

# **Moisey Pistrak (1888-1937) and the Unified Labour School: Analysis of Soviet Pedagogical Thinking for the Education of the *Homo Novus***

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## **Abstract**

*This research deals with the Soviet pedagogy proposed by Moisey M. Pistrak, which typified the structuring of the young people's school life in ancient Russia aiming at educating the new man. The objective of this research was to analyse the Pistrakian proposal for a unified labour school in the context of the Bolshevik revolution, seeking a critical analysis of its content and a correlation with educating the homo novus for the emerging Soviet socialist society. The methodology used to construct the text was based on bibliographic research on the main written works by the socialist pedagogue translated into Portuguese, namely: *A escola-comuna* (2009), *Ensaio sobre a escolapolitécnica* (2015) and *Fundamentos da escola do trabalho* (2018) (*The school-commune, Essays on the polytechnic school, and Foundations of the labour school, respectively*). Finally, Russian educators provided*

*pedagogical conceptions to students to educate the new man, a man of another kind, a man for the communist sociability. These conceptions translate the notions of organisation, autonomy, collectivity, and self-management.*

**Keywords:** *Russian pedagogy, critical education, Bolshevik revolution, education and work*

## **Introduction**

The aim of this manuscript is to understand the possibilities of thinking of an education that includes labour as a founding element. This kind of research should be relevant and develop some investigations addressing the Russian revolutionary period after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Several Soviet intellectuals such as Vladimir Lenin, Nadjla Krupskaja, Moisey Pistrak, Anton Makarenko, and Viktor Shulgin developed a revolutionary pedagogical proposal in line with the socialist movement (Pergher and Frizzo, 2018).

Moisey Mikhailovich Pistrak was born in 1888 and arrested and murdered in 1937. There is not much information about his political and intellectual trajectory. According to Golovaty (2017), the Soviet thinker graduated in mathematical physics in 1914 and held a PhD in pedagogical sciences. In 1918 he joined the cadres of the National Commission of Education (NarKomPros), when he worked at the Lepechinsky Demonstrative-Experimental School. In the same year he joined the Communist Party, 1925, Pistrak published “Fundamentals of the School of Labour”. Other bibliographic data brought by Boleiz Júnior (2017) indicate that in 1931, the socialist thinker worked at the North Caucasus Pedagogy Institute and, in 1936, became director of the Central Institute of Scientific Research of Pedagogy, linked to the Communist Higher Institute of Education, an organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Pistrak developed his works from his pedagogical work in conducting the Lepechinsky School and socialist militancy in the early twentieth century in Russia and then in the Soviet Union (Valle and Arriada, 2012). Little is known about his life-story, as his works were not much divulged in the Stalinist period of the Russian Revolution (Pergher and Frizzo, 2018). His texts exposed educational experiences during the post-revolutionary Russian period and his quest to educate the new man, the one who would live in the newly created socialist society. Pistrak, as a member of the intellectual class, was appointed as an auxiliary to the bureaucratic class of Bolshevik *intelligentsia*.

The objective of this research was to analyse the Pistrakian proposal for a unified labour school in the context of the Bolshevik revolution, seeking a critical analysis of its content and a correlation with educating the *homo novus* for the emerging Soviet socialist society.

To avoid an anachronistic analysis of the theme as a methodological process, this study makes use of bibliographic research on the main written works by the socialist pedagogue Moisey M. Pistrak (2009, 2015, 2018): *A escola-comuna*, *Ensaio sobre a escolapolitécnica*, and *Fundamentos da escola do trabalho*<sup>1</sup> (The school-commune, Essays on the polytechnic school, and Foundations of the labour school, respectively).

In Brazil, research on Pistrak's work is scarce, but the achievements of his educational practices justify the interest in a critical analysis and a verification of his contributions to contemporary school (Boleiz Júnior, 2017).

Among the research studies published on Pistrak in the Portuguese language, we highlight the work of Valle and Arriada (2012), who investigated some similar aspects of the pedagogy focused on labour education, by Anton Semiónovitch

Makarenko and Moisey Mikhaylovich Pistrak. The results indicate that their educational proposal converges as to the use of the principles of collectivity, self-organisation, and productive labour, designating educational practices in democratic and collective spaces, and seeking the preparation of the new human being for life in the socialist society in transition.

Following the same line, Valle (2012) analysed Pistrak's performance at Lepechinsky School in Moscow (Russia) and Makarenko's performance at Gorki Colony in Poltava and Khárkov (Ukraine) in the period following the Bolshevik Revolution. The author explained that Pistrak demonstrated that the main pedagogical issue is not exactly the educational method or the selection of curricular contents to be approached; instead, it resides in the definition of the purposes intended through education.

