

SCHOOLS TODAY

The Socialist view of a prominent current question

INTRODUCTION

It can confidently be said that in recent years education has been more often and more widely discussed than at any time since the public education system began. There is the perennial question of the “eleven-plus” and the clamour for “equality of opportunity”; there are the recurrent alarms about illiteracy, delinquency and blackboard jungles. At the same time, springing up in every city are the great glass-walled hives which are the new schools of the nineteen-fifties, visible symbols of changes which have taken and are taking place.

Most of all today there is the insistence that our school system must be revised to meet the needs of a technological age. Technical schools, which only twenty years ago were scattered on the fringe of the system, now appear more and more as the dominant units, while “academic” education with its emphasis on words and humanistic knowledge is plainly, today, a drug on the labour market.

The demand for more technical education means far more than merely extending the teaching of science and mathematics in schools. It requires greater expenditure by the State on science laboratories, workshops, equipment, and specialists' salaries. It involves the question of whether the education system as a whole is efficiently organized to produce enough technically-trained people; it has been noted, for example, that both America and Russia have many more science graduates per head of the population than this country, and that neither of those countries has a system of early selection.

The various opinions on these matters, since they are opinions as to what government policy should be, are expressed as political views. Thus, the Labour Party proposes to abolish the “eleven-plus” examination and replace selective secondary education with “comprehensive” schools. Others would rather continue multiplying the technical schools and aim at building-up the secondary moderns and re-orientating the grammar and public schools as instruments of high-grade scientific education.

All of these proposals are concerned with enabling British capitalism to compete and hold its own against other nations in an age of new industrial techniques. The Socialist standpoint, however, is an entirely different one. Its concern is not the employing class's problems of production, but the problems which are posed for the great mass of people by capitalism itself: wars, crises and depressions, poverty, and its innumerable consequences.

While the fundamental value of education is undeniable, the fact remains that schooling under capitalism is scarcely education at all, but the training of young people in the skills and disciplines the system requires. Real education, as it is expressed in such terms as Sir Percy Nunn's “to help boys and girls to achieve the highest degree of individual development of which they are capable,” is a question not of schools, but of society.

How it *can* be achieved, it is the purpose of this pamphlet to show.

Note - It should be appreciated that the scope of this pamphlet is the educational system of England and Wales, and that the Scottish organization differs in several particulars. The general Socialist attitude to capitalist education systems applies equally to Scotland, and elsewhere.

WHAT IS EDUCATION?

To say that education under capitalism is education for capitalism is not to accuse the ruling class of conspiracy. All education is the process of adapting and equipping children for the world in which they live: implanting morality, fostering attitudes and habits, teaching the basic skills which that world requires. Primitive peoples educate their children functionally, having them learn the facts of physical life, the laws of social life and the techniques of economic life from direct contact. Civilized systems are more complex, less direct, but just as functional.

A single example may show what is meant. A hundred years ago Denmark had a public-school system which aimed at producing gentlemen-farmers; its reverences were for the land and the humanities. Eighty years ago the German states next door became a single nation-state, swelling and stiffening with aggressive nationalism, In a short space of years, the Danish system changed to meet the new situation; its headmasters became Kaptains, its tone loudly patriotic.

An education works like that, aiming at no more and no less than to fit the young to support the society in which they live. Public education as we understand it has developed with industrialism in the last two hundred years. It is true, of course, that schools and universities were there for the few before the Industrial Revolution, and likely that there was at all times a good deal of education through the family, the Church, and apprenticeship to trades. Organized elementary schooling, however, was a product of capitalism; and, as the nineteenth century advanced, appeared more and more an essential concomitant to it.

Various trends went to the early shaping of the educational system in Britain. One was fear: "the desire of the upper and middle classes to establish social discipline among the poor." as Miss M. G. Jones puts it in her history, *The Charity School Movement*. Another, to give credit where it is due, was humanitarianism; yet another, the nineteenth-century reverence for knowledge. The dominant force, however, was simple economic necessity. The age of steam machinery had to have workmen who were educated in some degree. In his *Short History of English Education*, H. C. Barnard writes:

"There were endless new posts to be filled in industry . . . Thus even the people who did not approve of social and political equality - e.g., the opponents of the movement which led to the Reform Bill of 1832 - did not necessarily object to giving the workers some specialised technical education which would make them more effective in industry."

