

Public Education on Trial

SOCIAL situations are never simple, and in wartime nothing is simple, save emotion. The educational conditions leading up to the dismissal of three teachers in a New York high school afford no exception to this statement. Guidance through the maze may be had, however, by reviewing the matter as a culmination of the established and traditional relationship of official superiors and inferiors in the school system, and as evidence of a sharp clash between two opposed social and educational philosophies. But since these causes have been exasperated by war conditions and war psychology, it is first necessary to say something about the "loyalty" aspect of the matter.

Almost up to the time of the meeting at which the men were dismissed, a reader of at least the editorial columns of the newspapers would have derived the impression that the teachers were accused of disloyalty of some degree or other. But by the time of the final meeting the prosecution had settled on another formula. The men were not charged with overt disloyalty; they were charged with a lack of that active or aggressive loyalty which the state has a right to demand, in war time particularly, from its paid servants. Now lack, absence, is a negative thing; it is notoriously difficult to prove except when the thing at issue is definite and tangible. Opinions even among experts differ as to the precise constitution of loyal patriotism; no burden of standardization has ever settled upon the exact tests by which its absence is to be determined.

The observer who bears in mind the negative character of the charge will have the key to many of the otherwise inexplicable phenomena of the testimony (I say testimony rather than evidence advisedly) and the trial. Ordinarily a person is innocent till proved guilty. The charge of absence of something, that something not being clearly defined, shifts the burden. Anybody may then safely be considered guilty until he can present convincing evidence that he is in possession of the required article—which is, perhaps, one reason why negative charges have not been encouraged in the legal procedure of more enlightened countries. Moreover, charges of lack or absence encourage suspicion. With the multiplication of accusations and loyalty pledges in the schools—pledges which naturally such pro-Germans as there are sign with the greatest regularity and cheerfulness—the situation was approaching the point exemplified in the old tale: "There is nobody in the congregation orthodox but you and me—and I am not quite sure about you." There follows another lack than that of active and aggressive loyalty, namely, a lack of

intellectual scrupulousness in making and weighing charges. The lack of active loyalty is assumed to be so widespread that a sacrificial offering, even if somewhat vicarious, will be welcome to the God of Hosts. It is absurd to be too particular about positive evidence to prove the lack of a thing. There are suspicious circumstances; to punish this man will at least arouse others to a less passive patriotism.

One who reads the volume of testimony with these things in mind will have little difficulty in understanding either its concentration upon views rather than acts, views which might be entertained on various hypothetical occasions rather than any views ever actually uttered, or its desire to entrap individuals into obnoxious statements. Such an atmosphere breeds suspicion, accusation and violent action, the phenomena of Inquisition, whether of Torquemada, Salem, the Committee of Public Safety of the French Revolution, Lenine, or New York School authorities.

All this, however, concerns the spirit and atmosphere, the local color, of the school episode rather than its substance, or structure. These are to be sought, as has already been said, in the only too well established methods of school administration with respect to teachers. Quite independently of this episode, one of the least sensational of our school superintendents, Mr. Arthur Perry, has written a pamphlet regarding the problem confronting the new Board of Education. In it he frankly states that there is a general feeling that the building of the Board of Education is a circumlocution office; that there is practically no city-wide esprit de corps among the teachers; that because of this lack the "tremendous amount of enthusiasm and intelligence in the more than twenty thousand members is going pitifully to waste"; that the devotion of teachers to pupils—which is general—is due to dictates of individual conscience, rather than to leadership, and that the feeling is widespread among teachers that instead of looking to their immediate employers, the Board of Education, for support and aid, they must rather protect themselves *against* their employers by using the pressure of legislation or of public opinion to secure "even ordinary consideration."

This is a temperate, and even tempered, statement. It indicates the background upon which a particular difficulty has been projected. If there has been a lack of "active" loyalty in support of the war, the charge affects not three alone nor yet thirty nor three hundred. But what it reflects is not lack of individual loyalty, but just this absence of leadership on the part of nominal leaders, an undermined esprit de corps, a widespread scepticism and even cynicism, the immediate responsibil-

ity for which does not lie at the door of the teaching staff. Not merely the accused teachers but the teaching force has been left without inspiration, and the guidance of any constructive policy and hence exposed to every sort of irresponsible interference and amateur pressure.