Santos and Paludo (2016) analysed the contributions of the Soviet educator and his socialist pedagogy to the advances of the pedagogy of the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - MST, Portuguese acronym). According to this research, a pedagogy based on the principles of the socialist education, whose central category is labour, can be built. "The MST draws on Pistrak's idea that manual labour is an educational process and therefore it is critical to teach students the value of collective work through manual labour tasks in schools." (Mariano and Tarlau, 2019, p. 3).

Furthermore, studies on Pistrak's works have been growing in recent decades in Brazil, notably linked to involvement of the MST, which is clearly one major reason, as Tarlau (2012, 2013) and Mariano and Tarlau (2019) explains. In this way, the aforementioned works indicate that the theme is relevant to the current educational discussion, since Soviet pedagogy serves as an inspiration for 21st century pedagogical practices.

In addition, Tarlau (2012, 2015) stated that over the past three decades the MST Movement created some innovative educational pedagogy for rural schools — nationally known as Education of the Countryside (Educação do Campo, in Portuguese). Given the relevance of the theme investigated in this manuscript and its relevance to education in Latin America, especially in Brazil, Moisey Pistrak's ideas are fundamental to guide a revolutionary educational practice. In this context, presented in the previous paragraphs, it is necessary to understand the Marxist critical radical education, including in this perspective the early Soviet revolutionary educational thought.

Boleiz Júnior (2017), in turn, showed the relevance of the Pistrakian literature in the period following the Bolshevik Revolution, where Russian society found itself spinning with the need to reform its basic education network, to adapt it to the communist ideals. In this context, Pistrak proposed an education for the new man of the Soviet society. In the Pistrakian school model, labour plays a fundamental role, and proletarian labour is sought, opposing a petty-bourgeois ruling class that was no longer admitted to power.

Golovaty's study (2017a) also focused on Pistrak's work and presents a critique of the conception of the labour school (polytechnic school). From the class struggle and the bureaucratisation processes in Russian society between 1917-1929, he analysed Pistrak's polytechnic school from the bureaucratisation process and class struggle in the Russian Revolution of 1917. The author highlighted some contradictions in Pistrak's proposal. First, the thesis defended by Pistrak and the Marxism-Leninism advocating the progressive elimination of the State, but which played a fundamental role in guiding the masses, allowed the strengthening of the bureaucratic class and State capitalism; second, the contradiction between polytechnic education as a rupture in the division between intellectual/manual labour and the guidelines of the new economic

policy of his country, the latter eventually diluting the radicalism of the Pistrakian proposal; and third, the halt (or even the partial exclusion) of the self-organisation of the school and the community, as a principle of learning autonomy and cooperation without bureaucratic/hierarchical ties, from the guidelines of the Bolshevik Party in the period above.

Golovaty (2017a) also pointed out that it is necessary, at the same time, to articulate the historical and sociological look at the relationships between education and social structure, schooling, and the Russian Revolution. For the author, the Pistrakian work should be understood in the political and economic context in which the works such as *Fundamentos da escola do trabalho* (Fundamentals of the labour school, 1924) and *Ensaio sobre a escolapolitécnica* (Essays on the polytechnic school, 1929) were produced.

Pergher and Frizzo (2018) also analysed the work as an educational principle in Moisey Pistrak's writings (besides Antonio Gramsci's). The authors emphasised that Pistrakian literature was one of the systematics of introducing the material work as a fundamental element of the pedagogical processes, creating education *for* and *from* the workers.

Pistrak is appointed as a fundamental militant educator as to the pedagogical aspects of the labour-education relationship (Quaresma, 2018). The author affirms that her life and work within the communal school, a socialist experience, is a current reference for the development of educational processes that aim at labour as a formative principle, as well as self-management and collectivism.

More recently, Pistrak's thinking was revisited by Barroso et al. (2020), in research that criticised Pistrak's thinking and his works in the movement

entitled *Russian Pedagogy* (between 1917 and 1932). The authors indicated that Pistrak's proposal for a school of labour aimed at educating a new socialist society.

After this brief Brazilian contextual analysis of Pistrakian education, it is important to indicate that Vendramini et al. (2016) demonstrate that Soviet pedagogy has been studied not only in Brazil and Latin America, but in several places around the world. The works of Zhuk (1981), Holmes, Read and Voskresenskaya (1995) and Hessen (2016) can be cited as examples of research on the theme of socialist pedagogy. These articles bring as a common perspective an analysis of the place of educational praxis in Russian Soviet education.

