
EDUCATION AND THE WAR

BY EARL BROWDER

THE war program has finally caught up with the schools. In the higher schools it has already made considerable headway. According to a recent issue of *School and Society*, "when measures for national defense were initiated in the late summer and early fall, universities and colleges throughout the United States promptly undertook their share." The professional journals have lost no time in examining "The Role of the Educator in the Present War Crisis," and determining the exact function of the teacher in the "defense" program. They have even coined their own special slogan: "Educational preparedness is a vital part of national preparedness." Indeed, one college president discovered that the war has given "new meaning and deepened dignity to our profession," and prayed that the educators would "not be found wanting!" (*School and Society*, December 21, 1940, p. 645.) To avoid such a possibility, he proposed that the educator assume the role of popularizing the "positive" aspects of democracy and reviving the gospel of sacrifice.

Here we have the immediate significance of the shameful spectacle now disgracing our educational sys-

tem. Under the pretext of combating subversive activities, the rulers of America are seeking to harness the schools to the war machine, a task which cannot be accomplished without the suppression of all that is progressive in the realm of education. In this respect, the events in the educational field are only a replica of what is happening in every sector of American life. If they appear to be more shocking, it is only because of the high regard Americans have for education and the general misconception that our schools are exempt from the vulgar influences of the more material realms of life.

Nevertheless, the simple fact remains that our schools are under assault both from within and without, an assault more sweeping and broader in the objectives than appears on the surface. Although it has already assumed serious proportions, it is only in its beginnings and promises to merge the separate and at present independent attacks into a nationwide and centrally directed drive against the whole educational system. The Rapp-Coudert "investigation" of the New York schools, allegedly for subversive activities, is only a sample of what

awaits the school system of the entire country.

If our educational system, which has never recovered from the effects of the 1929 crash, has displayed any hopeful, positive features during the past decade, it has been in the growth of teacher unionization, the vigor of the progressive student movement and the extension of progressive educational principles. But it is these very elements of vitality and growth that are the target of the present drive. Summarized more fully, the objectives of this drive may be stated as follows: (1) To destroy the teachers' unions which bring teachers within the orbit of the labor movement; (2) To remove the schools as centers of progressive, democratic education, preventing their participation in the people's movements; (3) To transform them into bulwarks of reaction and instruments of Wall Street's war program; (4) To beat down resistance to the plan to scrap higher education for the masses; (5) To abolish academic freedom and students' progressive movements; (6) To "coordinate" all textbooks in full harmony with the reactionary outlook of the National Association of Manufacturers.

As a matter of fact, the N.A.M. is assuming the leadership of this drive through its project to control all social science textbooks. Like the Rapp-Coudert Committee, and for the same reasons, it is anxious to purge the schools of even the mildest criticism of capital and its disastrous stewardship of American economy. Of course, to mask this effort to subvert the truth and enslave the mind, it pretends to be

combating subversive activities in the well-known style of the burglar who shouts, "Stop thief!"

The bigoted and benighted forces and vested interests that have rallied for this job, the sinister purposes behind it, the arbitrary, star-chamber procedure and the yellow-dog demands for union membership lists testify to the reactionary character of this drive. But even more than this, they testify to the reactionary character of the whole "defense" program which releases and multiplies, not democratic, creative energies, but reactionary persecution of all the vital, progressive forces and trends in our educational system. They only provide additional evidence, in the important field of education, of the enormous duplicity that characterizes the gap between the words and deeds of our ruling circles infected with the fever of "manifest destiny" and blind to everything but the conquest of world empire.

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Capitalism in its decline is especially hostile to popular, democratic culture; the only perspective it holds out for it is one of decay and death. The war program, which is itself only an expression of the mortal crisis of capitalism, has merely brought the matter to a head and accelerated the drive against popular education. This mood and temper of our ruling circles is best expressed by the New York Chamber of Commerce in its shameless declaration not so long ago that there are too many schools in America. The ruling class does not regard education as a development of the

intellectual powers of man, the enrichment of human personality. It measures the value of education purely by what it contributes to the maintenance of its rule, the extent to which it promotes its profits and policies; anything beyond that is evil, wasteful, useless, and dangerous, especially if it really educates the masses to the truth.

