

WORKERS' EDUCATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE

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Not all of those engaged in public-school education are well informed as to a very significant movement in recent educational history, that known as Workers' Education. By this we do not mean vocational or industrial education as such; rather it is an attempt on the part of the labor group in this country, particularly the labor unions, to develop a program whereby the workers themselves and their children may be educated in a way planned by, dominated by, and sympathetic to labor, and distinctly apart from the public-school educational program.

As a brief historical sketch, we may say that the movement began in this country soon after the turn of the century. In 1911, the National Women's Trade Union League initiated a labor school in Chicago, and in 1915 the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union launched the first of their Unity Centers, of which there are now about fifteen in as many cities, with upwards of six hundred study groups and with about 30,000 attending.

In the early 1920's the American Federation of Labor adopted the movement, and brought it into their own organization by means of a "Workers' Education Bureau." Under this impetus, a development took place which has now resulted in more than fifty city labor colleges, many summer schools, as well as some elementary and high schools. Some of the newer labor unions are also seeing the possibilities in Workers' Education, and have established further schools on their own account. A recent large increase has taken place under the unifying program of the Affiliated Schools for Workers, which group has at least eighty local committees conducting schools throughout the country. It should be noted that though the curriculum and the offerings in the workers' classes are frequently similar in title to those in our public schools, they are usually vastly different in teaching method and in point of view.

It is true that public education has made some efforts at rapport with the workers, with a considerable measure of success in some instances. Witness the School for Workers in Industry at the University of Wisconsin and their Summer School for office workers, the Bryn Mawr Summer School, and the Pacific Coast School for Workers in connection with the University of California. Also the Federal Government through its Emergency Education Program, and using unemployed teachers, has at times had as many as 40,000 office, store and factory workers in classes.

But the workers themselves claim not to be satisfied with this help, nor to feel that these programs, good as they may be, meet the basic need. As one of their leaders said: "Labor is undertaking to educate *itself*, thus refusing to have education handed out to it by those who neither understand nor sympathize with its problems and points of view."

Although the labor forces, at the time of the agitation which resulted in the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act and the development of the vocational program in our secondary schools, took a prominent part in that effort which resulted in the establishment of industrial education in high schools, they have since become cold and in many cases antagonistic to it. The reason for this antagonism and in fact for their insistence upon the maintenance of a separate and complete workers' educational program has been explained by one of themselves thus:

"It is unreasonable.....to expect the teachers in the lower and higher schools to understand or admit the special educational needs of the workers as a class. The nearest approach to such an understanding has occurred in vocational education with well recognized results. Here the recognition of the special educational needs of the workers as an economic class is so complete that the curriculum fails to consider the possibility of a removal from that class....The public schools fail to grasp the idea that true

education means, first, training to earn a living; second, preparation for promotion; finally, and more important, instruction in the possibilities and methods of participation of all workers in the management and forming of financial policies of the industries in which they work." In brief, the worker, in his own words wants "not education for culture, but education for control".

A very significant development of recent years has been the rather general introduction of communistic elements into the management and the curriculum of a large number of the schools. Many of these schools have recently been disowned by the more conservative labor leaders, which has tended rather to exaggerate than to reduce this trend, in the thinking of many concerned.

Now what are we to say of the significance of such a movement as this, even granted that it has not been as successful and as widespread as its early promoters had hoped? Surely it is important for the educational and vocational counselor to see the implications of a development like this. Is not such a counselor remiss who undertakes to attempt to make vocational and educational adjustments for the children of the labor-

ing group, and who is at the same time ignorant of the fact that the parents of these children may be all the while imbuing them with an outright if not contemptuous disapproval of the whole present public-school system? For we must face the fact that a considerable number of those who comprise in total more than half the school's population—the industrial workers of America—subscribe to an educational philosophy diametrically opposed to the thinking of the educators now in control of our public schools. Would it not be wise for those of us interested in vocational guidance, in fact for all of us in education, to take into account this undercurrent of disapproval, this striving toward something not satisfied by our present school system? Is it not time, in fact, to take stock of our complete educational system and its philosophical bases, to learn whether the present program is one which we can with perfect confidence claim to be a satisfactory offering for all the children of all the people? If this be done, and it has been done,* we may perchance find valid criticism of the basic philosophy of present-day education much more far-reaching than that given by Workers' Education.

* See Robert L. Cooke, *Philosophy, Education and Certainty*. Zondervan (Grand Rapids), 1940.