Given the above, we divided this paper into two interconnected parts. First, we discuss the Bolshevik revolution's context, the space-time of Pistrak's educational and militant work, and the Russian pedagogy's main characteristics to avoid anachronisms. Subsequently, we expose how Pistrak's works structured the Unified Labour School (2000, 2009, 2015, 2018), seeking a critical analysis of its content and a correlation with the education of the *homo novus*.

### **Context of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Pedagogy**

According to Villela (1970), Russia's urban proletariat was distributed in factories with more than 100 employees per unit, and with all its rusticity of manufacturing processes, were intrinsically linked to the countryside, both with the peasants, due to a large part of the population living in rural areas, and by the raw material that came from those regions. The land ownership and occupation in the Russian Empire was poorly divided. The land was concentrated in the hands of few. About 40% of the land belonged to the aristocracy, and there was excessive exploitation of human labour.

In this devastated scenario, it was inevitable the existence of different social classes, forming a social pyramid of inequality: at the top was the nobility, holder of the economic and political power that, alongside the clergy and the bourgeoisie, represented 12% of peasants, who represented 80% of the poor and illiterate population, and only 8% of the factory workers. Although relating only to the constitution of classes, the data give us a clear indication that capitalism had not yet achieved its development in Russia (Bertoldo, 2018, p. 140).

The opening of Russia to the West in the last decade of the nineteenth century enabled a technological advance of the industrial sector, supported by revolutionary ideas based on a Marxist intellect led by the proletarian youth of various cities of Russia in those times. According to Fitzsimmons and Suoranta (2020), Lenin in his speeches and writings wanted to make the proletariat capable of fighting and overcoming its oppressor, tirelessly criticizing the bourgeoisie and the capitalist class, without forgetting to comment that the explorer character may be internalized within the proletariat.

The movement openly fights for a socialist society, drawing on revolutionary leaders such as Vladimir Lenin, Che Guevara, Rosa Luxemburg, Jose Martí, Emiliano Zapata and Antonio Gramsci for their inspiration. While MST militants have no illusion that a socialist revolution in Brazil will occur in the near future, their activism is focused on reconstructing relations of work in the rural countryside through organic cooperatives that are sustainable and competitive in the current economy. When people in MST camps receive legal rights to their land, the movement encourages people to give up these individual rights and join their land together to construct agricultural collectives. Many MST courses offer joint technical degrees in agro-ecology, encouraging students to go back to their settlements and promote organic agriculture. (Tarlau, 2012, p. 6)

The Russian Empire suffered from the lack of popular representation, and this favoured thoughts about revolutionary movements that could struggle for the



rights of the proletarian people. “The proletariat needs the State only temporarily. We do not after all differ from the anarchists on the question of the abolition of the State as we aim” (Lenin, 1978, p. 263).

The twentieth century, marked by imperialism, staged crisis, world wars, important revolutions for and by the people that collaborated to advance social democracy, at least their democratic ideal, the confrontation through a united front of the masses, and all revolutionary acts led by the workers. In 1905, the Soviets emerged in this scenario. They were a workers’ council that, during the strikes, served as a committee of 40 representatives elected in factories and workers’ quarters. Lenin (2004) commented that in moments of the struggle between the media, parties, factions, and groups, the ideologies and policies that help the classes forge weapons for future battles are formulated.

The fall of Tsarism occurred in February 1917. The workers and peasants’ celebration and activity peaked in October 1917, when the developments took place for the Soviet proletarian State to enter into force with the protagonism of the Bolshevik Party - which existed since 1903, when the Tsarist government took power in Russia. Lenin (2004, p. 29) commented that “[...] of a correct revolutionary theory which, in turn, is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.” The Russian Revolution coordinated the execution of the means of production so that social relations would not suffer significant impacts due to the coming change.

Bolshevism was born on a solid basis of the Marxist theory in the early twentieth century, remaining in the “righteousness of this revolutionary theory, and of no other” without any embargo, passing through the international experience of the entire nineteenth century and, in particular, the deviations, vacillations, errors, and

disappointments of Russian revolutionary thought. After all, as Lenin pointed out, for several decades (1840-1890), Russia's avant-garde thinking had been looking for a revolutionary theory. (Moura, 2017, p. 100)

The new labour school appeared in this context, dialectically opposed to that old school of bourgeois morals, emerging from the longing for change in the educational model in force until then in the Soviet Union, so that they could meet the needs of the Bolshevik movement (Boleiz Júnior, 2017; Barroso et al., 2020).