The great State of New York, the richest in the country, provides the most striking example of the combined effect of the all-devouring war program and the general decline of capitalism on the school system. Instead of extending the educational opportunities and facilities, the New York school system will drop two hundred and twenty-five classes starting with the spring term on February 3. The announcement of Dr. Campbell, Superintendent of Schools, which revealed this cultural retrogression, estimated that \$500,000 a year would thus be saved. He admitted that the outlook for prospective teachers in the New York school system was bleak and he expected that the time might come in the near future when even regular teachers would have to be placed on preference lists, something unprecedented in the history of the New York schools.

Dr. Campbell attempted to justify this reduction on the ground that for a decade the elementary schools have been losing an average of 20,000 pupils a year and that the decrease has now begun also in the academic high schools. The strong suggestion of a threat against the teachers in his statistics does not alter the basic significance of the consolidation of classes and reduc-

tion of teaching staff. Not only do his figures indicate an underlying process of social decline, but they are directly related to the war economy and are characteristic of its slashing of social expenditures. With schools overcrowded and with at least a third of them unfit for occupation, the war-economy gentlemen see no need for new classes and new teachers. Their slogan is "Save on schools and spend it for war." Youth that is being prepared for imperialist cannon-fodder obviously needs no culture!

Facts like these, of course, take the starch out of the exalted phrases and "noble sentiments" about preserving the freedom of the human spirit which are offered as the moral justification for support to Wall Street's war program. They expose the essential demagogy of a book-writing Vice President who only recently introduced a chapter in his volume on *The American Choice* with a sentence from Thomas Jefferson which reads: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Above all, these facts show the real purpose behind the investigation of alleged subversive activities by Communists in the schools.

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It is necessary to note that, in order to conceal this purpose, these "investigators" do not hesitate to misrepresent the position of the Communists in relation to the public schools. This misrepresentation is not due to the failure of the Communist Party to make its views

known. As far back as January, 1935, I expressed the official position of our Party in an article written for *The Social Frontier*. That article represented the basic position of our Party then and it represents our basic and official position today. In substance it declared: The educational system is involved in the general crisis of capitalism. Progressive educators must join in the fight against fascism and cultural reaction. In this way, by tying up with the labor movement and appealing to the masses, they can further their struggle for progressive teaching and combat reaction inside the schools which is part of the general social struggle. But the school is not the place where fundamental political questions will be answered and it certainly is not the place where the basic issues of the class struggle will be resolved. The Communist Party merely asks the educators to join in the fight against cultural reaction, but as far as its fundamental revolutionary outlook is concerned, "the Communist Party has its own educational work, its own educational institutions, to conduct this specific task of indoctrination, and does not look toward any other body to do it."

What does this position show? To anyone not merely looking for pretexts for persecution but interested in establishing the truth, it shows that the Communist Party does not have a conspiratorial attitude toward the schools. It merely establishes the well-known fact that the school is part of society and its social struggles and that progress must be defended in the educational field as in every field. It shows fur-

ther that Communists maintain that the social issues will be decided in life, in the economic and political arenas, that is, outside the classroom. It starts from the premise that the proletariat is the social class that will lead the struggle for socialism, and that the main task of Communists as the most advanced section of the proletariat is to play a leading role in uniting the working class in defense of its economic and political interests and in the struggle to abolish exploitation and oppression. On this basis, it draws the general conclusion that the working class will be educated and will come to understand the correctness of the Communist program and the need for socialism only in the course of its practical struggle in defense of its daily needs. Finally, it establishes the principle that the Communists who owe their advanced position to the teachings of Marxism-Leninism can master these teachings only with the help of their own Marxist-Leninist educational institutions.