It is matter of common knowledge that the strain in the relations between superior and inferior and the general unrest in the teaching staff have been on the steady increase during the latter years of the Mitchel administration. To the teachers that administration presented its most brutal face. All of the better informed of the friends of the now defunct Gary system in New York have been aware for some time that its success was fundamentally compromised if not doomed by the autocratic way in which it was formulated and imposed from above. Under Mr. Churchill, the cultivation of more coöperative relations with the teaching staff had begun; after the fusion administration broke with him, the situation became largely that described by Carlyle as anarchy plus the constable's club.

New York memories are proverbially short. But if any one will turn back to the newspapers of the pre-election days he will find them full of school riots and school strikes, for which the fusion campaign managers with the ineptitude which characterized their almost every act were holding, by name, Mr. Churchill, Mr. Somers and other members of the Board of Education, responsible. Pupils of De Witt Clinton High School were active in a strike against the imposition of the longer (seven hour) school day. The merits or demerits of this lengthened school day are of little account for present purposes in comparison with the fact that it presented one more autocratic decree and imposition from above. The teachers immediately affected were not even consulted as to its probable effects or the best way of administering it so as to mitigate the hardships it would work upon the many pupils who spent part of their time in earning money to continue at school. Provoked by these riots and strikes, and presumably as a Tammany man not particularly pleased at having them unjustly charged to Tammany, Mr. Whalen, the chairman of the High School Committee of the Board of Education, said that he would close the schools rather than allow teachers and pupils to "run them."

This utterance seems to have furnished the proverbial straw. Members of the school council, most of whom are among the dismissed and transferred teachers, prepared resolutions condemning Mr. Whalen's attitude as autocratic and called a meeting of the teachers of the school which passed the resolutions almost unanimously. The Inquisi-

tion followed. There is no evidence that Mr. Whalen himself instigated it. The variety and number of the coincidences with respect to the teachers called and not called, the questions asked, etc., amount to a mathematical demonstration of the connection between the two things. It was no accident that the inquiry began in and concerns teachers in the De Witt Clinton High School. Moreover this action on the part of teachers in that school did not stand alone. Before this episode the school had been famous—or if any one will, infamous—as a center of unrest, of independence, and of protest against autocratic administration. If an example was needed, here was the place to begin. If specific charges of insubordination had been brought, the hearing might have cleared the air. Underlying causes of friction would have been brought out and the public been placed in a position to determine the balance of rights and wrongs. But it was more tactful to leave the indictment vague and to establish a subtle association between lack of loyalty to official superiors and to the nation.

The direct clash of educational philosophies as to methods of teaching and discipline in dealing with pupils presents the same conflict from another angle. The situation between teachers and pupils corresponds, point for point as the mathematicians say, to that between teachers and their employers. Hence the phrases "teaching instinctive obedience" and "respect for authority as such" (with true metaphysical emphasis upon the "as such") are permanent contributions of the trial to pedagogical literature. Teachers who do not instil in pupils blind "doglike" fealty to every kind of authority are not likely themselves to yield it. Teachers who regard the possibility of utilizing their own thoughtful experience as an important factor in conducting the schools will respect the intelligence of their pupils. This defines the fundamental issue. Is automatic routine habit or the development of habits of reflective consideration to be the dominant aim of teaching and discipline? Never has it been revealed more clearly that the latter is "dangerous" and the former "safe"—dangerous to whom and safe for whom being carefully concealed save as the subtle association with disloyalty may be insinuated. In spite, then, of the temporary prestige which war psychology may give to automatic habit over against thoughtfulness as an educational end, progressives might, were it not for danger of injustice to individuals, well be grateful to the reactionaries for having the issue so unambiguously set forth. The fact that this conflict of ideals and principles is the source of a multitude of other clashes and discrepancies is usually overlaid with irrelevant mat-

ter and ornamentally concealed with eulogistic phraseology. The trial has brought it out in a bald, naked, uncompromised form. The record stands. Like most reactionary triumphs after the issue is once revealed, the record will become a milestone in the history of the gradual victory of a progressive over a reactionary social and educational philosophy.

