

Workers' Education

REVISED EDITION

AMERICAN EXPERIMENTS

(WITH A FEW FOREIGN EXAMPLES)

(June 25th, 1921)



By
ARTHUR GLEASON
of the
Bureau of Industrial Research
289 Fourth Avenue
New York

Fifty Cents a Copy

Chapter I

WORKERS' EDUCATION

THE way a group of grown persons best educate each other is in the method used by Socrates and his friends. It is the way of endless discussion centering on one subject. It is almost the hardest work in the world. The results are sometimes amazing. A grown man discovers he is beginning to grow again. Endless discussion about one subject can not maintain itself on words. It dies away unless it feeds on knowledge and finally interpretation. It reaches out for facts and then for the meaning of them. In modern terms, this Socratic method means a class of from five to twenty-five, who read books, listen to talks, and ask questions. They take to themselves a like-minded teacher, who is a good fellow, and together they work regularly and hard. This is the heart of workers' education—the class financed on trade union money, the teacher a comrade, the method discussion, the subject the social sciences, the aim an understanding of life and the remoulding of the scheme of things. Where that dream of a better world is absent, adult workers' education will fade away in the loneliness and rigor of the effort.

But there is no one road to freedom. There are roads to freedom. So workers' education will include elementary classes in English, and entertainment for the crowd. But the road for the leaders of the people will be straight and hard. Only a few thousand out of the millions will take it. It is a different, a new way of life to which the worker is being called.

Definition.

Workers' (or labor) Education (except for the resident college) falls inside the classification of Adult Education. But it is its own kind of adult education, and is not to be confused with university extension, evening high schools, night schools, public lectures and forums, Chautauquas, "Americanization," education by employers,

and Y. M. C. A. industrial courses. Labor education is inside the labor movement, and can not be imposed from above or from without. It is a training in the science of reconstruction. It is a means to the liberation of the working class, individually and collectively. In pursuing that aim, it uses all aids that will enrich the life of the group and of the worker in the group, and that will win allegiance of the worker to the group. The aim then is clear-cut, but the content and the methods are catholic. Workers' education is scientific and cultural, propagandist and civic, industrial and social. It concerns itself with the individual and his needs, the citizen and his duties, the trade unionist and his functions, the group and its problems, the industry and its conditions.

The best recent summary of workers' education is that of Dr. Harry Laidler:—

If the object of a workers' educational experiment were to give the worker greater power of enjoyment here and now; or to develop his ability to think fundamentally on social problems; or to help him to function more effectively as a citizen in the solution of social problems; or to equip him to fight effectively for immediate improvement in the conditions of labor; to train him as a leader in the trade union movement; to interpret to him his place in the scheme of things; to give impetus to his demand for a new order of society; to develop his sense of loyalty to his economic organization—if the aim were any one of these things—I believe that that aim would be a legitimate aim of workers' education.

Education, says Graham Wallas, is “a process by which human beings so acquire the knowledge and habits which constitute civilization as to be fitted to live well both individually and in cooperation.” That which distinguishes labor education in this process are the experiences of the workers and the conditions of industry.

“Control.”

Workers' education as it develops will be financed on workers' money, controlled (in the sense of policy) and managed (in the sense of administration), by workers' organizations. It is idle to debate whether workers' education can be controlled by others than the workers. It can not be. Controlled by “public” authorities, by universities, by middle-class persons, it is adult education. It is education. It is useful. But it is not workers' education. Workers'

education can no more be outside the labor movement than a trade union. It is as definite an expression of the labor movement as the trade union. When the union is guided by outside benefactors it becomes a "company" union, a welfare club. When education of the workers is controlled by other organizations than the organization of the workers, it remains inside the category of adult education, but it passes out of that special kind of adult education which is workers' education.

Varieties.

In the United States there may be one kind of education for a particular racial group. There will be regional solutions, local experiments, experiments in a given industry. Our infinite variety of life and our wide spaces will demand a multitude of experiments.

The peasant and cooperative background of Denmark results in a workers' education of the folk high schools, which is possible perhaps for certain Middle Western groups in our country, but which is not universally possible.