The significant thing about this whole position, which can be found outlined again and again in all the basic writings of Marxism-Leninism, is that it stakes its acceptance on publicly verifiable facts; it trusts its fate to the living experience of millions of people, submitting to the most inexorable of all tests, the final judgment of the masses based on the bitter experience of life. The Communists derive their strength from objective truth, and this truth is public, wide open, reproduced a million times over in the life of every toiler, every human being. It is grounded in the material, objec-

tive conditions of society, and it is these conditions, in the last analysis, that assert themselves with all the overriding force of a law of nature.

Marxism simply says that the people can get along better without capitalists, landlords and exploiters; that all their troubles flow from the system of capitalist private property and production for profit; and that if they want a peaceful, happy and prosperous life, they will have to change the system. Indeed, all the material and social prerequisites for such a change have long been at hand, and this change can no more be prevented, once the majority of people are ready to make it, than darkness can be kept from being dispelled by the sun.

The Rapp-Coudert Committee may never know it, but the conditions produced by the capitalist "way of life" are the worst offenders against the best laid plans of the capitalist ruling class. If Marxist ideas take hold of the people, it is because these conditions confirm the correctness of the Marxist analysis and the necessity of the Communist program. The whole Rapp-Coudert falsification of the Communist position is based on a contempt for the people and for the truth and the very possibility of objective knowledge. It rests on the cynical assumption that the masses can be indoctrinated with any kind of notions regardless of their merit or objective truth. Such an assumption is appalling in its implications. Indeed, only a ruling class which knows that the ideas it seeks to indoctrinate have nothing to do with the truth can pretend that the people will keep on absorbing any ideas

regardless of whether they stand the test of thought and experience.

Anyone who is really serious about freedom of the human mind must permit the truth to prevail whether he likes it or not. He must follow the truth wherever its conclusions may lead, regardless of vested interests. That is the spirit of objective science; and that is the theoretical and practical substance of any position that professes to adhere to Jefferson's oath of "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." In that case, however, such a person must either disprove the Communist position on its merits or cease posing before the world as a champion of the liberty of the human spirit.

Needless to say, this is the last thing the reactionary "investigators" of alleged Communist activity in the schools are willing to do. Their task is of a different order, and they operate on a different plane than that of inquiring into the merit or truth of Marxism-Leninism.

They are so little concerned with the merits of anyone's position that they regard everyone as a Communist, regardless of his adherence to Marxism-Leninism, as long as he displays even the shadow of a progressive idea. The attack against social science textbooks, for example, an attack which has continued since the middle of 1939, is not a drive against Communist textbooks. There are no Communist textbooks in the public school system, regrettably; let us not forget that. The texts that have been under fire are written by people, some of whom have themselves been out-Red-baiting the Red-baiters. Despite this, they have

not been able to save themselves from the onslaught of reaction, and by their own Red-baiting have only helped to feed the attack against the underlying principle of progressive thought which is the object of the drive. This basic principle was summarized quite clearly, even if not exhaustively, in an editorial in the railroad workers' paper, *Labor*, in its issue of September 10, 1940. It said:

"To put it bluntly, children must not be permitted to discover that our own national income is so distributed that millions starve while a few indulge in profligate spending, and that one reason labor unions are formed is to assist in righting this lamentable condition. To give the boys and girls these facts 'might warp their minds. . . .'"

This campaign against even mildly liberal textbooks was originally launched by Blanton, Martin Dies' colleague from Texas, in 1934, when, as a member of the House Committee on District of Columbia

Affairs, he waged a fight against a book by Professor George Counts. He made life so miserable for Counts that the latter began a steady retreat, and ended up virtually an intellectual prisoner of Dies, capitulating completely and making his peace with the powers that be. That is far from an edifying spectacle, but it demonstrates how reaction works, breaking down character and step by step driving people into the swamp.

There can be no doubt that the drive of reaction against the educational system has its own logic and those that lend themselves to it, even in the slightest way, will find out only too soon they have themselves become its victims. Wall Street's war program is the inexorable foe of everything progressive in the educational field. Only the united resistance of labor and all true friends of democracy can save the educational heritage which the American people fought so long to build up.