

## BOOK REVIEW

**Maria Alicia Rueda, *The Educational Philosophy of Luis Emilio Recabarren: Pioneering Working-Class Education in Latin America*. New York and London: Routledge, 2021**

Maria Alicia Rueda has made an essential contribution to education and Marxist studies with the publication of *The Educational Philosophy of Luis Emilio Recabarren: Pioneering Working-Class Education in Latin America*. By focusing on the early twentieth-century Chilean Marxist, the author showcases a lesser-known Communist leader and pioneer in working-class education. As the author states “the book is not a biography, nor does it approach him as a ‘great man’ but rather as ‘an organic intellectual’ of the working class”.

Recabarren was born in Valparaiso in 1876 and was schooled by French priests. From a family of modest means, he worked from a young age in a print shop, where his work as a typographer trained him for his lifelong work as a newspaper publisher and journalist. At the age of 15, he participated in the Chilean Civil War as a military recruit and having published anti-government propaganda, he was judged in a military court but exonerated. From that time onward, he was an engaged activist joining the Democratic Party in 1894, a party that represented working-class interests. Throughout his years

in the Democratic Party, he identified himself as a “revolutionary socialist”. During his years in the party, he founded newspapers and was elected to Congress, the first working-class leader to achieve that distinction, but he did not take office when he refused to take a religious oath.

Recabarren self-exiled to Argentina in 1906 after serving prison time for organizing miners in northern Chile. In Argentina, his socialist thinking was refined. Following the severe repression of working-class protests in Chile in 1907, he returned to his native country. He wrote one of his most important essays, *Rich and Poor through a Century of Republican Life*, a scathing critique of the shortcomings of Chile’s supposedly democratic system. As he radicalized, he broke with the Democratic Party and, in 1911, founded the Socialist Workers Party (POS), a forerunner to today’s still influential Communist Party of Chile. The years surrounding World War I were crucial to developing the POS and Chilean socialism. He was involved in forming several unions and socialist newspapers during that era. His strategic thinking generally followed the reflection of the Second International that socialism was a natural and non-violent progression of human development that could be achieved with the full extension of voting rights to the working class. In this context, he placed workers' education on socialist ideas to the forefront of both his writings and practical work through speaking tours and newspaper editing.

Like all socialists of that era, he was influenced by European events. When most of the European socialist parties of the Second International supported their governments in the war, Recabbaren and the POS took an antiwar stance and later, with the triumph of the

Bolshevik Revolution, joined the newly formed Third International under Soviet leadership. In the postwar period, as a member of Congress for the POS, he led the Federation of Chilean Workers (FOCH), which organized into a single union federation the majority of the workers in the country. He championed the unity of the working class as a key Communist objective as part of a long-term strategy of bringing about socialism in Chile. Tragically Recabarren died in 1924 following a military coup of gunshot wounds presumably of his own making. Like the death of Salvador Allende almost fifty years later, the circumstances of his death have always been disputed. Still, his impact on the development of the Chilean working class and socialist movements cannot be disputed. As the author argues, he should be considered a figure of significant importance in Latin America in the same category as Agosto Cesar Sandino, Jose Marti, Carlos Mariategui, and Jose Antonio Mella.

It is important to note that the working class struggles of Chile took a different form from ones that focused on armed struggle. Instead, the Chilean struggle was conducted “not by caudillos but by educators”. As a result, a primary focus of Rueda’s book is Recabarren’s work as an educator. His view of the role of education for the working class was the following:

The major obstacle to social equality today is the difference in culture, education, and customs. That can be resolved by providing the means for education and cultivation, and in a few years of active work, all lack of culture and manners will disappear (Recabarren, 1912/1976, p. 133).

The education of the working class would require a multifaced approach involving the intelligentsia, the press,

the schools, and municipal governments. However, he saw no role for the Roman Catholic Church, a group usually charged with an important educational role, critiquing their failure to produce a morally good citizenry. While he saw education as the task of many organs of society, his focus was the role of working-class organizations. He identified different structures and wrote about their respective roles. One type of organization was the *mancomunales*, mutual aid societies of the working class that held sway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These bodies mainly served as defenders of workers' rights. Still, Recabbaren worked with them to add an educational function with the publication of newspapers and the building of worker-operated spaces where there could be the education of both adults and their children. This was part of a strategy of arguing for night schools in the absence of proper public schools. He would later apply the *mancomunales* experience to all the working-class organizations he worked with. Rueda contends that this was a crucial part of his legacy.

## **Gary Prevost**

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## **References**

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