In the meantime, it was proposed to modify the long-used educational models, emerging the labour school, reformulated and implemented with new stages and methodologies that would collaborate for the education of the revolutionary youth and the worker who was in search of a society that looked forward to a new educational model and, from it, conceptualised labour freely. The October socialist revolution enabled several thinkers of communist society to contribute to the proletariat's seizure of power. As Moura (2017, p. 132) attested:

Most of the population from the countryside and the city composed the high rates of illiteracy; the immense Russian territory, short of modernity, was neither electrified nor industrialised; the economy, dependent on agriculture, kept the workers in conditions of extreme exploitation in the latifundia, living in miserable conditions. The revolutionary political impulse indicated radical changes in the economy, science, and education and, above all, sustainability for the process of transition from bourgeois society to the proletariat. Thus, the scenario required a perspective of education conceived in the revolutionary determination based on Marxist principles and anticipating the scientific and cultural modernisation of the USSR.

The Bolshevik rise to power showed the need for transformations in the Soviet Union: social relations, new technologies, a new industrial process, the resignification of labour and the relationship between people and commodities.

For Lenin (2004, p. 389), the concepts of a new society “[...] must be assimilated with a critical spirit so as not to clutter your intelligence with useless chaff, and enrich it with knowledge of all the facts without which it is not possible to be a cultured modern man.”

Russia’s reconstruction would be on the new foundations, which would deny the capitalist ideas in force, thus giving rise to a “new world” from the old rubble. And educational institutions would be fundamental to this stage. Thus, the Pistrakian work is crucial for us to understand Russian education in this period. And that is what the topic that follows in this article addresses.

### **The labour school in Pistrak**

Pistrak worked at Lepechinsky School as of 1918 (Boleiz Júnior, 2017).

Although still little known in Brazil, his works have gained ground in academic research and social movements in recent years (Santos and Paludo, 2016). In the last decade, the author’s biography has gained new translations into Portuguese in the publishing house Expressão Popular (Pistrak, 2000, 2009, 2015, 2018).

The involvement of the MST is clearly one major reason, as Tarlau (2019) explicates the idea of 'study complexes' collaborates so that the connection of those involved in this organizational model of society can have more simplified access to studies that connect them organically between these three processes: contextualized learning, work and self-government.

Following the historical context presented in the previous topic, we emphasise that Pistrak realised that the new social relations in the emerging socialist society, created as a consequence of the October Revolution, lacked a new type of man, consequently, a new type of education. The Pistrakian *homo novus*

would be capable of acting in the new society and leading Russia to a life for the peasant and proletarian masses.

However, in the view of the Soviet educator, there were still visible remnants of the old society also in school. The latter is regarded as an institution structured on bourgeoisie values (Barroso et al., 2020; Quaresma, 2018). For Pistrak, overcoming the challenge of educating the *homo novus* by repeating old-school activities with their elitist pedagogical theories would not be possible. It is necessary to found another way of thinking and doing school praxis, to “[...] remove the old way of life from the dead centre” (Pistrak, 2009, p. 144).

From this perspective, the contents that would be presented to the new generations would collaborate so that the concepts referring to society and how the future social relations would be from this revolution. The knowledge previously affected by the bourgeoisie would not be discarded from the curriculum of the new educational model that would emerge in Russia, but incorporated in such a way that it would be overcome in the form of the new man. Lenin argued that they should start from the real conditions, from history. In a pronouncement in 1920, Lenin commented that it was not the time for the complete extinction of the bourgeois school, but it was necessary to take advantage of what was relevant to formulate a communist education. The Soviet pedagogue himself indicated this perspective, as highlighted in the following excerpt.

It is necessary that the new generation understands the nature of the struggle waged by humanity, the space of the exploited class and the space that must be occupied by each adolescent, and for each one to know, in their respective spaces, to fight for the destruction of useless forms, replacing them with a new building. (Pistrak, 2000, p. 31)<sup>2</sup>

Agreeing with this point of view, Valle and Arriada (2014) warned that Pistrak understood that there were many traces of the old society (bourgeois and tsarist) hidden among the bricks of the old schools, coming from elitist practices, whether explicit in the old curricula or non-verbalised. Such a view of school was now inconsistent with the new socialist ideals. Education is a powerful weapon capable of boosting the construction of human thinking. In the case of education in revolutionary Russia, it would be the mechanism of forming the ideas of socialism to put an end to the principles of capitalism and subservience, paving the way for a classless society.

