

CHAPTER VIII

EDUCATION

THE educational work of the labor organizations in the needle trades, though but a few years old, has already reached a stage where its tendencies can be roughly defined. The extent of these educational efforts, and still more the broad vision which they have revealed, have attracted considerable attention, on the part both of the labor movement and the general public. The 1918 convention of the American Federation of Labor found the subject of sufficient interest to direct the Executive Council to appoint a special committee to investigate the educational system of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and other similar schools, with a view of reporting to the 1919 convention whether the methods employed could not be applied generally to the labor movement of the United States and Canada. The numerous articles in the press, and the formation of the Art, Labor and Science Conference with the express purpose of cooperating with these trade unions in education, are indications of the growing interest in this work.

It is generally recognized that, in a sense, every labor union is an educational institution in itself. The elementary principles of democracy, the concep-

tion of majority rule, the rudiments of representative government, the significance and practice of the ballot, the first inklings of taxation by the will of the people and the realization of the significance of self-discipline in a democracy, are perhaps nowhere learned in a more direct and immediate way than in a labor union. No amount of school training could ever cultivate that simple understanding of the basic principles and practices of self-government which is naturally acquired by every active member. In addition, the regular trade activities of a labor organization are educational in many other ways. The process of determining the demands which the organization is to present to the manufacturers, the struggle for these demands, the consideration and settlement of grievances and disputes, the practice of mediation, conciliation, and arbitration—all these activities touch upon the fundamentals of economics and sociology, and more directly upon questions concerning management and control of industry. This explains why many a labor man, with only very scant opportunities for a systematic education, has attained such a high degree of knowledge and culture. The educational value of the regular trade activities of labor unions varies, however, with the type and character of the unions.

The broader the principles upon which a labor organization is built, the wider its horizon, the greater the community with which it identifies itself—the greater is its educational value. The union which

limits its philosophy to the immediate betterment of its own craft must necessarily provide fewer opportunities for education than the one that considers its work for the immediate betterment of the industry as a mere link in the social process leading towards full industrial and political democracy for the entire people. The member of a craft union can follow the work of his organization without giving much attention to the general economic, social, or political problems of the times. The trade unionist of the old type does not see any close connection between these general conditions and the immediate tasks of his own organization. The situation is entirely different in the needle trade unions. As shown in a previous chapter, the success and very existence of the organizations in these trades depended upon their active adherence to the philosophy of the new unionism. Scattered in trades of an inferior industrial structure, they could draw their organized strength only from the ties of conscious working-class solidarity. With the prospect of immediate betterment seemingly so remote, their appeal to the workers for organization had to be based on the greater promise of the full emancipation of the working class. This fundamental philosophy made it necessary for the unions in the needle trades from the very start to devote considerable attention to subjects with which the average union of the old type never concerned itself. It can be said that, in this sense, the educational work in the needle trades began with their first attempts at organization.

During the early 'eighties, when the first attempts at organization in the needle trades were made, the unions had an ephemeral character. Every year small and transient trade unions sprang up and disappeared before sending forth roots. During this time these unions were rather debating societies than real trade organizations. The members of such unions were often more interested in the theoretical battles between the different philosophical schools fighting for supremacy on the East Side than in their trade activities. The evident futility of their efforts to gain immediate improvements in sweatshop conditions gave abnormal impulse to their hopes of accomplishing this purpose, and more, by means of a general reconstruction of society on the basis of one or another of the philosophies propounded to them. Another contributing factor was the fact that all the early efforts at organization were directed by a comparatively small number of immigrant revolutionary intellectuals. The state of mind of these immigrant intellectuals is described best by one of them in an article written many years later.²

These men "suddenly found themselves under the influence of three main schools. The teachers who dominated the three schools were idolized by their followers. One of them was William Frey who taught Positivism and the 'religion of humanity;' another was Felix Adler who preached Ethical Culture; and a third was Johann Moste who taught

² Dr. H. Spivack quoted in *The History of the Jewish Labor Movement* by H. Burgin, 1915.

Anarchism. Eager audiences flocked to all three. But, at the beginning, the teachings of the three were confused in the minds of the youth into an Ethical-Anarchistic-Positivistic hash."