The healthy and balanced growth of the three-fold labor movement of Belgium—the trade unions, the labor party, the cooperatives—and the compactness of the Kingdom enable the workers to make a neater classification of needs and to federate the solutions into a single central national administrative body, which would break down among our mountains or seep away upon the prairies.

The salty individualism of the British, with their fundamental unity of consciousness, permits them to make untidy unrelated experiments in workers' education, all moving in the one direction, although unaware of its goal. A loose but deeply grounded scholarship of the young university men finds ready alliance with the instinctive drive of the workers toward a fuller life.

No such casual unprogrammed adventure into the universe is possible with our practical pragmatic American business unions. We shall demand clear statements of where we are going. There will be dozens of experiments, but each will keep a ledger of exact results.

Already the American experiments have been of many kinds. They have been state-aided, university-aided, independent of state and university.

There has been education for labor given by wealthy benevolent trustees, as in the Cooper Union. There has been the Rand School on a party basis. There have been schools organized on the basis of the consumers, as the schools of the cooperatives.

There have been schools for the groups of producers: a single union, like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union; groups of unions as the United Labor Education Committee; the Central Labor Body of a city, as the Trade Union College of Boston; the State Federation of Labor, as in Pennsylvania.

Next Steps.

Much of the early work of American labor education will concern itself with elementary and secondary courses in such subjects as English writing and speaking. Because of the racial and immigration problems, there is no general level of adult attainment. Labor groups differ in ability to read and write, and to read, write and speak English. Until this deficiency is met, there can be but little useful work done in such courses as history and economics. As long as immigration brings a new group each year, classes in English, elementary mathematics and so on, will be necessary. These classes absorb a large proportion of the energy of American workers' education. Already many of these adult elementary classes are taught in public buildings by public school teachers. It is probable that this sort of education will be increasingly taken over by public authorities. This will leave the business of workers' education to the workers. The objects, methods and materials of what is meant by workers' education will be outlined in the next pages.

Workers' education, as it spreads, is of course vitally concerned with facts in the social sciences. It is concerned with the collection, classification and interpretation of these facts. This means that labor education requires labor research. One of the continuous and all-powerful influences in workers' education is the newspaper. Labor education requires the labor paper. So as fast as labor education grows, there will spring up, out of the same root, labor research and the labor newspaper. Research is one of the sources of supply for education. The daily, weekly and monthly paper is one of the methods of imparting education to the workers. The labor movement

will remain inside the squirrel-cage of wages and prices, until it employs all three—research, education, and the newspaper.

Charles Beard once said:

“The modern university does not have for its major interest and prime concern the free, open and unafraid consideration of modern issues.”

The labor group is beginning to demand a free, open and unafraid consideration of modern issues in institutions of its own.

Object. Group I.

What is the object of workers' education? One object is to train promising youths, who are already officials, or are potential leaders, or are the most ambitious of the rank and file. Workers' education will train them in the technique of their particular union and industry. It will train them in the relation of that union and industry to society and the state. This kind of workers' education gives the technique of leadership. It includes courses in labor law, the use of the injunction, workmen's compensation, industrial and health insurance, unemployment, Federal agencies of inspection, employers' use of a secret service, duties of the walking delegate. Perhaps eventually place can be found in the curriculum for a course or courses dealing with aspects of the problem of management and production. Although it is inevitable that present interest in these questions should be slight, it seems equally inevitable that the leaders among the workers must more and more equip themselves with knowledge of the technique of their industry on both its administrative and its operative side. And this can be directly encouraged if an expository and critical course on managerial procedure is offered. The content of a course on modern personnel administration would, for example, come to have a wide appeal and a great practical value. As the subject of "workers' control" demands a knowledge of the functions of foreman, superintendent and technician, and a knowledge of the whole administrative area, it will become increasingly necessary for the advanced labor leader to study the shifting "frontier of control." Once the institution is under way, there will be no difficulty in selecting students for this first group. Only those will be admitted who have gone through certain courses. At first, the leader will have to

select by guess work. He will use his judgment, admitting those "who are sufficiently interested and willing to try." They will drop out quickly, under the more intensive and stiff regime, if their equipment is faulty, and their devotion languid.

Object. Group II.