Overcoming capitalism was the main instrument for forming the workers' class consciousness and that their insertion in the revolutionary movement was a point of no return. Pistrak (2000) commented that the new generation needed to understand the nature of the struggle waged by humanity, in which context was the exploited class and in which horizons the youth was heading and their respective spaces. The school that emerged along with the socialist revolution, where there were different and complex dimensions between the past and present, made education a great ally in the revolutionary school transition process to surpass the old school by following a revolutionary dialectic. "The school has always reflected its time and could not help but reflect it; it has always been at the service of the needs of a determined social system and, if it were not able to do so, would have been eliminated as a useless foreign body" (Pistrak, 2000, p. 29).

Pistrak's writings match the books and articles published by his Soviet educators' colleagues from the same period, such as Elizaveta Berezanskaya, Olga Leytnekker, Robert Mikelson, Aleksei Strazhev, and Viktor Shulgin, highlights the role of school in revolutionary society (Holmes, Read and Voskresenskaya, 1995). For Soviet pedagogy, the school is seen as a place "[...]

has always responded to those demands that a particular political-social regime has placed on it [...]" (Pistrak, 2009, p. 115). Those demands, in that revolutionary period, should link class interests, bringing success and enlightenment to the workers' class, the winner of the Russian Revolution, paving the way for a classless society: "Thus, labour itself is an educational process that helps students' holistic development. However, this labour also has to be 'linked organically and directly with learning'" (Shulgin, 2013, 72).

Golovaty (2017a, 2017b) states that Pistrak was basically concerned with formulating a new pedagogical theory consistent with the central objectives of the Revolution, since it opposed the bourgeois school. To educate the new man, a new school model would be needed, in which the young student would have a leading role in the construction of the new Soviet society. In this sense, the Pistrakian theory clarifies that young people needed to be educated with ideological and political firmness, in the revolution's principles and values concomitantly. Moreover, the school needed to be a space-time of autonomy and creativity to recreate social practices and work in the new society. "Thus, labour itself is an educational process that helps students' holistic development. However, this labour also has to be 'linked organically and directly with learning' (Shulgin, 2013, p.72: Mariano and Tarlau, 2019, p.12).

In Pistrak's view, the new socialist school should shape the *homo novus*. To this end, it demanded a revolutionary theory to sustain it. In allusion to the famous phrase of Lenin's critical-dialectical thinking, without a revolutionary theory, there is no revolutionary movement, for Pistrak, the same occurs in the educational field: without a revolutionary pedagogical theory, there is no revolutionary pedagogical practice. The school was an ideological weapon for the revolution, i.e., besides the strength inherent to the masses, a more systematised notion of who they were and what they needed was also necessary.

In his studies within the MST, Tarlau (2012, 2015) shows that the intention was not to transfer Pistrak's ideas to his schools, but to adapt these experiences adequately to the current Brazilian agrarian context.

In the new school, with its proletarian pedagogy, the students' attitudes in the face of the working class's collective interests were taught, aiming at socialism. In one of the documents of the Russian pedagogue, as shown below, this ideation becomes explicit.

Every technical, scientific or artistic creation is the ability to subconsciously combine the constitutive elements that contribute to producing the object one wants to create, and the ability to choose the better ones in a series of combinations instinctively. Any man possesses such skills to a greater or lesser degree: the school must develop them by all means available, and this is the aim of the new pedagogical methods based on the students' activity and investigation. (Pistrak, 2000, p. 62)<sup>3</sup>

Pistrak understood education as the collaborator of the construction of socialism in Russia through the integral education of man so that the new society that has been forming from the revolution could collaborate with the construction of knowledge for a new world. Education would develop beyond school contents, including dialectical mediations, problematising with the society of the present. Work at school would be linked to real production in society through concrete activities that involved children's and young people's routine practice.

Pistrak put into practice his pedagogical vision when conducting the Lepechinsky School and when in contact with other educational institutions of his time. He sought to introject the principles and values of the initial revolutionary spirit in the Soviet Union into the field of school pedagogy (Valle, 2012; Valle and Arriada, 2014). Using revolutionary socialist theory, Pistrak formulated his educational theory considering the structured study of the reality

of school practice, based on the materialist and dialectical method of Marxist nature.

According to this documentary research on the Pistrakian work, the school-commune was aimed at training students

[...] so that when they leave school, they can guide themselves in social life, have the skills of fighters and builders of the socialist regime, can easily guide themselves in tasks that are closer and beyond the socialist construction... especially the domestic-economic ones. Their ability to encompass those tasks must be practical and scientific-Marxist. (Pistrak, 2009, p. 136)<sup>4</sup>

Based on the excerpts above, we must highlight the main fundamentals of his pedagogical praxis: self-organisation, originality, collectivity, and work (Barroso et al., 2020; Golovaty, 2017a, 2017b; Quaresma, 2018). Despite focusing on the last of those foundations in this investigation, we do not disregard the others.