It was estimated in 1850 that eight million, or just under a third of the population of Britain could neither read nor write. The first State grant for schools was made in 1833, to be followed by a series of developments leading to the Education Act of 1870. Under this Act, local "school boards" had to see that schools were provided, and were empowered to make attendance between five and twelve compulsory. Here, again, though such legislation obviously was inevitable, when it came there was a special stimulus: the spectacular - and threatening - advances which Prussia had made in industry and commerce and her success in the war with France, which were attributed largely to her educational system.

The subsequent Education Acts of the nineteenth century and of 1902 and 1918 first consolidated, then re-organized, and finally co-ordinated State education. The 1918 Act did in fact empower and recommend local authorities to extend the leaving age to fifteen, but none was known to do so: again, the question of "education economies" is no new one. Educational reform has always been directed by the needs of major industry and resisted by the small businessmen on the town councils, who in this case wanted to lose neither their seats by a rise in the rates nor their cheap labour by a rise in the school-leaving age.

Education had become part of everybody's life. What had it achieved? For the employing class, it provided an ordered supply of clerks, mechanics and shopgirls who could add figures and had been taught honesty and obedience. It also gave a ready-made empire to the new lords of the popular press. To the working class it gave the most vital thing of all - the key to knowledge. What was not shown was how to use it.

THE SCHOOLS TO-DAY

Since the 1944 Education Act was given effect, schooling after eleven has been categorized into grammar, technical and "modern." Up to eleven it is "primary" - that is, preliminary to the selection by examination for the three types of secondary school. About seven-tenths of the child population of this country receives "secondary modern" education; the distribution of the remainder varies from area to area, with a higher proportion of technical schools in the towns.

The secondary modern school is the lowest, most prolific unit in the State education system. The scope of this kind of elementary education has widened tremendously in recent years. Apart from what is now accepted as the ordinary classroom curriculum of English, mathematics, history, science, geography, and so on, there are rooms and teachers for art, handicrafts, woodwork, metalwork, plastics, gardening, housecraft and needlework; courses in current affairs; facilities for social activities, films, games and physical exercises. Many secondary modern schools have "extended courses," which are means for children to stay until they are sixteen and take suitable examinations.

This change in the content of popular education is indisputably good for those who receive it. It has other implications which should be seen, however. One is the illusion of equality it creates. Under the 1944 Act's slogan "secondary education for all," secondary modern schools have set out largely to imitate and even rival the grammar schools in externals and amenities. The common justification of this policy is that it takes away children's feelings of failure and inferiority at not having gone to grammar or technical schools. That may be so, but in a wider view it means fostering a belief that the one kind of schooling is as good as the other. It is not, and cannot be when in fact one exists to produce lower - and the other higher - grade workers. The differences are created not by schools, but by society.

From another point of view, the changes in schooling reflect changed capitalist needs. Take, for example, the girl learning cookery and home management in the housecraft room of a modern secondary school. She has a trained instructor and is taught in a room equipped with electric cookers, washing machines, refrigerators and shiny tools. She is being educated in two ways. First, in necessary skills which her grandmother learned "in service" or in the home; which have disappeared as the nature of both upper-class and working-class homes has altered. And second, she is being educated as a consumer, a future buyer in the market for new kinds of domestic goods. She grows up to regard electric labour-savers as part of her way of life.

In spite of the continued boasts about the tremendous strides in individual development and the claims of human well-being the capitalist educational system has not solved the problem of backwardness in reading and associated subjects. Despite the grandiose educational schemes there still remains a large number of children whose standard of reading is poor. This is primarily due to the environment in which working class children are forced to live. It also seems clear that while educational progress has concentrated on the potential technicians and specialists and on meeting new aspects of economic life, the simplest and greatest need of the great majority has been left behind.

THE “ELEVEN PLUS”

The selective examination of children for secondary schools has, particularly in recent years, been a subject of continual controversy. The reasons are not difficult to see. Competition of any kind tends to inspire jealousy and resentment, and scholarships to grammar and technical schools mean opportunities to train for better-paid and better-esteemed jobs.

