was mediated through a social contract wherein capital and the state set the rules of engagement, and collective bargaining and disputes were regulated under labor relations legislation. *Labor’s Mind* looks at factors leading to the decline of working-class movements. Taylorism and constant restructuring contributed to a deskilling process that limited the power of the skilled trades and created a more fragmented work force. Previously close-knit urban working-class neighborhoods faced upheaval. Deindustrialization eliminated many good-paying jobs, gentrification forced housing prices up, and many workers moved to the suburbs. Communities were carved up by towering expressways and expressway ramps. The strength of the postwar anti-communist movement (which Higbie downplays) contributed to suspicions about leftist politics and divisions within workers’ organizations.

The final discussion of the book is Higbie’s analysis of the changing nature of labor education and the role of universities. Changes in the production process led to union decline and job instability and also an overt change in union education

strategy. In the 1930s, John Brophy of the United Mine Workers was very influential concerning the pedagogy of union education. Brophy used workers’ own experiences to instill an understanding of the moral and collective power of unionism. Labor educational programs emphasized leadership development and taught their members to develop collective strategies to increase union power. In the postwar period, this orientation was eliminated. Union education focused more on the training of professional representatives who mediated and settled all disputes, including contract negotiations. Higbie suggests that in the prewar period, unions had been more mindful of building unity among their members by transcending differences in gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and other classifications. All were included in union educational programs, even though Higbie also points out how women and men were treated differently and how male privilege was reinforced in many unions.

The book looks at the role of universities for working-class students in the postwar period. Working-class enrollment increased significantly as the government increased funding to build new campuses and pay for tuition support. The universities have become the new site of working-class intellectual activity and many of the community-based and union institutions have closed. Higbie argues that universities have not replaced the community empowerment role that working-class institutions played previously as they carefully mediated community demands and maintained their historic role as centers for professional development. An important aspect of working-class education provided by the working-class institutions has thus been lost.

Higbie suggests that the growing provision of digital educational programs could be an empowering pedagogy for students in the future. I find this naïve. Currently, the majority of digital programs provide lectures only. Similar to the critiques from working-class organizations in the

1930s, these programs do not provide two-way discussion between teachers and students. What is absent in the book is an acknowledgment of the historical mobilization of the US working class for universal access to public education. Social reformers like Jane Addams pushed for public education and business representatives often advocated for publicly funding training programs. The strongest push to provide public schools for the working class came from the working class itself, particularly with the advent of universal suffrage. Higbie relates how the US government provided funds for veterans to attend college after World War II, but he does not mention how this was partly a response to the massive social upheavals caused by returning veterans after World War I.

Notwithstanding some of my commentary, this book provides an in-depth review of the history of education within US working-class organizations and a rich discussion of how education and culture played a role in the empowerment of workers. Much of this history should be reexplored. We are in an era where workers face many daunting challenges. *Labor's Mind* cogently demonstrates how democratic education plays a key role in improving the daily and future lives of working people.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

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