Labour - an ontological principle of the human being from the Marxist viewpoint - it is the first type of contact of the human being with nature and with him/herself (Barroso et al., 2020). Labour is the foundation of the social being. This category includes the determining elements of the existence of humanity. Labour becomes visible in society through the production of material goods necessary for human existence, collaborating to reproduce the social being. "Labour is thus a condition of man's existence, independent of all social forms, the eternal natural need for mediation of the metabolism between man and nature and, therefore, of human life" (Marx, 2013, p. 120).

In this conception of breaking with capitalism and searching to build a foundation that would help a socialist society, the polytechnic teaching



proposed by Pistrak had as a premise an obligation that all children, and not only to the workers' children, should have. For the author, the singularities that identify the polytechnic school are placed from three points: the children's concrete performance in the productive labour, the erudition of the fundamentals and the execution of all stages of production and, finally, the fusion of productive labour with the development of the body and mind in a structured manner (Pistrak, 2015). As we could see from the documents investigated here, the Soviet students would have, first of all, "[...] a solid polytechnic basis of work, will have accumulated practical experience, will have the skills to work with their minds and hands in indissoluble connection. This, in itself, creates a bridge between theory and practice [...] (Pistrak, 2015, p.143).

Together with other Russian pedagogy representatives, Pistrak imbued the category of labour with the hope of creating a communal organisation through educational plans, students' self-organisation, and collectivity. In the Pistrakian theory, the role of labour was emphasised as an educational principle in school, formulating a pedagogical vision that would bring labour organically to the bowels of the Soviet school.

Labour occupied a large space in the school. "This time is also related to the appearance of the name of our school: 'school commune' - name the children themselves chose" (Pistrak, 2009, p. 147). The school educators narrated the emergence of this name as follows:

With the opening of the boarding school, it was necessary to provide not only breakfast but also lunch and dinner. When the children were preparing their first communal lunch, sitting around the table, their faces were cheerful, pleasant, alive. Suddenly, one of the boys jumps on the bench and shouts: 'Brothers, we already have

a commune!’ - ‘Yes, yes,’ cried the others. Someone started applauding, and the rest supported it. Then they began to question if the commune was good, why everyone was afraid of it. As of that moment, our school began to be called a school-commune, and children proudly look into the eyes of those who, with contempt, call them communists. (Pistrak, 2009, p. 147)<sup>5</sup>

Recalling the first experiences of his school-commune in 1918, with a pedagogical plan still little systematised, Pistrak highlights the youthful protagonism of his students, given the material and spiritual difficulties faced - insufficient productive means, hostile environment, former landowners’ threats, material squalor, and insufficient pedagogy cadre. The strong “[...] communist disposition of children and the idea of broad self-guidance of the commune. In addition, work” (Pistrak, 2009, p. 134).

Based on the labour school, the Pistrakian socialist education aimed to implement collective activism (principles of self-organisation and collectivity), in which all school praxis would be focused on the study of natural and social phenomena in collectivity. The work of the Russian author clearly states that in the labour school “[...] Labour is studied from the current point of view, that is, its study in comparison with other forms of labour [...]” less technical and/or modern (Pistrak, 2009, p. 134).

The founding element of the Pistrakian pedagogical proposal is labour, always linked to the idea of up-to-dateness, i.e., to the systematic study of the contextual routine of Soviet youth (Hessen, 2016; Barroso et al., 2020).

According to the results of the documents analysed from the Russian pedagogues, a polytechnic school must be understood as an institution that offered a communist education, founded on three specificities: intellectual education, body evolution, and the learning of theoretical and practical knowledge that support the productive processes. In the words of the Soviet

educator himself:

Education for work should begin with every day, self-service work. For the student to be led to the highest forms of industrial labour, it is necessary to go through a certain period of accumulation of a wide variety of work skills; it is necessary to start from those with whom he finds himself in everyday life. (Pistrak, 2015, p. 172)<sup>6</sup>