Debates between the adherents of all these philosophical schools, and especially between socialists and anarchists, were a very frequent occurrence at the union meetings. Many a time the debates were transferred from the local union meetings to the central body, the United Hebrew Trades. A characteristic example of the interest which the workers in the needle trades took in these chiefly abstract discussions is supplied by a debate held in Cooper Union in 1889 on the interesting subject, Whether the workers ought or ought not participate in the movement for an eight-hour day. During all these years numerous societies and clubs for self-education were organized and were working hand in hand with the trade unions. They were, however, as ephemeral and transient as the unions themselves.

An early attempt to create a labor college for systematic education is recorded in 1899, when the so-called Workers' School was organized by Drs. Peskin, I. N. Stone, and A. Ingerman. Systematic courses in economics, natural science, socialism, and allied subjects, were given in this school, which existed for several years, and was reorganized into the Workers' Educational League. Another attempt at systematic education was made by John Deitsch, who in 1901 organized the Jewish Workers League for the purpose of studying industrial problems, eco-

nomics, and so on. The constitution of this League contained a provision that it must remain entirely non-partisan. When the Rand School of Social Science was established in 1905 it met, to a great extent, the demand for systematic education which by this time was prevalent among the more alert element of the unions in the needle trades, especially those who had succeeded in gaining a satisfactory knowledge of the English language. The Rand School always drew a very considerable percentage of its students from the needle trades.

The first decade of the twentieth century was the time when all the present great organizations of the needle trades were built up; it was the time of rapid constructive trade union progress. But even during this period, when all these industries were raised from the sweatshop to civilized conditions, the interest of the membership in the wider social and economic problems rather increased than decreased. During this decade the unions made repeated attempts to organize educational work of their own. Many local unions appointed educational committees. Lectures at the regular meetings, musicales, etc., were arranged sporadically by many of the large locals. It is also worthy of mention that during this decade the branches of the Workmen's Circle³ increased their educational activities

³The Workmen's Circle is a Jewish fraternal order established in 1900, paying to its members sick, death and consumption benefit, and providing for them many other forms of assistance in time of need or distress. At present it has a membership of 80,000, of which about 75% are workers of the needle trades. The Workmen's Circle does a great deal of educational work through its

which reached an ever growing number of Yiddish-speaking workers.

As soon as the unions in the needle trades were established on a firm foundation, the need for educational work not merely increased, but also changed in character. In the early stages of their history it was upon the necessity of solidarity and organization that their educational efforts were concentrated. The lectures in economics or sociology were an indirect agitation for organization. They were meant primarily to solidify the ranks by a common consciousness which would make possible control over industries which, owing to their inferior structure, presented almost insurpassable difficulties to organization. Even the debates among the different social and philosophic factions struggling for supremacy within these unions were more in the nature of general agitation, limited to first principles and scratching only the surface of the subjects, than a systematic analysis of social and economic phenomena. The main purpose, consciously or unconsciously, was to develop that state of mind which makes possible concerted action upon the part of tens of thousands of loosely organized workers, scattered in thousands of shops with endless variety of working conditions, with no firmly fixed demarcation line between employer and employee, and subject, in addition, to all the miseries of the sweatshop, tene-

branches, and since 1910 also through its General Office. Among others, the Workmen's Circle published a number of good popular books in Yiddish on different social and economic subjects, including a text-book on Trade Unionism by Dr. Louis Levine.

ment home-work and all kinds of sub-manufacturing and sub-contracting. By the end of the first decade of the century this task of creating a common consciousness had been fairly well accomplished. The unions in the needle trades succeeded in solidifying their ranks and making concerted action on their part the established rule and practice; they succeeded in gaining a substantial control over their industries. More than that, by virtue of the more highly developed common consciousness they were fairly on the way to catching up with the standards achieved by the general labor movement of this country. The need for primitive education, which was primarily agitation, had lost by this time its urgency and importance. Something more fundamental grew necessary.

