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Workers' Education and the Social Studies

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VIEWED in proper perspective, the education of the adult worker is both preparation for a better life and a social experiment which in itself makes life more meaningful, for the educational process as we know it is designed to help the adult individual find his place in society—to make him a happier person, a more purposeful participant in useful community activity. We must show, methodically, the place of the labor movement in our social scheme, and the meaningful relation between everyday life and broad social issues such as national and international affairs, taxation, and fiscal and trade policies.

Teachers of social studies are aware that the primary demand of the labor movement, one on which it never compromised, was the shorter work-week. This hard-won gain released the time and energy which made the workers' education movement, and adult education in general, possible.

Workers' education holds that the worker is seldom ignorant but frequently uninformed. We have faith in the common man, in his idealism, his sense of justice, in his willingness, if only the facts are placed at his disposal, to make sacrifices for the common good. Workers' education therefore assists the labor movement in providing the information that will make it possible for organized workers to participate as effective citizens, creatively and intelligently, in the affairs of our democracy. Yes, the organized labor movement is reaching for power, but for power that generates from action based on knowledge and understanding.

Finally, workers' education is guided by the belief of modern psychologists that creative imagination and initiative can be developed

under improved social conditions. It thus gives new meaning to the creative efforts of workers everywhere.

The labor movement is an increasingly vital factor in our national life, and as such it merits the attention of teachers of the social studies. A fuller and more realistic treatment of the social factors that influence and determine our present-day life would save our young people from the skepticism which sometimes results from the discrepancies between the bitter realities that they must face in real life and what they have read about the world in some of their books. Such a realistic understanding would greatly simplify the work of those of us who devote ourselves to adult education and who believe that in a dynamic democracy the education of the citizen cannot end when he leaves the public school.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL LITERACY

THOSE who are interested in adult education should not overlook the widespread social, political, and economic illiteracy that exists among all groups in our population. The large number of books, periodicals, and other general literature dealing with the many vexing problems confronting our country as part of "One World" are not addressed to and consequently rarely reach the vast public, which is busily engaged with its daily affairs of earning a living, and is deeply concerned over what it will face in the postwar world. But it is precisely this vast public, composed of the average citizen, the backbone of our democracy, that "tips the scales"—whose votes determine the final outcome of all issues in our social and political life.

We need a body of social, political, and economic commentary written primarily for the millions of our citizens who are affected by, and who in turn affect, our public policies. Our writers who are interested in clarifying the thinking of the average citizen will have to develop a simplicity of language and structure in the preparation of their material. Means must also be

This article, by the secretary of the Educational Department of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, grows out of a section meeting of the National Council at Cleveland, November 25, 1944.

devised to influence the choice and character of the material used in our public media of communication, particularly the radio and the movies, so that the needs of the people may be served more fully. We may have to do this by exerting organized pressure or by supplying our own material, or by a combination of both. In any case, the character of the material which is being fed to the general public through movie scripts, radio programs, and magazine articles in periodicals with nation-wide circulation constitutes a problem that neither we in workers' education nor teachers of social studies in the schools can afford to ignore.

We are deeply concerned with the teaching of the social studies, but not as something abstract and academic. Workers' education holds no brief for knowledge without understanding. Social philosophies and general information, if not applied, cannot serve beneficially either the individual or humanity. We cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of a literate, well-informed citizenry if a lasting peace is to be built, and a civilized, orderly world is to prevail. Therefore, we strive to make the individual use his understanding for a social purpose, and we advocate the principle that education must lead to responsible group action aimed at creating a better society for all as a condition for a better, more satisfying, more fruitful life for each of us.

POLITICAL ACTION

ALTHOUGH a good deal of public excitement and interest have generally been aroused around election time, in the past main interest was usually focussed on the presidential candidates and little or no attention was given to the election of a Congress which would cooperate in the passing of legislation in the public interest. This was dramatically illustrated in the 1942 elections when progressive members of Congress were defeated because of the small electoral turnout.

With the advent of the New Deal, a gradual change in the attitude of the workers towards more direct political participation was effected, due primarily to the efforts of the labor movement. The organized workers who, in the past, had clung to political parties as a family tradition, learned from bitter experience the necessity for collective action in the political field as well as in the industrial. Through the social legislation of the New Deal they began more and more to appreciate the importance of political action on their part if their economic and social gains

were to be maintained and further extended.