In this context, labour functions as the mainstay of education, and should be linked to the students' real life and a socially useful activity. "One can then start from the *unique labour* complex and, based on it, starting from it, build the entire education system. Here, the labour is a *means* to unite teaching" (Pistrak, 2009, p. 216, emphasis in the original). From an early age, upon entering the school-commune, children were already guided "[...] to conduct life from the angle of the child's introduction into the issues of the scientific organisation of labour" (Pistrak, 2009, p. 141). The Pistrakian Unified Labour School principles bring productive labour as the basis for its students' formative process (Quaresma, 2018). In this conception of breaking with capitalism and searching to build a foundation that would help a socialist society, the polytechnic teaching proposed by Pistrak had as a premise an obligation that all children, and not only to the workers' children, should have. For the author, the singularities that identify the polytechnic school are placed from three points: the children's concrete performance in the productive labour, the erudition of the fundamentals and the execution of all stages of production and, finally, the fusion of productive labour with the development of the body and mind in a structured manner (Pistrak, 2015). Such thinking is corroborated by the indications of the research results of Holmes, Read and Voskresenskaya (1995). The thought above is explicit in the passage found in the documents produced by the Soviet educator, as set out below.

Putting at the base of schoolwork “the complex workplace,” adding to it the general basic elements of polytechnic work for all schools, contributing through the children’s socially productive labour, introducing into the environment the highest elements of technology, in parallel with the spread of the idea of cooperation and collectivisation. (Pistrak, 2015, p. 61)<sup>7</sup>

This perspective was made explicit by the Soviet thinker himself when reporting on the school organisation plan of the school-commune from 1919-1920. In the planning, at the base of schoolwork is ordained the study of human labour and society. In his words: “The starting point consists of two basic types of real work: the factory, company - industrial work - and collective farms - large-scale rural economy work” (Pistrak, 2009, p. 134).

In an excerpt by the Russian pedagogue, it seems that the very teaching of knowledge in the old school was aimed purely at the knowledge in itself. In contrast, in the school that brought labour as an educational principle to educate the communist *homo novus*, “[...] science should be given only as an instrument of understanding and transformation of reality, from the point of view of the general purposes of education” (Pistrak, 2018, p. 159).

Also, the Russian pedagogue stated that the question of labour in school, as the basis of education, “[...] must be placed in connection with *social* labour, with *real production*, with the concrete socially useful activity [...]” (Pistrak, 2018, p. 49, emphasis in the original). For the educator, school labour should not be seen as a simple methodological tool, or to obtain some techniques or even craft habits. In the school-commune, labour functioned as a tool for shaping the workers’ class consciousness for a future based on the importance of the socialist revolution.

The connections between labour and education strengthened very clearly as an activity constituting the human condition that the Russian context demanded (Hessen, 2016; Valle and Arriada, 2014). Pistrak and his fellow Soviet educators were clear in this regard:

Labour *itself* cannot solve the issue [of labour in school]. Labour, then, and only then, becomes the solution to the basic school problem, if it is taken from the perspective of the social revolution, if it is guided by the communist construction, and if in it, as a secure foundation, the basic principles of modern school are united, that is, the connection with the present and with self-organisation. (Pistrak, 2009, p. 216)<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, starting from the labour category, we must highlight the explicit connection of the theme with the Marxist line of thinking. Unlike other schools linked to NarKomPros, the school-commune did not have a specific discipline of “[...] political literacy, because all social science is built on a Marxist basis and all social aspects of the life of our school are strongly linked to the present moment” (Pistrak, 2009, p. 185). In this passage, the Soviet educator is exhaustive in indicating the connection of the school program, based on labour as a founding element, with the revolutionary philosophical theory.

The inclusion of young people in the manufacturing/rural production process was seen as an essential aspect for the Russian pedagogue, since it was a requirement of polytechnics in the Unified Labour School (Pistrak, 2000, 2009, 2015, 2018). The findings of this documentary research are in line with several studies on Russian pedagogy (Boleiz Júnior, 2017; Golovaty, 2017a, 2017b; Hessen, 2016; Pergher and Frizzo, 2018; Santos and Paludo, 2016; Valle, 2012). Finally, it is important to clarify that we are not defending the exploitation of child labour. Rather, we point to the existence of human labour through a link between school and production, allowing a complex formation of the stages of production. The learning *of* and *in* labour is the founding element of the

proposal to build the communist *homo novus*.

In this context, labour has the function of supporting education and must be integrated with the realities of students and with a socially useful activity and with the teacher, schoolwork should not be seen as a simple methodological tool, nor to obtain some techniques or even craft habits.

At the commune school, labour functioned as a tool to shape the class consciousness of workers for a future based on the importance of the socialist revolution.

