

WORKERS' EDUCATION
IN
ENGLAND AND THE UNITED STATES

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BY

MARGARET T. HODGEN

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God said: "I am tired of kings,
I suffer them no more,
Up to my ear the morning brings
The outrage of the poor.

I will have never a noble,
No lineage counted great,
Fishers, choppers and ploughmen
Shall constitute a state"

PREFACE

It is now five years since the first paragraphs of this book were written. The task seemed an easy one then. Labour Colleges were new and few. Their objectives were well defined, their future clearly indicated in glowing editorials. The best part of it all to a modern in a hurry to examine, describe and pass on to something else, was the fact that Workers' Education seemed to have burst fully grown upon a waiting world, uncomplicated by a bothersome period of youth and delightfully free of educational antecedents, difficult to trace and to value. It was not until an effort was made to press the study beyond contemporary manifestations of working-class demand for education that real obstacles were encountered.

Of course, it is hardly fitting for a research worker to complain of poverty of material. His job is to find it anyhow. Hoping, however, that a word to those who have lived and worked in the labour movement may be sufficient, the author would like to mourn the absence of working-class biography. By whom could richer and more significant human records have been kept? What lives have been more dramatic than those of the men who have led and followed the fortunes of trade-unionism? But cave-men who carved their annals in solid rock have told us more about themselves than generations of silent workers. Labour and labour leaders have a certain biographical responsibility to the future. The English have begun to realize it. Perhaps Americans will soon.

In the absence of such documentary evidence as only the workers themselves could have supplied, recourse

has been taken to other sources where the difficulty of separating fact from conjecture has been great. This serious embarrassment to accurate interpretation of labour's educational development has been increased by the fact that with every crystallization of the labour movement in the nineteenth century, the educational need perceived by those actually involved has altered. In the beginning the ability to read and write seemed to the poor to be sufficient. To-day, a mental grasp of complex economic and political principles must be combined with the ability to meet and deal with the keenest minds in government and industry.

The following pages will endeavour to show that with every change on the economic or political horizon, the educational motives and methods of the working class have changed. The only constant among many variables has been working-class demand for knowledge and a certain tendency on its part, first, to trust education only when administered by itself, second, to frame the content of education toward ultimate working-class control of government and industry.

In order to obtain an idea of the two competing forces in society operating on the one hand to exclude the workers from education, and on the other, to give them access to all the treasures of learning, an effort has been made to compare the educational motives of different classes. The discussion will accordingly follow two threads, the first of which will be a simple enumeration in chronological sequence of the educational enterprises founded for or by adult working men; the second, an interpretation of the motives animating founders.

For the purpose of visualizing the problem, the history and interpretation of Workers' Education may be regarded, at least in England, as a pyramid of three time levels. During the first the workers interested in education were poor, illiterate and voiceless both economically and politically; at the next, they were

skilled artisans less illiterate and more politically conscious; at the last, they had become organized working men, with an elementary education, the political franchise, and strong trade union affiliations.

At the first level, prior to 1830, the initiative in educating the adult poor in England was assumed by the ruling classes under the leadership of the Established Church, the Methodists, and certain charitable organizations. The motive of each group was determined by its peculiar interest either in maintaining the ignorance or increasing the literacy of the poor.

At the second level, between 1830 and 1900, the initiative shifted from worker to religionist, from religionist to philanthropist. The objective of education so clearly political under the Chartists, grew less defined with each new effort. Finally, under the Christian Socialists and in Toynbee Hall, economic and political motives were merged with diffused æsthetic and humanitarian impulses.

After 1900 the initiative was assumed by organized labour. The educational objective of the working class then became control over the political and economic aspects of working-class existence. Its method was educational enterprise administered by trade union organization.

In the United States, although the same general periods of development may be observed, the earlier acquisition of the franchise and the public school diminished the interest of labour in education for purely working-class purposes. It was not until after the disappearance of free land and the appearance of large numbers of foreign born workers, that American labour realized that the American labourer needed special and peculiar training for his function in the labour movement.

The period covered by the discussion will be the nineteenth century, not because it is the only one during which a subject class has endeavoured to

improve its position by education, but because it is the only one during which the poor as a class, the workers as an occupational group, have adopted uniformity of purpose and tactic.

The English-speaking nations have been chosen for study somewhat arbitrarily. Nevertheless, there are several reasons for so centring discussion. In the first place, material concerning the movement for Workers' Education on the Continent has been until recently inaccessible. Secondly, comparisons between the two English-speaking nations can be made with more precision, than between either one of them and the Continent. For the industrial revolution in Great Britain and in the United States antedated the extensive use of machinery on the Continent by half or three-quarters of a century; illiteracy, furthermore, has always been more unusual and education more common in England and in the United States than elsewhere; finally, democratic institutions in both countries have provided relative freedom from external and internal strife and, by reducing the tactic of the conflict between classes to that dictated by economic rather than political or nationalistic considerations, have simplified discussion.

With the foregoing difficulties and limitations of the subject in mind, the reader is urged to regard generalizations as suggestive rather than final and to be content with trends rather than conclusions.

In the course of writing these pages I have become a debtor to many friends. My mother helped to make the task of arranging a bibliography less monotonous; my father has read proof and lent moral support. Dr. Jessica B. Peixotto of the Department of Economics in the University of California followed the manuscript in the tedious processes of its development; and Mr. Frederick J. Teggart, of the Department of Social Institutions, proposed standards of historical method and research in the social sciences, which, though

seldom attained, have made even unsuccessful effort seem worth while. Mr. Paul Scharrenberg, Secretary of the California State Federation of Labour and a member of the Advisory Committee of the W.E.B., has read the book more than once. His assistance and criticism, favourable and unfavourable, has been the kind that only exceptional and long service in the labour movement makes possible. Two friends, Caroline Schleaf and Marjory Atsatt have been inexhaustible sources of courage and enthusiasm as well as sensitive and discerning counsellors. What ever is of value in the book is due to such criticism. Its inadequacies and imperfections are my own.

M. T. H.

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