The examination actually is the culmination of a selective process which begins as early as possible -generally at seven or eight years. Practically all infant and junior schools use the “streaming” method, by which children are graded according to ability as A, B and C. “A's” are feasible scholarship winners; “C's” the sub-standard ones, the slow, recalcitrant and defective. The emphasis and the degree of attention to each within this grading system depends on the individual primary school. It is fair to say, however, that the “eleven-plus” dominates other things in most schools, and some are concerned - often because of neighbourhood pressures - simply with a reputation for scholarship successes.

Much of the anxiety over scholarships comes from parents' desire to see their children have the best conditions possible. Much of it also comes, however, from motives of snobbery and the desire for superiority. In an age when “standards of living” are equated with possessions and status, the child's prowess is all too often a matter of gaining prestige for the parents. That kind of anxiety is as open to exploitation in this as in any other field; there are thriving enterprises in “home study courses” for children and pseudo-educational books that hardly add dignity to education.

The question of what is actually proved by intelligence tests and examinations is not so important as may be thought. In general, they discover what they seek: the children who are best suited for grammar - and technical-school training, it is doubtful whether any alternative method of selection would produce substantially different results, and some which have been suggested - selection on teachers' recommendation, for example - would probably cause far more resentment than the present examination. The limiting factor is always the number of places available, and this varies greatly from area to area.

The real trouble is not the “eleven-plus,” but the social stratification it reflects. The continual creaming-off process which goes on at every stage of the educational system is capitalism's necessary search for officers and N.C.O.s in the wage-earning army. Indeed, the grading of schoolchildren is almost an assignation of them to their future stations in life. The grading and selection continue after eleven; ability groups in the secondary modern school may range from “A” to “E.” and there are subsidiary examinations and courses of all kinds to ensure that industry gets just what it wants.

The defence of the selection system is that it does override economic differences; that, for example, entry to the grammar schools is now a question of ability when formerly it depended simply on paying the fees. That is only superficially true. There are still children who do not enter the “eleven-plus” because their parents fear the incidental expenses of a grammar school, or because they are needed as wage-earners at the earliest possible time. More important, however, is the simple fact that school ability has, like size and health, a close relationship with good environment. Writing of backward children in *New Trends in English Education* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), M. D. Clarke says: -

“Experience has shown that many of these children are gravely handicapped by their social background, by emotional problems, disturbed homes, poor physique, and these factors have serious effects on the development of their intelligence.”

The trend is still for grammar-school children to come from the better-to-do homes, where there are books, privacy and parental interest.

One other aspect should be mentioned. It used to be assumed that “brains” were a monopoly of the ruling class, and that the workers could expect no change for that reason alone. Now, when the State is combing the working class for potential experts to cope with new marvels and run an increasingly complex society, it can be assumed that at least one social myth has been accounted for.

THE COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

The tripartite system of grammar, technical and modern schools is not laid down by law. It has grown partly from tradition, partly because it was the most convenient way after the war of administering the 1944 Act. There are about 50,000 children, however (about 2.5 per cent. of the secondary school population) who go to none of the three, but to comprehensive schools. Some of these are experimental; others are in areas like London and Coventry where the authorities have a special liking for them.

The comprehensive school implies the abolition of the "eleven-plus." Without examination, all children of all grades go straight from their primary schools to the comprehensive school. The aim is to provide secondary education facilities of all kinds within one school, without segregation. The schools are necessarily large ones, their number ranging from six or seven hundred to 1,500 or more, and through their all-level courses cater for children of ages from 11 to 18.

The Labour Party's support for the idea of comprehensive schools is of some years' standing, and in *Learning to Live*, the statement of educational policy published in June, 1958, it has now committed itself to reforming education in this direction: "Labour therefore proposes to establish comprehensive secondary education and to end segregation at '11-plus.' This is an objective to be pursued both in the first five-year period and beyond." This is looked upon by both supporters and opponents as a radical departure from the "eleven-plus" system. In fact, it is a further development of the existing selection methods, and aims not to jettison but to co-ordinate them and give greater flexibility and efficiency to the entire system.

Learning to Live makes this quite clear. Its opening section on comprehensive schools is headed "True Selection," and in pointing out that selection at eleven is too rigid a method names the necessity for "real and continuing selection." Under the one roof of the comprehensive school, the grading is steeper, but continual interchange is possible. Thus, "creaming-off" is brought to its most effective point. In the advanced courses the unlikely prospects can be directed elsewhere, while "late developers" from the lower sections can readily be promoted to ensure that only the best material is available where it is wanted.