A second object of workers' education is to give the more eager of the rank and file a social or civic education. These courses will show the workers how they are governed. They will deal with the economic system under which they work, and the nature of the world in which they find themselves. They will include general cultural courses in history, economics and literature. The thing aimed at is a world view. The favorite courses remain history, economics, literature, because they are an interpretation of man in his world. Once the full circle is drawn, then, into a segment is packed the consideration of a single subject, such as the Greek Commonwealth, or the Agrarian Problem of the Sixteenth Century. Education is "the effort of the soul to find a true expression or interpretation of experience, and to find it, not alone, but with the help of others, fellow-students." By showing to a man his place in the long process and the scheme of things, education helps him to live the good life.

The rank and file will not be interested in this kind of labor education for many years. The most alert and energetic men and women will alone be attracted. Labor education is education of a tiny minority, the most promising of the youth.

Object. Group III.

A third object of workers' education is to reach the rank and file with education for the love of it, with semi-entertainment with a cultural slant. Its aim is mass education.

Method. Groups I and II.

Methods in workers' education depend on objects. If the object is to train leaders and to give the ambitious minority of the rank and file an intensive education, then the method will be that of the small class and hard work. Education for these groups is for those only who feel a desire, and have some sense of the direction they wish to

travel. The experiment will begin with three or four in the class, and with meager funds. If correctly grounded, it will grow slowly. Only at the end of some years will the experiment show results large enough to attract outside attention and public ceremonies. No short cuts and no brass bands will lead to workers' education of this intensive kind. This education is self-education. It is not by chance and happy blunder that workers' education rediscovered the ancient and correct *method* of teaching—the Socratic quiz, the question-and-answers discussion. The workers recaptured this method through necessity. The miner and railwayman, adult and having knowledge of life, would not submit to the autocracy of orthodox teachers. A “grown man” or woman will not sit silently each week for several years while a lecturer or an orator holds the platform. Each one of the group insists on contributing. University extension courses, night schools, Chautauquas, civic and church forums, mass meetings with star speakers, concerts, theatricals, are not the method of labor education of this kind. Labor education is intensive work on one subject carried on by a small class (5 to 25).

Opportunities for actual industrial responsibility are given by the duties of shop chairman, shop committee, and by the organization of cooperative establishments. This practice is of course an essential of education.

Method. Group III.

One method of reaching the rank and file, as yet unawakened, is by semi-entertainment. Various devices for stirring desire for education will be used. Bribes and lures will be applied. A beautiful actress will recite Shakespeare. A full orchestra will find “The Lost Chord.” Moving pictures, lantern slides, charts, budgets, maps, and other graphic representations, will be used. Three-quarters of the time will be used in attracting people. The other quarter will contain some bit of information. Out of these mass efforts will come individuals, asking for help in the rudiments of mathematics, in the English language. Classes will be formed to meet the two-fold need of those who never had an elementary education, and those who find that an elementary education has left them uneducated. Mass education by mass semi-entertainment will contribute to solidarity and

enthusiasm, which may later lead to intensive education by the class-and-discussion method for a small minority.

The question is asked:

If young people received a full and good elementary and secondary education, would there be need of workers' adult education? The answer is that the desire for adult education grows keener as the elementary education is more widely spread and more thorough. A well-instructed group of workers, twenty-five years old, will be eager for adult education. An illiterate group, or a group numbed by drink, will be hostile to class work. Also, a group of half-educated youths, fed on dogmas and preconceived notions and picturesque phrases dealing with catastrophic changes and millennial hopes, will be superior to education, to careful analysis, to surveys of fact.

A thoughtful paper on mass education has been written by J. M. Budish, of the United Labor Education Committee. He writes that the subjects included in the curriculum should be (1) Natural Sciences, (2) Social Sciences, (3) Cultural Elements. He suggests that:—

The shop meeting reaches more workers than any other union activity. About 75% of the members attend. If the technique of the shop and the routine shop problems are made an approach to the study of the structure of the industry as a whole and then of the inter-relation of industries, the shop has become a "project."

In local union lectures it is possible to reach about 10% of the union membership. As in any organization, an active minority of 10% hold office, work on committees and attend business meetings. The series of lectures must at least at first be closely related to the pressing trade union problems of today: the abuse of injunctions, the open shop campaign, the shop chairman movement.

