

Workers' Education Before The U. S. Congress

By M. H. HEDGES

ON its 21st anniversary workers' education in the United States became a national issue. For the first time in the history of the American labor movement, workers' education as a specialized type of educational activity ranked as a topic of national interest by virtue of hearings in the Congress on bills sponsored by labor through labor-minded representatives. The Bill, S. 1390, introduced into the Senate as a non-partisan measure by Senators Wayne Morse, Republican of Oregon, and Elbert D. Thomas, Democrat of Utah, had companion bills introduced into the House of Representatives by Thor C. Tollefson, Republican, of Washington, and Ray J. Madden, Democrat, of Indiana.

Every sophisticate in the United States sees the far-reaching implications of labor's extension act. It will place labor education on a national basis on a par with education for farmers and for businessmen. It will fuse two grass-roots movements, one from the universities reaching toward the labor audience, and one from labor reaching toward the institutions of higher learning. There are those who also believe that the new workers' education movement in the United States has deeply-involved international implications. It is influenced by historic developments in England and the Scandinavian countries. It carries concomitantly with it a vigorous drive for a student exchange program with democratic countries. Though indigenous, it has borrowed and adapted experience of other countries.

American labor has an honorable record in democratic education. The public

school system in the United States is usually traced to Horace Mann of Massachusetts and it is conceded that he could not have had success with his reforms without aggressive support from trade unions. The little red school house is a symbol as potent to Americans as the Statue of Liberty. The symbol points to the only sound way to get democracy. The little red school house, new style, must be an itinerant school penetrating industry itself, reaching its workers where they are, with the material to meet their hungers and needs. Protagonists of the labor extension bills in Congress believe if the bills pass the maturing situation will be properly met.

Gradual Development

The father of extension education in the United States was Justin Morrill, a blacksmith-farmer. He was elected Senator from Vermont in the troubled period preceding the Civil War. Knowing what craftsmanship was, and knowing also what the aim of farming was, he introduced a bill into the Congress in 1857 implementing his single-purpose democratic philosophy. It was not until 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, that the bill passed and was signed by Abraham Lincoln. This bill created a system of land-grant colleges through Federal aid. The bill provided for "training in agriculture, science and the mechanic arts." Though land-grant colleges were established under the act almost immediately, it was not until 1914 that an agricultural extension service (now a vigorous program) became a reality, and now, 86 years later, American labor is seeking to implement that section providing for training in the mechanic arts.

Just what is American labor seeking? Labor replies, "Parity." Labor has taken

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the position that there is a huge gap in the educational system which acts discriminatively against 60 million wage earners. Farmers to the number of six million secure approximately 28 million dollars a year in Federal aid to operate an efficient extension service. This service centres in a department of federal farm extension and fans out through land-grant colleges into every county of the union, where agricultural county agents on the Federal payroll act as teachers and counsellors. Though the "courses" have a strong vocational flavor, they inevitably culminate in economics, marketing and cooperative philosophy. Businessmen too have elaborate schools of business administration in all universities and colleges, where refresher courses for management are given. Labor alone lacks the facilities and the assistance necessary to repair the gap.

Though unions have sought to reduce this inequality through their own efforts, and though 79 colleges and universities are now offering some kind of labor courses, the movement has failed to reach millions, while adequately training thousands. To date, no open opposition has shown itself against the labor bill. The powerful land-grant college association has expressed sympathetic interest and offered constructive suggestions. The United States is education minded, be it remembered.

In presenting the bill, labor greatly strengthened its appeal by united effort. For the first time since the split in the labor forces in 1935, AFL, CIO, Railroad Brotherhoods and independent unions, powerful machinists and miner groups, cooperated 100 per cent. The National Committee for the Extension of Labor Education, Hilda W. Smith, Chairman, long-time leader in workers' education, numbers 66 representatives from all labor groups, with adequate representation from universities. One Congressman, viewing the list, declared, "I have not seen such a representative list for years."