The first record of this necessity for fundamental education on a large scale we find in the reports of the proceedings of the 1914 convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. That convention recognized the need "to dwell particularly upon the more solid and preparatory work of education and not to devote much time to the mere superficial forms of agitation and propaganda which have been the main features of our educational work in the past." The same motive we find in the report of the General Secretary, Max Zuckerman, to the convention of the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers held in May, 1917. Speaking of the unsatisfactory results of the many educational efforts made by the various local unions at different

times, he gives as one of the reasons for this failure "the mistake of merely advocating it as a general proposition instead of arranging a definite system to carry on the educational work." Perhaps the best analysis of the causes necessitating change in the character of the educational work is supplied by a recent editorial (August 22, 1919) in the *Fortschritt*, the official organ of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, of which the General Secretary, Joseph Schlossberg, is the editor. Since the Amalgamated Clothing Workers came into existence later than the other unions of the needle trades, the passage from the primitive education to the more fundamental education arose with them at a later date. Says the editorial:

"Our main power always lay in the fact that we educated the membership on the questions which they had to solve through our organization. . . . This was education on the special tasks as they arose. These tasks have now been accomplished. Today a different education is demanded. We now need such educational work as will explain to our workers the world events, their social position, the true purpose of a labor organization and its task under the present world conditions.

"We have reached a point when education is no less important than the organization itself. We must have it or we cannot continue our work, unless we are satisfied that the Amalgamated shall sink to the level of a reactionary bureaucracy in which the members are mere dues-payers and the officials are the organization.

"Our duties grow, and our responsibilities grow: the intelligence and the education of the members must grow

together with them, or the Amalgamated will cease to be what it has been until now. . . .

“The burning question before us is: What are we to do in order that our organization may always remain young, fresh, militant and rich in spirit? The answer is, that we must immediately inaugurate efficient educational work among our members.”

It took some time for the unions to settle on definite methods. The system is not yet completed. But at this writing it is sufficiently advanced to make fairly certain both its permanency and its form. An analysis of the educational work as at present conducted reveals the following principles underlying it. It is planned so as to be closely connected and interrelated with the usual trade activities of the organizations. Their aspiration is to make the educational and trade activities become two phases of the same movement, completing and helping one another. It aims on the one hand to increase the proportion of the membership which has a thorough understanding of the labor movement and its problems and can carry the burden of the work of the organization, and on the other hand to develop a stronger sentiment of fellowship among the membership at large, to raise the morale in the ranks of the organizations by imbuing them with a deeper devotion to the ideals of the labor movement and a greater readiness to fight for their achievement. It seeks to supply adequate mental food and facilities for a broad cultural life for that element which already craves it, but it still more endeavors to stim-

ulate among the great masses of the rank and file the want for knowledge and culture. The direct connection between the educational and the trade activities is shown by the fact that the former contribute greatly to the raising of the general standard of living of the rank and file, thus increasing its material wants. At the same time the higher level of intelligence makes it possible for the organization to accomplish more easily the task of improving conditions and increasing wages so as to meet the higher standard of living.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union was the first organization in the needle trades to begin this systematic educational work. As far as is known, this union was the pioneer in education in the labor movement of America. In accordance with the decision of the convention of 1914 their General Executive Board appointed a special educational committee. This committee naturally first sought to take advantage of the educational institutions which were already existing and active in the needle trades. Arrangements were made with the Rand School for a number of regular courses to be conducted under the joint direction of the International educational committee and the School. History, Theory and Practice of the Labor Movement, Method of Organization, and English were included in this program. A number of systematic lectures and tours, both in English and Yiddish, were arranged by the same committee. A further impetus to this work was given by the Waist and

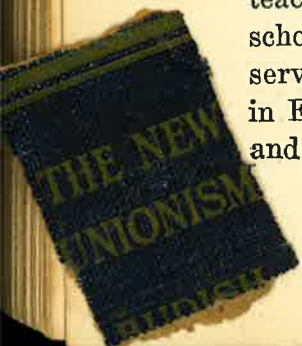
Dress Makers Union of the city of New York (Local 25), a local of the International, which independently inaugurated, under the direction of Miss Juliet Stuart Poyntz, a vigorous educational campaign among its membership. The 1916 convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union accepted a plan for an extensive educational campaign and voted \$5,000 for that purpose, and the last convention of the International, held in 1918, decided further to extend the work and appropriated a sum of \$10,000 yearly for it.