In this as in many other ways, the Labour Party's proposal for "equality" turns out only to be a re-organization of inequality. Its tradition has rapidly become to apply sweeping plans for the smoother running of capitalism - nationalized industries, social insurance: this is an addition to them. The owners of British industry, urgently requiring more and more science graduates and technical workers of all kinds, can only look to the national education system for their supply. The present methods of selection and training are, by everyone's account, inadequate to meet this need, and the comprehensive school aims to bring them up to date. It is simply the division of labour extended a little further into everyone's life.

There has been some surprise that the plan for comprehensive secondary education does not include the public schools. Here, the Labour policy-makers show a more realistic attitude than many of their supporters, who want these schools either abolished or "made democratic." The Labour Party rejected the recommendation of the 1942 Fleming Committee to open a limited number of public-school places to children from State primary schools. The State educational system, comprehensive or otherwise, is a system for the compulsory schooling of the working class at all levels. The public schools have a quite separate function; they are to teach members of the ruling class to be ruling-class. To interfere with this, the class division of society would be (in the words of *Learning to Live*) "an unjustifiable invasion of liberty."

Labour should know, in any case, the value of the public schools to capitalism. Its leadership today has a large proportion of public-school men. They include Albu, Crossman, Wedgwood Benn, Dalton, de Freitas, Gaitskell, Greenwood, the two Mallalieu, Noel-Baker, Mayhew, Mitcheson, J. R. Parker, Phillips Price, Shawcross, Soskice, Michael Stewart, Strachey, Strauss, Swingler, Osborne, and very many more.

TEACHERS

The extension of secondary education and the great increase in the number of schoolchildren, due to the post-war rise in the birth-rate, has brought a shortage of teachers in recent years. For this reason they have been able to obtain pay rises without much difficulty, and most specialist posts - for science teachers in particular - carry inducements in the form of extra allowances. A teacher's maximum salary today is £900 a year, and the allowances for special posts and heads of departments range from £75 to £200 a year; a university degree also means additional pay. A five per cent increase operated in January 1959.

A teacher's training ordinarily lasts two years at present; in 1962 it is to be increased to three. Some special courses for graduates, men holding technical qualifications or older people wishing to become teachers take only one year, however. Normally the potential teacher goes straight from school to a training college at eighteen and returns to school as a certificated teacher at twenty. Retirement is after forty years' service, though teachers due to retire at sixty may and do apply to continue till sixty-five.

Most teachers belong to one of the teachers' organizations – the National Association of Schoolmasters, the National Union of Woman Teachers, or the National Union of Teachers. Active support for them on the whole is weak, however; it is a sad but true fact that the majority regard their membership as necessary only because of the legal aid available when there are mishaps. These organizations are not professional bodies in the sense of, say, the British Medical Association, and the standards of professional conduct that they lay down for teachers' protection are really unenforceable. Nor, on the other hand, do they regard themselves as trade unions. The National Union of Teachers, the largest of them, acts to a large extent as liaison between the education authorities and the teachers themselves.

The individual teacher can have considerable personal influence. He (or she) can communicate his own attitudes and enthusiasms, and make learning attractive or wearisome. It is clear that the only people who ought to do a job of this kind are those who want to, and equally clear that this cannot happen in a world like ours. Many arts graduates become teachers today simply because there is almost no other job open to them: what else can be done with a degree in literature or history? Many are people who were pushed in by their parents to a respectable job with long holidays. And many, in a time of educational expansion, are people to whom it is a career as would be commerce or politics, lifting themselves on the backs.

That is not to denigrate teachers, but to point out that they are workpeople in a far-from ideal world. Some are very good, and some are very bad; some do wonderful things for children, with incredibly poor facilities (as well as the glittering comprehensive palaces, there are still many schools which are slums). What a teacher cannot do is alter the educational system. Moreover, one of the employing authorities' tactics in the last few years has been to offer teachers what appears as a stake in the system by creating inequalities of pay and status.

The extension of secondary education has had largely this kind of backing. Headmasters, for example, gain in pay by having children stay at school after fifteen, and special courses usually carry increased allowances for teachers who might otherwise doubt the value of it all. The granting of "special responsibility" allowances since 1948 has, indeed, been part of a policy of "divide and rule" which has probably had the effect of minimizing teachers' efforts either to improve their own conditions or to unite about educational matters.

