

Workers' Education at the Turning Point

By Bertram D. Wolfe.

THE fate of workers' education is hanging in the balance. The Carnegie corporation, the largest of the many funds created out of the millions wrung out of the American steel workers by the late Andrew Carnegie, is openly out to buy up and corrupt, with the philosophy of class collaboration, the entire working class movement of the United States. It has already given to the Workers' Education \$25,000 at a clip for a publication fund, and its resources for the corruption of the first beginnings of a workers' education movement in the United States appear to be unlimited.

The consciousness of this fact hung like a shadow over the Third Annual Conference of teachers engaged in workers' education, called by Local 189 of the American Federation of Teachers, at Brookwood College, February 19, 1922. The agenda of the Conference seemed to promise a more or less platonic discussion of the relatively non-essential matters connected with workers' education. Questions of psychology, of the maintenance of interest, of the development of a demand for workers' education, of promotion and maintenance, of the use of the drama, etc.—such were the formal subjects scheduled for discussion. But, running thru every paper and every general discussion was always the underlying preoccupation with two fundamental questions: Why is workers' education? and how shall we resist the financial octopus that threatens to engulf it? The manner of deciding both of these questions will determine the fate of the movement for workers' education in America.

As I expressed it in a conversation with Lloyd M. Cosgrave, secretary of the Workers' Education Bureau, "Working class education in America has a great future but no past." It is, in fact, in its infancy. Hitherto the American labor movement "has always been interested in education, but it is only within recent years that it has become interested in its own education" and it has still to determine what character its own education shall take.

THE representation at the conference ranged all the way from university professors who wanted to extend the benefits of bourgeois "sweetness and light" to the working class, to coal miners who thought that the purpose of workers' education was to teach the workers how to get more of what they produced and take over the government and the mines.

Thus the field of workers' education in America is at present a battleground between these warring tendencies and one of the most heated discussions at the conference was precipitated when I attempted to define the class basis of workers' education. I pointed out that the university extensionists, the cultural philanthropists and the open shoppers were united in claiming that "the moment it (education) attempts to impose a certain curricula (sic) as representative of the needs of wage earners, it must defeat its own purposes and the interests of its supporters." (Law and Labor, Vol. 8, No. 1—Jan., 1926—Law and Labor is the legal organ of the open shoppers.) I tried further to point out that education, controlled by the workers, financed by the workers and permeated with their point of view was as necessary as were unions, controlled and financed by the workers and expressing their point of view or as newspapers so controlled and so financed.

This elementary concept, that all workers must hold, was attacked by people at the conference as "ugly, brutal and damnable." One speaker went so far as to declare, "Education for the workers is not education at all," and another: "I hate the phrase 'the workers.' I hate all generalizing phrases. I hate this phrase to get into our general vocabulary. They always tend to make us feel that the workers are a specialized class, that they are the other fellow."

THIS conflict, thru which British workers' education went a little earlier, is now being fought out ideologically in the infant education movement of the American workers.

But, before the conference was over, there was not the shadow of a doubt but that the majority of those present accept the view that workers' education must be controlled and financed by the workers and must serve their class interests, altho there was wide difference of opinion as to what these class interests really are.

But the question which dominated the conference and gave to the often futile discussions a vague background of historic bigness, was the question of how to defend workers' education from the enveloping movement which had been begun by the powerful Carnegie Corporation.

Again and again vague references were made to the question of "taking money from the enemies of labor," but always in such a way as to leave the uninitiated in doubt as to whether this was really a vital question that had to be decided then and there, or whether it was an abstract theoretical discussion on the principle of financing workers' education. But, as the conference continued, the increased repetition of these references, in always more and more definite forms, gradually made it clear that the speakers were bothered by a living reality, by a danger which threatened the very life of the labor movement and its educational activity.

At last, on the final day of the conference, the vague doubts took definite form and the names of Rockefeller and Carnegie were brought into the sessions and tied up with the question of financing working class education. Many of the delegates still did not believe that this could really be so. Paul W. Fuller, educational director of Sub District 2, United Mine Workers of America, declared: "If any workers' institution ever got such funds and if it got to District 2, you could preach the funeral of that organization as far as the miners are concerned." A delegate, active in workers' education in Germany, thought the whole thing was a joke and said: "I do not know how it is in America, but in Germany it is hopeless to try to get funds from employers for workers' education. We do not have to worry about that."