At present the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union has in its national office in New York a special educational department consisting of a staff headed by Director Dr. Louis S. Friedland and Secretary Fannia Cohn, working under the supervision of the educational committee appointed by the president of the International. This department conducts classes directly in the city of New York and also advises and helps the local unions of the International, both in the city of New York and in other cities, in planning and carrying out their own educational work. In New York, the International has secured the cooperation of the municipal Board of Education for the use of the public school buildings and for the assignment of teachers for their English classes. Six public schools in the various residential sections of the city serve as "Unity Centers" where numerous classes in English, economics, literature, physical training, and other subjects are conducted for the ladies'

garment workers. These schools also serve as centers for various recreational and social activities. This work is of a more elementary nature, calculated to reach a large portion of the membership. More advanced educational work is carried on in Washington Irving High School under the name of the Workers' University of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. Among the courses given there the following may be mentioned: Social interpretation of Literature, Evolution of the Labor Movement, Problems of Reconstruction, Sociology and Civilization, Labor Legislation, Social Problems, Trade Unionism, Cooperation. In both the Unity Centers and the Workers' University concerts are arranged from time to time. Lectures arranged by local unions are also frequently accompanied by a concert.

Since December, 1918, the Philadelphia organization of the I. L. G. W. U. has conducted educational projects among its membership similar to those in New York. Efforts are being made to extend this movement to Boston and other centers of the women's clothing industry.

The United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers convention in 1917 adopted a plan for systematic education on a large scale. As a result, an educational center known as the Headgear Workers Institute was organized in a public school. The activities were similar to those of the ladies' garment workers—classes in English, physical training, civics, history of the labor movement, public speaking and parlia-



mentary law, and collective bargaining. A number of general lectures and excursions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and several "family gatherings" were added. The program of the "family gathering" consisted of a concert, lecture and educational moving pictures; it was intended for the membership and their families and friends. The Hat and Cap Makers did not continue their educational work long, before they inaugurated a campaign for uniting the interested labor organizations in a general educational enterprise.

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers made their beginning at systematic education only at the end of 1917. The trade problems with which this organization was faced were up to that time so numerous, pressing, and in most cases, of such an emergency nature that they took up all the energies of the organization. At the end of 1917 the beginning was made simultaneously in Baltimore, Chicago, and New York. This initial effort met with considerable success in Chicago and Baltimore, but it proved rather abortive in New York. The 1918 convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers instructed the General Board to continue and extend their educational work. It was at that time that the United Labor Education Committee was launched and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers decided to join this common enterprise. Since the organization of the United Labor Education Committee, both the Amalgamated and the Hat and Cap Makers have con-

tinued their educational activities through this common committee.

Cooperation of these unions in education was initiated first in June, 1918, at an informal conference held between delegates to the A. F. of L. convention at St. Paul. The United Labor Education Committee was finally founded in November, 1918, by the following organizations: Amalgamated Clothing Workers, United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers, Furriers' Union, Fancy Leather Goods Workers Union, and the Workmen's Circle. An Executive Board, consisting of two representatives from each of these bodies established a joint office and took charge of all their educational work. While originally begun by needle trade organizations, the United Labor Education Committee later embraced a number of other unions and consists at present of about twenty labor organizations.

From the report submitted by the chairman of this Committee, J. M. Budish, to the Educational Conference of the United Labor Education Committee, held on February 7, 1920, the following summary of its first year's activities is derived:

An educational undertaking of this sort, serving so large a constituency, and with such limited resources—\$17,450 was appropriated by the affiliated organizations—was faced by the necessity of an important choice of policy. Any classes which it could establish would include only a small proportion of the union members. Should the emphasis,

then, be laid upon reaching the people in as large masses as possible, and inducing a mental attitude receptive to education, an aspiration which might in great part be satisfied by outside agencies? Or should all the effort be concentrated on supplying in detail the wants of a few? The former course was adopted in a memorandum approved by the committee at the start. "The fundamental necessity," said this memorandum, "is that the center of gravity of the educational work shall be transferred from supplying systematic knowledge to creating a steadily increasing demand for it, based upon the firm conviction that the Kingdom of Heaven is open to him who seriously looks for it." At the same time, "no efforts certainly must be spared to supply the elements who are craving regular systematic education with the necessary classes, courses, etc."