Without doubt there are many things teachers could do as regards their conditions, by looking beyond the differences created among them and seeing themselves simply as people who go to work together and have a common interest. If their conditions appear fairly favourable at the moment, a trade depression could quickly lead to "education economies" involving them: it happened in the nineteen-twenties. In a wider view questions about teachers and their place in education are aspects of larger social questions – fundamentally, of the organization of society itself.

RELIGION IN SCHOOL

So much talk about educational developments must convey to many people that better kinds of knowledge are taught today in schools. In many ways, they are; in one important respect, however, progress has gone not forward but backward. Before the 1944 Education Act, religious teaching in schools was optional and undefined; now, it has a stronger footing than at any time since the public education system began.

The parliamentary White Paper *Educational Reconstruction*, published in 1943, spoke of “a very general wish, not confined to representatives of the Churches, that religious education should be given a more defined place in the life and work of the schools.” The 1944 Act met this “general wish” by making daily religious worship compulsory and laying down that there should be two periods a week of religious instruction for every child - as much, that is, as any school subject except English and mathematics. Religion is, in fact, the only subject in the school curriculum to which is attached a statutory compulsion to teach it.

For most school subjects the syllabuses are prepared by specialist teachers or by the Head teachers. Thus, there may be quite wide differences from school to school in what is actually taught in some subjects: geography, for example, or science. Religious instruction is again unique in having to be given from approved national or regional syllabuses which are prepared by committees representing the education authorities, the Church of England and other religious denominations.

The “conscience clause” enabling children to be withdrawn at their parents' wish remains, but is rarely invoked because understandably few people wish their children to be singled out. This also has been made more difficult. Under former Acts any religious instruction had to be given at the beginning or end of the school day to facilitate withdrawal; that requirement has been wiped out.

It is even rarer for teachers to withdraw, though the 1944 Act lays down that no teacher shall suffer any penalty or disability if he chooses not to teach religion and not to attend religious worship. This means very little in practice. A non-religious teacher has no chance of becoming a Head, because he cannot conduct religious assemblies, and his chances of promotion generally are diminished. Victimization does take place, but it is always difficult to prove because the proof required is not of other people's actions, but of other people's motives.

The training of teachers also is governed by religion to a considerable extent. Originally, the training colleges were run almost exclusively by religious bodies. Now, many are in the hands of local education authorities, but a large number are still church-administered and, since 1944, the other ones have had to concede some of their secular character by arranging courses for specialists in religious teaching.

Thus, after nearly ninety years of public elementary education and two hundred years of modern science, religion has tightened its grasp on the young. It has, indeed, as good a grasp as it could wish, outside Catholic countries. The effects of the first ten years are worth noting, however. The 1944 Act became operative in 1948, so that a whole generation of children now has passed through the schools. So far from a lessening of crime, immorality and the other things supposed to have been caused by the absence of proper religious teaching, there has recently been much concern about their increase among young people: another practical test of Christian claims.

Any student of society knows, of course, that these things have nothing to do with religion. The facts are that the churches want control of people's., -especially young people's - minds, and the State has given it to them because religion is the oldest and best means of securing a submissive working class.

THE SOCIAL PROBLEM

The terms “capitalism” and “working class” have been used several times in the preceding pages. It is time now to say what they mean, and refer to the social context in which education is being examined.

The basic, vital function of all societies is production. What distinguishes one form of society from another is the relationship between men and the means of production. In primitive communities they belong, such as they are, to everyone; in more complex societies there is class ownership which directs the whole course of man's productive activities and the other activities resulting from them.

In capitalism, the social form of the modern world, the means of production - the land, the factories and sources of power, the machinery, and everything auxiliary to them - are owned by perhaps 10 per cent. of the population of the developed countries. The nine-tenths who remain without ownership live, therefore, by being wage-workers, all more or less poorly paid: they are the working class. There can be no identity of interest between the two groups; under this ownership system the one class is always exploited by the other. All production is carried on for, and all social activity is contributory to, the motive of sale for profit.