The official journals or endorsed papers are a neglected educational medium.

The W. E. B. (Workers' Education Bureau) should create pamphlets to serve as a basis for shop and class room use.

Personal guidance in reading may be given by the more advanced students and by a librarian as well as by teachers. The sense which fits reading to readers must be enlisted for workers' education. The worker must be taught how to handle books, use indexes, select what he wants, taught to digest and assimilate material found in libraries. Bring traveling libraries of say 50 selected volumes into the shops, the trade union meetings, and the classes.

It has been suggested that workers' education should be made compulsory for new members, for apprentices, and for officials. At best, this could only be done in certain unions. At worst there are possibilities of abuse. In any case, the suggestion calls for long consideration.

TEACHERS

In Britain the success of workers' education was due to men like R. H. Tawney, J. J. Mallon, Arthur Greenwood, Alfred Zimmermann. The type is neither the smart brisk young tutor who patronizes nor the bearded professor who is dogmatic. The type is that of humble-minded scholarship set in charming democratic personality. American colleges do not as yet produce this type in numbers. The workers' teacher is a rare person. The only method as yet used for finding him is to bring normal school and university-trained teachers into contact with labor groups, and to winnow out the teacher who catches hold. The balanced qualities, which give clear exposition and suffer heckling gladly and call out group discussion, can only be revealed in practice. No technique of normal school training alone will produce the man who can interpret experience to a labor group, although something can be done through normal classes to show the prospective teacher how material may be simply prepared, and presented in the method of group discussion. The suggestion has been made that a local association of teachers could call a conference of themselves and local trade union leaders on workers' education. If both elements cooperated, classes would be an immediate result. One American teachers' union numbering 1,000 was called on for teachers for workers' education. Two persons were available. But two are a beginning in a new work.

One experiment in workers' education has found that teachers in secondary schools were more successful than university professors. In this experiment, the language used was simpler, the understanding of the group mind was more complete.

Increasingly, teachers will come out of the ranks of the workers. Even the best of the university men retain a methodology and a mental habit of their group, and insensibly swing workers' education to their ideas of what it ought to be. It is not the function of the educator to lead labor along the lines of his preconceived judgment

of the proper destiny of labor. Rather, it is his job to walk humbly into that new world of experience, conditions and ideas, to be more concerned with discovery than exhortation, more concerned with the definition and interpretation of labor to itself than with the superimposition of his learning or his policy. The teacher is the psychoanalyst, revealing by discussion what the workers want.

The teacher will be forced to use a new way of teaching. If he does not, his class will die on his hands. The old text-books are no good for his group. The class-room method will not "work." The subject material (of abstract economics, for instance) will not hold attention.

The teacher will avoid mass meetings, advertising what he is going to do. The little class seems lonesome after a mass meeting. He will make his appeal by pamphlets, bulletins, syllabi of courses. He will speak to every sort of workers' meeting. He will speak to trade unions' locals, district conferences, state federation conferences. He will begin his experiment small in one place. If successful, it will do much of its own advertising and publicity work. Its students and graduates become the promoters of workers' education. A regular bulletin or leaflet or magazine organ will gradually become necessary.

The lesson will be slowly learned that working class education costs in money and time; especially, that it must pay its way in point of adequate compensation for teachers. It is idle to hope that a permanent teaching staff of the right calibre can be built on the tag ends of busy people's time, for which a nominal fee is paid. This kind of educational work requires special ability, extended preparation and follow-up. On the other hand, successful experiments in labor education have been made by the equal and enthusiastic early sacrifices of both workers and teachers. Only gradually have the experiments been able to take over the full time or even a remunerative half-time of the teacher. All such effort in beginning is dependent on a fund of patient idealism. As the need and the appeal become clearer it is probable that a group of teachers will respond in this country as they have elsewhere.

What is immediately needed is the asking and answering of some simple questions in methods of class procedure. There should be an

exchange of experiences by teachers of labor. What presentation interested the class? Can the social sciences be presented visually and pictorially as the physical sciences are? How can graphs, charts, slides, photographs, maps, be used? Is the discussion a question and answer from the beginning? Or does the teacher lead off for a half hour? Does the teacher use his high-school technique? Or is there a new and different technique for labor education? How can sound fact-foundations be laid in minds, untrained, or weary, or indifferent, or dreaming of world-revolution?