The pioneer work of the committee of course encountered difficulties. It was necessary to try experiments, to stir the rank and file to their own need for education, and to accustom them to forms of instruction quite different from the agitation to which they had been subjected in the past. Obstacles were set up by local public officials, particularly those in charge of the school buildings, many of whom, frightened by the prevailing anti-revolutionary hysteria, feared this might be some new form of Bolshevik propaganda. It was impossible, for instance, to hold classes or lectures in the school buildings in the Yiddish language, although this was

the one chiefly spoken and understood by a large proportion of the membership.

One of the most successful activities of the committee was the holding of forty-seven forums in various parts of New York, which were attended by about 11,200 persons in all. At these forums, in addition to lectures by widely known speakers on various important subjects, there were recitals of good music by soloists and string quartets, educational moving pictures, lecture-recitals in which the musical compositions presented were explained by competent musicians, and dramatic recitals by Miss Edith Wynne Matthison and Charles Rann Kennedy. The music for the forums was provided by a Section on Music of which Josef Stransky, conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra, was chairman.

In order to bring education directly to the rank and file, lecturers were sent to many regular meetings of the union locals. To arrange such lectures properly, it was necessary for each local to elect an educational committee, which should choose the most convenient time of meeting and select from the list of lecturers and subjects the ones preferred. Since most of these lectures were given at regular business meetings they had to be short; it was a difficult task for the speaker to gauge properly the temper of his audience, to develop his subject in twenty or thirty minutes without sacrificing the standards of accuracy, and at the same time to interest a group of active unionists many of whom had only the most rudimentary understanding of

English. If college instructors were submitted to discipline of this sort they might gain in color and directness. Naturally the lectures were not uniformly successful, but on the whole the experiment was judged satisfactory by the union members themselves, who in a democratic undertaking of this sort have the final authority over what shall be done. In all, 97 lectures were given at local meetings which had a total attendance of 13,715.

Excellent opportunities to make contact with the rank and file were furnished by the meetings called by the unions conducting strikes. Arrangements were made by the Committee to make use of the leisure of the strikers for educational and recreational purposes. During six strikes by affiliated unions, 59 meetings with a total attendance of over 45,000 were supplied with speakers and concerts of the highest standard. Union officials and other observers often remark on the fact that in a strike, when people are united in a common purpose and their emotions are unusually stimulated, their imaginations become active and they are in a peculiarly receptive mood for social and cultural values. Instruction of a more practical sort was furnished to girl strikers in the form of talks on sex hygiene, given in cooperation with the American Social Hygiene Association.

Perhaps the most ambitious undertaking of the Committee was the provision of three concerts in Carnegie Hall by the Philharmonic Orchestra, solely for the affiliated membership, at a price far below

that which the general public has to pay. It was felt by the committee that something must be done to counteract the degrading effect on the personality of the worker which is produced by the amusements easily accessible, such as cheap moving pictures and musical shows. Most workers seldom patronize good concerts and theaters, first because the cost is too high, and second because these forms of recreation having been in effect monopolized by more fortunate members of society, the workers feel little interest in them. Nothing, however, could be more demoralizing, both to labor and to art, than the identification of fine and serious productions with a remote stratum of society with which the worker has nothing in common. On this account it was thought advisable to give concerts under the auspices of the unions, solely for their own membership. Few concessions to popular taste were made in the programs, on the theory that the way to learn to appreciate the best music is to hear it. The result, of course, was that the concerts were rather thinly attended and proved a heavy financial burden; but a steady and rapid rise in attendance from the first concert to the last gave hope that if the experiment were continued it might before long become self-supporting.

A similar experiment in drama was projected; it was planned to have a Workmen's Theater in English, giving serious productions of masterpieces seldom heard on Broadway, under the best possible direction. This plan did not mature, but the Com-

mittee did cooperate with the Jewish Art Theater, organized by Louis Schnitzer, Ben-Ami and Emmanuel Reicher and others, and performances of a high standard were furnished to union members at less than half price. Here enough support came from the membership to make the experiment self-sustaining. An English-language theater is still on the program and may be founded before long.