In the last three presidential elections we have accordingly seen increasing numbers of workers who did not hesitate to break family tradition and act collectively to further their interests. This they did in an organized manner under the leadership of their trade unions. This is one of the great contributions which the labor movement has made towards our democracy.

NEED FOR BROADER WORKERS' EDUCATION

THE postwar world contains both a promise and a threat. The American people, after having suffered a decade of unemployment and depression during which they were denied the use of their hard acquired skills, nevertheless threw themselves wholeheartedly behind the war effort in the hope that a better world would be built out of this great disaster. If these people are disappointed—ideologically, economically, or socially—with the outcome of this global struggle, our democracy will face a real danger such as it has never faced before.

Some people have simplified the Nazi movement as one which had its roots in the ambitions and designs of one person or a group of persons. This is not only confusing but most dangerous. The roots of Nazism go deeper. It is the historical responsibility of workers' education to analyze and interpret the real origin of Nazism, and to bring home to the workers the fact that it was only during a critical period in the history of mankind, during a time when political, economic, and social institutions failed to meet the needs of the masses of the people who wanted to live decent, dignified lives, that the rise to power of Nazism was made possible. In a word, Nazism must be seen in relation to the whole social structure.

If the progressive, democratic forces in Europe, including Germany, had not confined themselves to being "critical opposition" only, but had had the daring and foresight to get together with America and take the lead in social and economic planning to meet the great technological advance accelerated by the First World War, it is reasonable to assert that the tragedy which befell Europe, the rise of Nazism, could have been crushed in the very beginning. The most important functions that workers' education assumes, therefore, in this great period of social change are: (1) to interpret the present world upheaval as an historical phenomenon; (2) to analyze the clash of ideals involved in this revolutionary struggle; (3) to evaluate critically the economic

and social values of our time from both a national and an international point of view; and (4) to make all the necessary information concerning these problems available to the people.

Workers' education must also emphasize the importance of an evaluation of economic and racial imperialism, two of the most dangerous enemies of mankind, and the sources of most wars. It must analyze and interpret the cultures, characteristics, and aspirations of the races of the world. It must point out that only as men and women of the other races, which inhabit the countries in and around the Pacific, are treated with respect and understanding, will we receive the full cooperation of these countless millions in our common struggle against the enemies of real freedom and democracy.

THOSE of us who realize what an important influence the home exercises upon the development of our children, the citizens of tomorrow, insist that the community should assume the responsibility for keeping our adult population enlightened in a changing world. This demand assumes increasing importance in the postwar world, when our citizens will be called upon to make historic decisions which will influence not only our own country but the whole world.

The usual reply to such a demand has been the "budget." It has been asserted that most of our communities are already overburdened with taxes, that there must be a limit to taxing real estate and raising rents. Recognizing that there is a certain amount of justice in this argument, there has been a growing enlightened opinion which maintains that while education is primarily the function of the community, it is also a national responsibility, which must be met by the federal government through the appropriation of funds for carrying out an effective educational program, both for children and for their parents. At the same time safeguards must be taken to see that the administration of such programs remains under local control.

THE labor movement joins other enlightened citizens in their efforts to make higher education available to all, and not only to those who can pay for it, because it considers culture a most powerful instrument for democracy. Democratic culture abolishes the special birthright. It offers the greatest opportunities for the development of talent and makes possible the creative participation of the people in the formulation of social

policies and the achievement of greater social fulfillment.

The labor movement therefore expects that in postwar America all our children will get at least a high school education, and that a college education will be made possible for all who desire it. Such an education need not necessarily be associated with working towards a degree or training for a specific profession. What is most important is that our children get an education such that they may enjoy a fuller and richer life.

A real resentment prevails in the labor movement against the dangerous artificial gulf which still exists between the vocational and academic high schools. In the former the emphasis has been placed too exclusively on the "trade." Since we recognize that the aim of education should be to prepare students for effective, intelligent, informed citizenship, irrespective of vocation, cultural subjects should definitely be included in the curricula of trade schools.