JOHN DEWEY.

Between Two Stools

ONLY those who do not know my husband, James Wilbur, will think I exaggerate when I say that never before today has his conduct flooded my heart with doubt. Errors of judgment not a few have been his, acts conceived and executed in wrath, but never before, when I surveyed his course in a spirit of calmness, have I been at a loss to decide whether James did right or did wrong.

Far be it from me to seek refuge in the assertion that he acted for the best. Such a plea, as James himself has often told me very kindly, is ever the refuge to which feeble minds and unstable wills resort. It avails not at all to reassure myself by repeating that his intentions were good. When were they aught else? The unalterable fact remains that James has brought not peace and strength upon the parish, but distraction.

Everyone is aware that the Reverend Jonathan Skene was once beloved by his parishioners. His saintly face, seen Sunday after Sunday as he stood at the lectern or in the pulpit of St. Peter's, was for many years an inspiration to us all. Even of late, when his peculiarly sweet voice had begun to fail, it could still be heard in every corner of the church, doubtless owing to the excellent acoustic properties of the sacred edifice. When we moved St. Peter's up town James, as junior warden, had kept reminding our architect that God's word must be audible.

Until the Russians saw fit to have their revolution Dr. Skene was staunch about the war. Not a word did he utter with which right-feeling and right-thinking men and women could disagree. Very early, and oh! how persuasively, did he set forth his reasons for deeming participation in the cataclysm to be the duty of the United States. But with the advent of the Russian revolution came a change which James deplored. Dr. Skene fell into an unaccountable and most unchristian hopefulness. Less and less did he seem able to realize that the revolution would never have happened if the revolutionists had not wanted land that did not belong to them. Land is property, as James often warned him, and property is thrift.

Not many weeks ago Dr. Skene brought on the climax by preaching a sermon which stirred James to the depths of his nature. James does not wish to be unjust. He admits that Dr. Skene is not blind to the contemptible character of certain Bolshevik leaders. Dr. Skene in that very sermon acknowledged that some of them might be selfish, unpatriotic, corrupt men, in Germany's pay. If he had stopped there he might still be Rector of St. Peter's. Unfortunately, instead of knowing when to stop, he went on to make a distinction between the Bolshevik leaders and the Russian peasants as a whole. Blind they may be, he declared, these Russian peasants, unknowing and misled, guilty of a folly which can only prolong the war or bring it to a disastrous close. Yet by many words and tokens, so he said, you shall know the Russian people for children of the new dispensation. Have they not obeyed the command which bids us agree with our adversary quickly whiles we are in the way with him? They resist not evil, they are ready to love their enemies. And we? We revile these Russian peasants, we would persecute them if we could, we are tempted into the sin of calling these our brothers fools. Fools they may be, Dr. Skene concluded, yet is not theirs a folly which Our Lord would set above the wisdom of the wise? Where else is the truth so manifest as in Russia that the children of light are not so wise as the children of this world? If Our Lord were alive today he would be nowhere more at home than in Russia.

James came out of church amazed and very stern. He called upon Dr. Skene between services. Meeting the Doctor upon his own ground James asked rather sharply whether Our Lord had not said, in that very Sermon on the Mount to which the Doctor had adverted, Take no thought for your life? The Russians, James pointed out, are not true peace-makers, since no one but a German or a pro-German would for one moment think of calling them the Children of God. Neither are they truly meek, James added, as is proved by the fact that they have not yet inherited the earth, much though they want to.

I could not imagine how Dr. Skene could answer that argument. James says he did not even try. The Doctor's manner was gentle, but his mind was closed to the truth. His face, as James recollects having phrased it at the meeting held a few days later, a secret meeting of course, was that of a gentle fanatic. Dr. Skene stuck to his assertion that in spite of the harm they had done and would do there was something Christian about the behavior and spirit of the Russian peasants, something which Our Lord would have rather liked. I think it blasphemous to talk of Him in that familiar