According to the policy adopted by the Committee in the beginning, classes offering continuous and systematic instruction in special subjects were the last to be developed. Several classes in English, Economics, Industrial History and History and Appreciation of Art were successfully carried on, but on the whole this side of the movement is still in the formative stage. In the meantime, a cooperative agreement was made with the Rand School, by which members of affiliated unions may join classes at the school without expense to themselves.

In order to symbolize the contact with artists and intellectual leaders which the labor movement must make in any broad attempt at education, an Art, Labor, and Science Conference was created by those interested; this conference constituted itself a permanent body and elected Sections to cooperate with the Committee in the various undertakings which it had in mind. Much valuable assistance was rendered by members of this conference—for instance, by Professor Charles A. Beard, by Josef Stransky and others of the Music Section, and by Richard Ordynski and others of the Drama Section. The con-

ference has interesting possibilities of future development.

Friendly relations were established with other bodies carrying on labor education in America, and with the Workers' Educational Association of Great Britain. A national information bureau or central office may be formed to correlate and serve the various union educational activities in the United States.

In the eyes of the educator, perhaps the most interesting feature of all is the democratic nature of the enterprise. The report of the Chairman, from which the above account was extracted, was presented to a conference of delegates from the local unions which the Committee had been serving. It was as if the faculty of a university had to submit a report of its year's activities to the student body, who in turn had the right of unlimited criticism, and could grant or withhold the funds for the support of the institution. Criticism of all sorts was indeed freely voiced, but defenders of the work were also at hand, and after the Committee had had an opportunity to hear every ground of dissatisfaction, the report was unanimously accepted. Contact of this nature insures that as long as the Committee survives, it will be a vital institution. The conference itself was not the least educational of its undertakings.

The report of the committee appointed by the American Federation of Labor to investigate workers' educational enterprises is included in the report of the Executive Council to the thirty-ninth annual

convention of the Federation held in June, 1919, at Atlantic City. It has for this study a special interest because it reveals a cleavage between the business type of unionism and the new unionism.

"Your committee recommends," says the report in the general summary of conclusions, "that central labor bodies through securing representation on boards of education and through the presentation of a popular demand for increased facilities for adult education make every effort to obtain from the public schools liberally conducted classes in English, public speaking, parliamentary law, economics, industrial legislation, history of industry and of the trade union movement, and any other subjects that may be requested by a sufficient number, such classes to be offered at times and places which would make them available to workers. If the public school system does not show willingness to cooperate in offering appropriate courses and type of instruction, the central labor body should organize such classes with as much cooperation from the public schools as may be obtained. Interested local unions should take the initiative when necessary."

This report was unanimously endorsed by the convention with the addition that the Executive Council was instructed to appoint a committee to investigate the matter of selecting or preparing and publishing unbiassed text-books on different subjects concerning the labor movement.

The difference between this conception of labor education and the one of the new unionism may be

compared with the difference between applied science and science. The function of education for the business unionism is merely to supply the members with a little more knowledge and information, from which they may derive immediate benefit, especially in connection with their direct trade activities. The new unionism thinks of educational work rather in the light of its vision of a coming commonwealth with a new culture. The business unionism would burden itself with this work only in case the public school system is so reactionary and so entirely uninfluenced by the labor movement that it refuses to supply the necessary classes in English, public speaking, economics, etc. The new unionism regards the creation of a labor culture, towards which educational work is a mere initial step, as its foremost aspiration, and as much a part of the task to be undertaken by the workers themselves as the struggle for political and industrial democracy. Says the report of the Executive Council, "But such classes (under union auspices) should be considered a stop-gap. The sound solution is a progressive board of education responsive to the public." As against this conception of labor education as a temporary stop-gap, the new unionism believes that labor must create its own educational agencies because they are a step towards a new and finer culture, towards the mental and spiritual emancipation of the people. For the new unionism the freedom from ready-made conceptions, the habit of independent thinking, the searching attitude of mind towards life, the creative imagi-

nation, the ready response to the delicate and noble impressions of nature and the treasures of human thought and intuition, the free and many-sided personality—and a society of equals built on this foundation—is that higher ideal which underlies, consciously or unconsciously, all phases of the labor struggle. Labor education is therefore to the new unionism not a mere passing activity made necessary by a temporary wave of reaction, but perhaps the most conscious expression of all its aspirations.