

# Education for the the Workers

## What the Workers' Education Association is trying to accomplish—Bringing the Universities and the Trades Unions into Partnership

By J. W. MACMILLAN.

The Workers' Educational Association is now twenty years old. It began in England, and has spread to most of the British Dominions. It has 20,000 members, which does not seem many out of all the people in the world, or even out of that fourth of the world's population which lives under the Union Jack. Nevertheless, when one considers the nature of the purpose which animates this Association, one does not look for crowds. It does not make the appeal of the bleachers or of oil-shares. It is not meant for fun, or for money. These 20,000 who attended its meetings are in pursuit of education. They come from the class which was not privileged to attend school continuously throughout boyhood and adolescence, but went early to some shop or mine, away from books and teachers and all intellectual stimulation.

The founder and first General Secretary of the movement is Albert Mansbridge, whose book, just published, "An Adventure in Working Class Education," gives the history and reveals the spirit of it. It is a Worker's University, a college whose doors open to any who love knowledge, however calloused their hands may be. It represents an alliance between the Universities and the Trades Unions, though unofficially on the part of both. Everyone knows that universities often attain an academic and pedantic prejudice regarding life. They love thinking, and recoil from working. They become hyper-sensitive to the affronts of coarse matter, and its stubborn and surprising performances, and remain in a dream-world where asymptotes and final causes can be relied on to do what is expected of them. On the other hand, the Trades Unions have been known for their intellectual apathy. They have been fond of hot facts, not of cold facts. Being purposive organizations they have coveted that view and aspect of truth which favored their contentions, and been impatient and even resentful of any happenings or considerations which might be placed on the other side of the question. The orator rather than the teacher, exhortation rather than persuasion, physical action rather than intellectual action,—these have been the guide-posts on their journey. It has been a great thing to bring the two together, to dissolve the academicity of the universities and to transform the apathy of the trades unions.

It has not been a hard thing to do. The authorities of both organizations have uniformly encouraged the co-operation. What difficulty has arisen has come rather from the potential clientele. The machinery has functioned admirably, but the raw material has been obstinate. The reason why it has been easy to bring the universities and the trades unions into partnership is that they are agreed in opposing the traditionalism of their age. That inert and huge weight of willing conservatism which lies like a monster glacier across the path of progress, and is composed partly of the selfishness of the privileged and partly of the habits and customs of all, is recognized alike by organized education and by organized labor as a foe. On this common platform the man of thought and the man of toil can meet. The temple of the Workers' University has been erected on this platform.

The object of the Association is education. It is not the formulation of a programme of reform. For, while both university and trades union be-

lieve in reform, they commonly differ very widely as to what particular shape the reform should take. Their alliance would not last long if it went to the length of making a new constitution for society. So the Association has kept in view the true sense of education as the full development of the individual and the fitting of him for his membership of an intelligent and self-governing community. It has learned from the mistakes of its forerunners, the Mechanics, Institutes and Evening Schools, which were mostly adjuncts to the factories in which their members earned wages. The economic motive is buried out of sight in the Workers' Educational Association.

For two years this movement has been in existence in Toronto. The credit for its inception lies with Professor W. S. Milner, of Toronto University, who in the winter of 1917-18 conducted an experimental class of this sort in the Technical School. The next year ten classes were organized, and the formal union between university and trades union, with the adoption of the constitution of the W.E.A., began. Thus the Association has been at work for two years in this city.

The classes meet each week for two hours. Some of the tutors follow the plan of lecturing for the first hour and conducting a discussion during the second hour. Some of them mix the lecturing and the discussion together. In every case both the instruction and the discussion takes place. The tutors are always men of competence in the subjects they teach, so that even the least advantaged student can be made to understand. They know their logic so well that they can make it simple. The subjects taught are such as Psychology, Modern History, Political Philosophy, English and Finance. Not all the tutors are members of the staff of Toronto University, but all are university graduates and experts in the departments of study concerned. The attendance is limited to twenty in each class, as a larger number than this cannot carry on the discussion to advantage. The average number in a class is about a dozen. They meet in one of the buildings of the University.

An annual meeting is held once each year, for the transaction of the necessary business. Here the committee of management is elected, consisting of eight members, of whom three are from the University, three from the trades unions, and two from the general public. As I pointed out in an earlier paragraph, the governing bodies of the University and the Trades and Labor Congress do not officially control the Association.

The prospect before the W.E.A. is that it shall become more catholic in temper. Out of it may come some wide and powerful enterprise for general adult education. After all, there is nothing in it peculiarly for members of labor organizations. It would be easy to alter the provision which requires that a certain number of the governing committee should belong to university or trades union, and let the connection be no more than a friendly interest. Such is the wish and hope of those who have been active in it. They have seen its usefulness to grown men who keep their faculties of wonder alive, and neither the faculty of wonder nor the desirability of cherishing its existence is any monopoly of the class of manual workers.

Perhaps the desire of learning is. If so, that is the rock upon which the ambition of the devoted leaders of this movement to extend its benefits to other classes will be shipwrecked. Some thing can be said for the contention that the man at the forge or the lathe is more apt to desire to "improve himself" than the man in the office or behind the counter. The very narrowness of the lot of the man who punches the clock impels him toward the cultivation of his natural powers. His fellow, who is paid by the month, wears better clothes, and stands before wider opportunities has more allurements in his life. Just as people used to think more about heaven when the earth was less comfortable, and have forgotten heaven in these days of pianolas and motor-cars, so the very hardships of the worker are his spur to study.

Of the need of general education no calm observer can doubt. The quality of the individual is the basic element in all group life. More and more, as the control of life is handed over to the masses, the importance of individual character increases. The knowledge, wisdom, self-control, calmness and tolerance of the average man become the essentials of peace and order. These things come through education. True education, such as the W.E.A. furthers. Not mere book learning, though this is of moment. But the enlightening of the spirit of man, his release from ignorance and impulse, his power to govern himself and his lot.

One recalls a picture of a typical soviet of Russian villagers. They sit together, crowded into a stuffy and dingy room, whiskered and unwashed. All are silent, for none will betray his his profound ignorance of the matters to be considered. To them comes the delegate from Moscow, presumably to record and carry their decisions to the superior soviet meeting there. He is a boy of less than twenty, a sophomore from some University. No sense of ignorance hinders him from speaking. He says, "Brothers, I know what you are thinking. You, who do the work and solve the problems of Russia, you are thinking——" (here he announces the policy of the heads of the government). These are your thoughts, are they not, brothers?" The whole assembly nods its head, as one man, and the meeting of the soviet is over. How can any rational government be achieved by men so ignorant as these Russian peasants?

One recalls, too, occurrences much nearer home, when the election was affected by some catchy phrase, calculated to rouse the impulses of national jealousy and hate, or by some slander, circulated too late for effective denial before the voting, or by the hollow and resounding declamation of some windbag, or by deliberate corruption practiced by men personally upright, in the heat of the combat. If we are to have rational government in any democracy we need a high standard of education, which can be reached only through a considerable number of citizens continuing to be students all their days.

It is popular to sneer at education. Indeed, with very many people no argument is so convincing as the sneer. There are newspapers who live by sneering at supposedly worthy things. Perhaps the barometer of a people's fitness for self rule might be found in the current vogue of the sneer. Education is the antidote to the sneer.

Winnipeg, Man.—"On the whole the crop outlook for Manitoba is very encouraging," says an official report given out this week by the provincial Department of Agriculture. It is stated that reports from 50 per cent. of the points are entirely satisfactory, whilst in others there is some word of lack of recent rains. Many wheat fields are headed and a fairly early harvest is expected.