TEXT-BOOKS

It is not by chance that workers' education altered the subject-matter, the content, of the teaching. Fresh from first-hand experience of danger, monotony, and the workings of the industrial system, labor rejects the abstractions of academic political economy, and the purple chronicle of kings in history. They want to know the adventure of the common man down the ages. This means re-writing the text-books. The workers are forcing the experts to rewrite them. The secretary of the British Labor College writes us (in November of 1920):

"Those experts. We've been battling with them for three months now, trying to bully or cajole them into Simplicity of Language, Abolition of Technical Treatment, Definiteness in the Statement of Established Results of their Sciences, Conciseness. We want a book on their subjects of 150 to 200 pages. They want to supply a self-contained library, mainly technical, with ill-defined co-ordination of results, and precious little relation to a continuous unfolding of natural social phenomena."

Text-books are needed in all subjects—in technique of leadership, civic culture, in American industrial history, in trade union and labor history, in political history, in economic geography, and so on. Text-books for American workers' education have not been written. Sound scholarship, simple statement, clear English, cheap price, are the requirements. The probable line of procedure here is that after discussion the teacher will draw up an outline of his course. This outline will grow into leaflets; the leaflets into pamphlets; the pamphlets into a text-book. The text-book, then, will be written by a teacher of workers' classes, and will be an answer to the needs of the group.

The pamphlet will be a valuable instrument in workers' education, as in other enterprises of social change. The pamphlet is read where the book is neglected. The pamphlet is remembered and kept, where the newspaper is thrown away and forgotten. Pamphleteering has been an unknown art until Upton Sinclair, Scott Nearing, Paul Blanshard and a few others began to discover its carrying power. Pamphlets are immediately needed for workers' educational groups on such subjects as "Unemployment," "Labor Education and What It Could Mean," "What Is a Trade Union College?" "How to Start a Trade Union College," and on 50 other subjects.

At the end of this pamphlet will be found a list of books and pamphlets which have proved useful in workers' classes.

What seems agreed on as texts immediately needed are a dynamic history of the American trade union movement; an American industrial history; a syllabus on industrial history; a syllabus on the American labor movement; a text on workers' education, which will contain the experience of teachers in presentation of material, and the whole technique of teaching workers' groups.

One of the teachers in the Pennsylvania workers' classes, C. J. Hendley, writes us:—

My notion of a labor class text-book is that it should be a pocket size volume, containing about twelve lessons of, say, twenty pages each; that it should be written in a style that would lure the student to further reading; that it should contain detailed references and directions for more thorough study; and that it should be developed inductively from familiar facts and concrete data to general principles. Simplicity and clearness would be of paramount importance in such literature. It should be written with the unsophisticated and uneducated workman kept in mind. I think our texts should treat ostensibly the commonplace problems that the average serious-minded workman faces in his every-day work, but in reality introducing him to great principles and ideals of social and economic progress,—not mere propaganda for any particular doctrine, but an appeal to what is sanest and noblest in the human mind.

The Ladies' Garment Workers report on this need:—

The International was confronted with the problem of text-books, because most of the available text-books are written either for college or high school students or for children in the elementary schools. To solve this problem it was decided to have the teachers prepare pamphlets on the subject-matter of their courses. These are published by the

Educational Department and sold to members at a minimum cost. These pamphlets will be used as text-books by the classes, since teachers who have had experience with workers' classes are best fitted to write text-books for them.

A first need of many experiments in workers' education is that of an outline of present-day civilization. The student wishes to know about the world and his own place in it. He wishes to know nature and human nature,—about climate and the location of food, coal, iron ore, oil, rubber, copper; and how these physical features and natural resources react on man with his bundle of instincts. The student wishes to know what are the problems of today, and what intellectual tools exist for grappling with them.

A brave attempt to make this outline of present-day civilization has been published by a group of Columbia instructors. It is called "Introduction to Contemporary Civilization—A Syllabus" (Columbia University). It is faulty in such omissions as a proper consideration of workers' education. The suggested reading is not generally adapted to workers' groups (of course it does not pretend to be). But the Syllabus affords a working answer to the need of many group leaders in labor education.