A SHORT time before closing time of the final scheduled session of the conference a resolution was finally introduced by the secretary of the conference in the name of a group of delegates, reading as follows:

"Resolved, That the members of the American Federation of Teachers, invited to attend the conference on workers' education, in session at Brookwood Feb. 22, 1926, go on record as opposing the acceptance, by agencies for workers' education, of money or other assistance from institutions such as the Carnegie Corporation, the General Education Board or other organizations fundamentally opposed to the interests of the working class."

This resolution at last convinced every delegate that they were faced, not with an abstract discussion on finance, but a concrete question of the fate of workers' education. A desultory discussion started, but it lacked only a few minutes for the final adjournment of the conference. On my motion, a special session was called for the afternoon of the same day to consider exclusively this resolution.

This special session was carried on under a changed atmosphere. The air seemed charged with intensity as the delegates began their first discussion of vital significance. A. J. Muste and Arthur Calhoun, who had attended the conference called by the Committee on Adult Education of the Carnegie Corporation, in an unofficial capacity, reported their observations on that conference. Calhoun described the plan of the Carnegie Corporation as "a universal and limitless scheme for bringing workers' education under their control." "They have, at their disposal, limitless financial means and are ready to subvert any workers' education movement that will accept their support."

QUESTIONING of Calhoun, Muste and Spencer Miller, secretary of



A Sketch from Life by a Worker Correspondent, A. L. Pollock.

the Workers' Education Bureau, revealed that the Carnegie Corporation had called a preliminary conference in Cleveland in October 1925, to consider the question of adult education, including workers' education; that then a committee of seven had been set up to call regional conferences. This committee of seven had summoned a conference on adult education in New York to which they invited various representatives of workers' education movements, such as: Fania Cohen of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, A. J. Muste and Arthur Calhoun of Brookwood and others. (The Workers' School was not among the invited guests.) Some of these declined to attend and others had attended to investigate the matter. They found there representatives of university extension movements, of the motion picture interests, of the museums, of the public lectures, of the naturalization and Americanization activities and various other elements interested in one or another form of adult "education."

Cross questioning revealed that the committee of seven, which called this conference, included none other than Spencer Miller, secretary of the Workers Education Bureau, himself. Thereupon, he took the floor and was subjected to a cross fire of questions as if he were on trial before the bar of justice (and perhaps more than he realized, he was on trial before the American labor movement.)

He admitted that the Carnegie Corporation had insinuated that it was ready to give money to the cause of workers' education and that his bureau had asked for \$25,000 in December which the Carnegie Corporation granted on Feb. 15 of this year. Then, one by one, the delegates expressed themselves, in no uncertain terms, as condemning the acceptance of this enormous sum from a source so hostile to labor. The opposition ranged all the way from that cautious

viewpoint that "the Workers Education Bureau would lose prestige among the workers if it did not keep its skirts clean," to the view that no working class movement can possibly accept finances from the Carnegie Corporation if there were not something wrong in the matter. "By accepting the money, the Workers Education Bureau has aided the Carnegie Corporation in its scheme to corrupt the workers' education movement and give that corporation prestige before the American working class," declared Calhoun. "We do not want the Workers Education Bureau to become financially independent of the labor movement," was Dana's point of view. David Saposs, one of the members of the Workers Education Bureau executive, revealed that he and Fania Cohen had voted against accepting the money, but that all the others, including James Maurer, (socialist) John Brophy, Matthew Woll and John P. Frey, had voted in favor. The eleven members of the executive include Jos. W. Perkins.

THE feeling of the conference was such that when I declared: "If the Carnegie Corporation has given us money for a publication fund, it should convince us that there is something wrong with the character of the publications that we have been putting out and it is time that we published some works of such character that only the workers could possibly support our publication activities," the applause was general.

The final result of the conference was a unanimous vote, 18 being recorded in favor and no one, not even Spencer Miller himself, voting against the resolution.

Thus, the conference marks a big step forward in the development of working class education, financed and controlled by the working class and giving their point of view and aiming to serve them in their struggle for emancipation.