Pattern of the Bill

The labor extension bill, identical in both Houses, follows the mores and patterns of American legislation and education. Though the bill insists that the proposed extension service be centered in the United States Department of Labor, the plan does not give the Federal Government any say-so about course content, for the proposal moves through existing institutions in the 48 states. State governors are empowered to set up state labor extension boards, screening agencies which will pass on requests for aid. Preferential standing will be given land-grant colleges as executive institutions in each state, though public and private institutions can receive aid. The nub of the proposal lies in the advisory councils at both Federal and State levels with labor holding majority representation on each. The bill moves to grass-roots levels by requiring and permitting labor groups of the local communities to initiate requests for aid to the state screening boards. The hearings, just closed before the United States Senate Subcommittee, have developed the most comprehensive and incisive record of workers' education in the United States extant. It is being printed. This source book contains illustrious names of educators, employers, Congressmen, teachers, students, labor directors of education, labor officials, including William Green and Philip Murray. In this wise, the labor bill has made educational history.

There is no open opposition to the Bill, though labor is not too confident of its passage. Yet the bill developed sharply contrasted points of view. Labor's bill provides that the proposed extension service be centered in the United States Department of Labor. Though no witness at the hearings took issue with this proposal, one Senator suggested that it go into the Federal Office of Education. This office does not operate at Cabinet level, but is a bureau

in the Federal Security Agency. For years labor has felt that the Office of Education in outlook, philosophy and operation policies was not aware of the needs or aspirations of the workers. William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, declared:

I foresee also an opportunity in this Bill to repair an inequity. I refer to the weakening of the United States Department of Labor by lopping off services to workers.

I must tell you that the great American Federation of Labor wants to see the United States Department of Labor strong and effective, equipped to perform the valid services it is required to perform for the widespread labor movement.

The United States Department of Labor is weaker to-day than it was when the labor movement numbered 5,000,000 workers. The labor movement now numbers 15,000,000 workers, and the Department of Labor has too few technicians to render this great labor movement proper assistance.

This Bill properly places the Extension Service in the Department of Labor. We want it placed there. We feel very strongly about this point.

Let me say it again. We firmly believe that this Extension Service properly belongs there and we want it placed there. Will you heed our request?

Another issue which developed at the hearings, had to do with majority representation by labor on federal and state councils. The Bill provides for a National Advisory Council to the Secretary of Labor, and State Labor Extension Boards in the several states. The question was raised by Senators as to the advisability of this so-called "favoritism." Labor itself stressed the fact that only two or three universities and colleges in the country have labor representatives on boards of regents or trustees; and that labor had to have full confidence in the program.

The specious question of class legislation was raised by unconvinced Senators. Labor replied:

What we have now is class discrimination, and when labor comes forward in good faith to cure this invidious arrangement of class discrimination, it is met with a charge of class legislation. The truth is that the only way to keep all other educational arrangements on the higher level from being class legislation is to give labor parity in that situation.

Management Participation

Another issue grew out of the foregoing. Why, asked opponents, can we not have labor-management extension services? The programs at Cornell and Rutgers Universities were held up as examples. This is an important point. Labor had declared frankly that the Bill was an aid to peaceful and sound labor-management relations. Labor pointed out that the Taft-Hartley Act had clouded issues, employed compulsion and failed to go to the heart of the difficulty. Labor insisted that to make collective bargaining effective workers had to be equipped for the bargaining process. Labor went further, declaring that the passage or non-passage of the Labor Extension Bill would indicate the true temper of the Congress toward labor. If the Bill passes, it would wipe out much of the ill-feeling engendered by the Taft-Hartley Act.

Yet labor insisted that the Labor Extension Service should be "Labor's own" service, free from the charge of undue company influence.

The National Committee for the Extension of Labor Education believes that it has made contact with the rank and file of labor. Hundreds of letters have poured into the Committee's office from the "little people" of labor giving money, and vigorous support to the measure. The Bill, in a genuine way, is a democratic measure that must be seen against a crowded calendar of educational activity—GI training, extension of university education and widening of adult training. This new interest in education may be of profound and real significance, marking the unconscious answer of a democratic people to world problems.