

Is American Labor Shortchanged in Social Studies Classes?

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SOME twenty-four years ago, the late labor leader, Phillip Murray, complained "... that schools go on their merry way teaching so-called history and so-called social studies hardly even recognizing the existence of the labor movement or labor management relations." As recently as seven years ago a study of textbook treatment of labor had concluded, "Not a single labor topic, except industrial vs. craft unions, was adequately described or explained in the majority of the textbooks."

My own current study (*The American Labor Movement in Modern History and Government Textbooks*. Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers Curricular Viewpoints Series) was an attempt to determine whether now, in the 1970's, when organized labor is one of the major institutions in American society, its history, procedures, and purposes were "adequately described or explained in the majority of the textbooks."

The central question is: Are American

students, most of whom enter the labor force when they graduate from high school, being taught about what it means to be an employee? Are they learning what the responsibilities, regulations, problems, rights, and benefits are of being a wage or salary earner? Are they acquiring a better understanding of the heritage of organized labor, of the "... conditions which prompted its rise and frequent eruptions, the men, principles, and tactics that guided (or misled) it, and the ideology and weapons employed to check, frustrate, or destroy its effectiveness," as Professor Leon Litwack observed? Certainly the texts should offer a fairly comprehensive history of the American labor movement which would show students that the eco-

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Schools generally have failed in teaching labor's story. A way must be found to view the role of the laboring man and woman and of their major institution—their union.

conomic gains of the American worker today did not come easily and that many of them were realized at a great sacrifice of lives and property.

The criteria used for evaluating the 28 history and government textbooks in my survey were their treatment of (a) labor history and (b) collective bargaining and labor disputes. I found that, while the texts have made considerable progress since Will Scoggins' seminal study in 1966 (*Labor in Learning: Public School Treatment of the World of Work*. Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California), too many of them still shortchange labor in the American experience, past and present. Only four texts among the twenty

history volumes could be rated "superior" in a rating scale of "poor," "fair," "good," "excellent," and "superior." Two of the government texts among a total of eight were rated "superior." This clearly suggests that editors and publishers have a long road to travel in this connection.

Getting the Labor Story into Schools

Just how much revision and addition will take place in future editions will largely be determined by how much interest and pressure are brought to bear both by labor itself and by the educators in the schools. What surely brought about the turn-around in the treatment of black history in the textbooks was the work of Black-American organizations and the decision makers in the schools. Labor leadership has always been distant about getting its story into the schools. Unlike business, which has always

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"Bell-time," a scene from New England factory life, appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, July 25, 1868.

offered the schools and teachers all kinds of materials that teach the "benefits" as well as the romanticized history of big business in American life, the labor union education departments have remained invisible. Outside of a few large urban school districts, boards of education throughout the nation are dominated by businessmen and professional people with practically no labor leaders serving. This situation plays no small part in explaining labor's continuing invisibility in the classroom.

Because the textbook is generally the classroom "Bible" for a great majority of classroom teachers of social studies, how much is taught about any given topic as well as the teaching strategy utilized are very much determined by the textbook used in the course. There is, however, an approach that is open to curriculum-makers and teachers who recognize the need for vastly greater input for acquainting our students with the world of work in American life and society. That approach is the use of supplementary audiovisual materials and paperback source readings dealing with labor that are available now in the educational marketplace. Use of such materials can be made in terms of enrichment of present textbooks or they can stand on their own feet in a mini-course of 4-6 weeks which is exclusively a "course" on some dimension of the labor movement. This latter approach gives labor a place in the sun in the curriculum. Beyond that, bringing labor people into the classroom—ranging from union officials to union stewards—and taking field trips to community plants, would bring labor's "story" home to the students.

Teachers Know Little About Labor

Finally, there is the problem (which was so true for so long in connection with the teaching of Black-American history) that few teachers have themselves been taught much about labor in their own education from high school through college. Thus their familiarity with the "facts" let alone with the bibliography of labor is unquestionably minimal. Under the circumstances, it would fulfill a compelling need for school districts to offer in-ser-

vice courses on the content as well as the teaching strategies of labor. At some point the schools and the education departments of the local as well as the national labor unions will have to come together and work cooperatively to produce a labor education program worthy of the name. Once this happens, the educational publishers will come through with more and much better materials. However, I must emphasize that there is presently available an impressive list of school labor materials for those school people who want to move *now* in the direction of meeting the need for labor education in the classroom.

In my own judgment, the American world of work is too much a part of the life of this country for the schools to be short-changing the constituency, let alone the publishers who, after all, follow and do not lead in matters of what is taught. The responsibility of leadership rests with the educators.

The 43rd American Assembly, Columbia University, met at Arden House, Harriman, New York, in November 1973 and devoted its discussion to the topic of "The Changing World of Work." The concern of the participants was the matter of work and how it relates to increased or decreased satisfaction with life, both on and off the job. "Our lives are organized around our jobs. The work ethic is deeply imbedded in our cultural values. For Americans, it means a commitment to productive labor, involving security, independence, self-esteem, and dignity." The report goes on to comment that "The challenge now is for labor and management to work at resolving the issues of the work place in a nonadversary atmosphere, with a goal of improving the quality of working life."

This recognition of one of the most compelling issues of our time simply cannot be ignored by one of America's most important agencies for social change—the schools. The way to begin is to give our youth the background and perspective of the role of the laboring man and woman and of their major institution, their union. Not to do so and not to do it now shortchanges the American people more than it shortchanges *their* labor movement. □

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