### **Concluding remarks**

The incorporation of Marxian principles in the teaching advocated by Pistrak contributed to the emergence of a humanising school based on the dialectical articulation of theory and practice as a way to overcome the educational precariousness offered to Soviet workers, where they were transformed into conscious accessories of machines in a mere means of action for an activity foreign to themselves.

The Russian revolutionary understands that the new education must be the starting point to construct the communist *homo novus*, from the material left by the old society, through the acquired knowledge from the institutions formed by proletarians and peasants that aimed to overcome this system of a society divided into classes. The Pistrakian proposal saw education as the way out of a situation that devastated Russia, to reach the desired communist education. The principles that were integrated into the new Soviet school possessed, from the class struggle, the struggle against bourgeois society, uniting their hatred against the old society with the decision and the ability to organise the workforce for that struggle, in a united force.

Pistrak's thinking pointed out the challenges that educators in the socialist field would face, where the denial of the assumptions and ideas of capitalist society would be the most problematic but at the same time challenging context for the establishment of a new concept and a new vision of labour in Soviet society. History is not finished yet and is still moved by conflicts and class struggle. Educators must continuously carry out by themselves the movement of transformation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>All excerpts from Pistrak's books refer to manuscripts in Portuguese. The authors of this article performed some free translation (English) of the excerpts indicated in the following notes.

<sup>2</sup>O próprio pedagogo soviético indicou essa perspectiva, como destacado no excerto a seguir. É preciso que a nova geração compreenda qual a natureza da luta travada pela humanidade, qual o espaço da classe explorada e qual o espaço que deve ser ocupado por cada adolescente, e que cada um saiba em seus respectivos espaços travar a luta pela destruição das formas inúteis, substituindo por um novo edifício (PISTRAK, 2000, p. 31).

<sup>3</sup>Toda criação, técnica, científica, artística, é a aptidão para combinar subconscientemente os elementos constitutivos que contribuem para a produção do objeto que se quer criar, e a aptidão para escolher instintivamente numa série de combinações aquelas que são melhores. Qualquer homem possui tais aptidões em maior ou menor grau: é preciso que a escola as desenvolva por todos os meios à sua disposição, e este é o objetivo dos novos métodos pedagógicos baseados na atividade e na investigação do aluno. (Pistrak, 2000, p. 62).

<sup>4</sup>[...] para que eles ao saírem da escola orientem-se na vida social, tenham aptidões de lutadores e construtores do regime socialista, possam facilmente orientar-se nas tarefas mais próximas e mais distantes da construção socialista... especialmente doméstico-econômicas. Sua habilidade para abarcar estas tarefas deve ser prática e científico-marxista (Pistrak, 2009, p. 136).

<sup>5</sup>Com a abertura do internato foi necessário não apenas café da manhã, mas também almoço e jantar, e quando as crianças preparavam para si o seu primeiro almoço comunal, sentadas ao redor da mesa, as carinhas eram alegres, agradáveis, vivas. De repente, um dos meninos salta no banco e grita: 'Irmãos, nós já temos uma comuna!' - 'Sim, sim' - gritaram os demais. Alguém começou a aplaudir e o resto apoiou. Começaram a discutir então porque, se na comuna é bom, todos têm medo dela. Desde esse momento nossa escola começou a chamar-se de comuna escolar, e as crianças com orgulho olham nos olhos daqueles que, com desprezo, chamam-nas de comunistas (Pistrak, 2009, p. 147).

<sup>6</sup>A educação para o trabalho deve começar com o trabalho cotidiano, de autosserviço. Para que o estudante seja conduzido às mais altas formas de trabalho industrial, é preciso passar ele mesmo por um determinado período de acumulação de grande variedade de habilidades de trabalho; é preciso começar a partir daqueles com os quais ele se encontra na vida cotidiana (Pistrak, 2015, p. 172).

<sup>7</sup>Colocando na base do trabalho da escola "o complexo local de trabalho", acrescentando a ele os

elementos básicos gerais do trabalho politécnico para todas as escolas, contribuindo através do trabalho socialmente produtivo das crianças, introduzindo no meio ambiente os elementos mais elevados da tecnologia, paralelamente com a propagação da ideia da cooperação e da coletivização (Pistrak, 2015, p. 61).

<sup>8</sup>O trabalho *por si mesmo* não pode resolver a questão [do trabalho na escola]. O trabalho, então, e somente então, torna-se a solução do problema básico escolar, se ele for tomado na perspectiva da revolução social, se ele orienta-se pela construção comunista, e se nele, como fundamento seguro, unem-se os princípios básicos da escola moderna, isto é, a ligação com a atualidade e com a auto-organização (Pistrak, 2009, p. 216).

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