On this basis, the civilization of the twentieth century has developed. With it have also developed the problems which are direct consequences of the universal production of goods for sale. The wars which result from the competition of capitalist nations in the world's markets, and the special problem which a particular weapon of war may impose; the economic crises which recur uncontrollably; the poverty and insecurity from which the wage-earning class is never free; the consequences of poverty in bad housing, ill-health, crime and many other evils.

All social and economic problems must therefore be related to the organization of society. Reformers in all fields, including education, fail to understand this and attempt to deal with the effects without touching the social causes. Often, too, the problems are dealt with from the point of view of what is good for “industry” or “the nation.” - that is, the owning class in the nation. What should really be judged is the capitalist system from the viewpoint of the great majority. Human society exists for the satisfaction of human needs, yet capitalism fails to provide a satisfactory life for most people living in it.

The inequalities which are reflected and developed in the educational system are necessary factors in capitalist society. All people going to work for wages are selling their labour-power; the price of this depends, as does the price of every other commodity, on the labour that went into its making. Thus, a professional person or a skilled technician's labour-power (subject, of course, to market conditions) commands a relatively high price because it embodies other people's skilled labour in education and training; an unskilled workman's labour-power, on the other hand, has only a low price because it is essentially a cheap product.

From this economic point of view, the school under capitalism resembles a factory in which materials are tested, classified and put through processes which will mould them into finished products for the market ranging from the cheap, mass-produced to the costlier high-grade article. In practice it cannot fortunately, be as mechanistic as that because the material is human, but the view is not far removed from the capitalist one. The owning class at times is prepared to pay heavily and foster education to have its own requirements met; at other times and when there are other priorities, the education system may be subject to abridgements and economies.

The granting of education and facilities for learning to the working class, even though it is for someone else's reasons, is of immense value. Within the framework of elementary education there have been many improvements and additional benefits over the years. These, however, have resulted from the increased complexity of capitalism that has demanded more knowledge and more economic participation from even the least skilled worker, and so necessitated a widening of his education.

True education, the developing of each individual towards his own well-being and that of society, has not yet been attempted. What is necessary for it is the re-organization not of schools, but of society.

SOCIALISM AND EDUCATION

The aim of Socialists is to bring into being a society in which not only will the problems and privations of the present-day world be absent, but every person will lead a free and satisfying life. What is wrong with our society is its basic condition of ownership by a class; the answer, therefore, is to establish a new social system based on the ownership by everybody of all the means of production.

Such a society has not yet existed, though there has been much confusion about it because of the play with the word "Socialism" made by reformers, Labour and social-democratic parties, and admirers of Russian State capitalism. Socialism means that all people will have the same relationship to the means of production. Everyone will take part as he is able, in the necessary work of society; there will be no money, and everyone will have free access – will, in fact, own - all that is produced.

Thus, there will be neither exploitation nor competition, and social activity will take new forms when no person is compelled to serve another's interests. For the first time, there will be true education. Certainly there will be no segregation or selection. There will be the best possible facilities, unrestricted by money considerations, for those who wish to have specialized knowledge or skills, and the possession of special knowledge will have no implication of superior status. Each person will follow his own bent and make his own contribution to society, and the reward will be not individual, but social: a good world to live in.

Children's education will be shaped, as it has always been, by the needs society discovers. For this reason, its exact form cannot be predicted. New social values, the organization of the home and the family, the different nature of towns and cities, will all bear upon it. Possibly there may be no schools at all for young children: letters and simple skills may be learned at home and the techniques of social life learned through play. If, on the other hand, schools are found necessary, their concern will be for children to learn to live not as wage-earners, but as human beings. And it is this, the motive and not the form, that is the important thing.

Can a society like this be achieved? Indeed it can. The conditions needed for its establishment are with us now: the development of the means and methods of production that could create abundance if the profit motive did not stand in the way. All that is lacking is people to bring it to being. Thus, the concern of Socialists under capitalism is education of a different kind - showing the facts about capitalism, and the only answer to the problems which it causes. The beginning of this kind of education is the realization that capitalism's educational systems must, because of what they are, hide the facts and direct attention away from the answer.

Here, then, is the great need of today: people to make a different world. People, that is, who have looked at capitalism critically - as one aspect of it has been looked at critically in this pamphlet - and seen that it has long ceased to be useful to man, and that Socialism is wanted *now*.