It is encouraging to know that many educators are discussing this problem, but we must see to it that this discussion leads to the elimination of a longstanding defect in our vocational schools.

FULL EMPLOYMENT AND SECURITY

OUR people expect that in the postwar world poverty, unemployment, ill-health, malnutrition, and slums will be things of the past. They have learned during this emergency that the nation has all the necessary resources—economic, industrial, technological—as well as the human skills required to make a happy life for all its citizens. Out of the accumulated experience of the great depression and the global war our government has developed a better technique for social planning and control.

There are those who fear that economic planning may endanger our personal freedom. But while they are not certain that economic abundance must necessarily lead to a democratic society, they do know from experience that poverty, insecurity, ill-health, and sometimes the fear of these things, lead to degradation.

The answer to such reservations is that planning is always going on, but up to now it has been primarily by industrial organizations whose main concern has been their individual profits. We in the labor movement insist that post war planning should be done by government, management, and the labor movement, conjointly, for the purpose of making effective use of our

resources—our plants, equipment, and the improved techniques developed during the course of the war—to provide our people with a basis of economic security. This must be done without in any way altering the underlying values of our traditions of liberty and democracy. Although we have learned that unselfish, intelligent, far-seeing leadership is essential to the health of a democracy, we must insist that the individual remain the source of values in our society, and individual fulfillment its basic objective. Finally, maximum freedom must be secured for the organization of workers into free trade unions.

Another vital problem for our democracy to face is that of our Negro citizens. A fighting democracy such as ours cannot adopt as its war slogan the ideals of freedom and democracy while some ten million of our own citizens do not fully enjoy these rights. We know that our Negro fellow citizens, who are shedding their blood on the battlefields so that democracy and human dignity will prevail, and the other millions who sustain them on the home front, expect that in the postwar America they will enjoy to the full every right that an American citizen is entitled to. We all appreciate the contribution which our Negro citizens have made to our young culture. No other people in all history have gone so far in so short a time since release from slavery. We have a right to expect that their full participation in our national life will be accelerated.

The labor movement insists that social security should be extended to every group which makes the life of the nation possible. It deplors the fact that more citizens are excluded from social security benefits than are covered by them.

HOUSING, HEALTH, AND NUTRITION

DECENT housing is one of the primary problems facing the community and the nation. It is an established fact that juvenile delinquency can be traced to unpleasant home surroundings. A cheerful home environment in a well-constructed, modernly equipped house is just as important for the progress of our democracy as are our schools, colleges, and other public institutions which tend to safeguard our liberties and welfare.

A large-scale housing program will also be one of the most important schemes of conversion from war to peacetime production, and will con-

tribute toward the achievement of full employment at the same time that it provides our citizens with a most vital social benefit.

Our military leaders are fully appreciative of the fact that the vigor, resourcefulness, cheerfulness, and efficiency of any army depend upon the health of the individual soldier. The workers know that important advances have been made in the science of nutrition. They also know that America is one of the leading food-producing countries of the world. They expect that there will be no repetition of crop and livestock destruction in order to keep the farmers from bankruptcy. They expect a postwar America in which the farmer will find it profitable to make full use of agricultural machinery and produce enough food to make available to every citizen an adequate and nutritious diet.

TOWARD BETTER CITIZENSHIP

SOME people objected to social planning at this time lest it weaken our war effort. We in the labor movement emphatically disagreed with such an attitude. The workers knew that no plan, no matter how elaborately formulated, would be of any use unless we defeated the enemies of humanity. We were therefore convinced that a purposeful, enlightened, far-sighted social program would have the effect of strengthening the determination of our fighting men and women to crush the enemy on the battlefield; it would stimulate those on the home front to contribute their full share towards the winning of the war. We, of all nations, whose background is so idealistic, should appreciate the moral and physical value of ideas and ideologies.

We may say that one of the most important tasks of workers' education is to sustain the confidence of the masses in representative government, especially at this time when the so-called "weaknesses" of the democratic system are being subjected to attack the world over. New courage, strengthened determination, deepened confidence, and faith in the higher objectives and aspirations of mankind—these are the human attributes we need to illuminate our way in the atomic age. These ideals the labor movement, through the medium of worker's education, and you, as teachers of the social studies, seek to inculcate in the citizens of our country.

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