



# Workers' Education in Belgium

by

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**S**IDE by side with the labour movement as a whole, and more especially with the trade union movement, there have grown up of recent years a number of educational organisations which stand in a unique relation to education in general. Their object is to provide adult workers with the knowledge which they need in order to share in the leadership of the organised labour movement. It is interesting to study the new methods by which the labour movement in various countries is endeavouring to meet this new need. Mention may be made of Ruskin College, Oxford, the Labour College, London, and the Scottish Labour College, the new Education Committee of the Trades Union Congress, and the Workers' Educational Association in Great Britain ; of all the organisations affiliated to the Workers' Education Bureau of America ; and of the education committees of the Socialist Parties and the works councils schools of the General Federation of Trade Unions in Germany. In this article a description is given of the corresponding organisation in the Belgian labour movement, namely the National Committee for Workers' Education (1). This Committee is perhaps more representative than any similar organisation, since the movement for working-class education in Belgium is more highly centralised and co-ordinated than in any other country. This is chiefly due to the close co-operation between the three branches of the labour movement, the political Labour Party, the trade unions, and the co-operative societies. The Belgian Labour Party has not been split by Communist doctrines, and its organisation is closely linked with the Trade Union Committee (2) and the Co-operative Union (3). These three bodies jointly established the National Committee for Workers' Education.

## ORIGINS OF THE WORKERS' EDUCATION COMMITTEE

The National Committee for Workers' Education was founded in 1911. Until that time the greatest diversity, sometimes even confusion, prevailed among the educational organisations set up by the working classes or for their benefit. The most usual form

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(1) *Centrale d'éducation ouvrière.*

(2) *Commission syndicale.*

(3) *Office coopératif.*

of organisation was the study circle, generally basing its discussion on lectures, for which only a small number of local speakers were available. Any success achieved by these circles, which had little method or co-ordination, was generally only ephemeral. In addition a number of labour leaders turned for education to organisations set up by middle-class intellectuals and more or less modelled on the university extension movement or people's universities. The instruction given was based on social ideals and educational methods fundamentally alien to the needs and mentality of the working classes. Institutions of this kind only flourished for a short time. They were on the decline in 1911, and only a few relics of them now remain in Belgium.

The development of trade union organisation during the first decade of the twentieth century made increasingly evident the need of definite attempts to train leaders and generally to give the workers an education to fit them better for organised action. The Labour Party and the co-operative societies also realised the need of increasing their activities both extensively and intensively.

The explanation of the fact that the initiative for the establishment of the National Committee for Workers' Education did not come from the organisations for workers' education already in existence at that time is to be found in the lack of cohesion existing among them. The necessary initiative came from the leaders of the Labour Party, the trade unions, and the co-operative societies. The General Council of the Belgian Labour Party, on which the Trade Union Committee and the Co-operative Union are represented, decided to establish the Workers' Education Committee in order to co-ordinate the work of organisations already in existence and to create new ones. The rules of the Committee, which have hardly been modified since its formation, provide for a managing committee, comprising, in addition to a permanent general secretary, three members elected by the General Council of the Belgian Labour Party, two by the Co-operative Union, two by the Trade Union Committee, and one by the Federation of Young Socialists<sup>(4)</sup>.

The objects of the Committee are defined as follows :

The organisation and co-ordination of the work of all working-class educational organisations, dependent on the aforementioned bodies, which will instil into the workers the knowledge and the qualities which will fit them for carrying on the struggle for the emancipation of their class in every sphere.

The new organisation is thus distinguished in two essential respects from institutions for popular education arising out of the university extension movement, which was of such importance in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the first place, it intends the movement for working-class education to be directly controlled by the workers' organisations themselves. Secondly, it declares that its object is not to fit the workers for their individual struggle for existence but for the collective struggle for

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(4) *Fédération des jeunes Gardes socialistes.*

emancipation. Its ideal is thus entirely different from that of public or "impartial" education, since its object is the training of leaders for political, trade union, and co-operative organisations.

#### FINANCIAL RESOURCES

From its foundation the National Committee for Workers' Education endeavoured as far as possible to encourage the workers' organisations themselves to take financial responsibility for the institution which they had set up, but the available funds of these organisations were at that time very limited. It was difficult, moreover, to ask them for great financial sacrifices on behalf of a new enterprise which had not yet been able to produce any results. In order to start the work, therefore, an appeal was made for private donations. To begin with these amounted to 120,000 francs, of which 100,000 francs were given by the late Mr. Ernest Solvay, who a year later gave the Committee an endowment of 1,000,000 francs, payable in annuities over a period of thirty years.

Annual grants to the Committee from workers' organisations increased from year to year and at present are more than double the income from the Solvay fund. For the current year the administrative income of the National Committee includes, in addition to 30,000 francs from the Solvay fund, annual grants of 25,000 francs from the Trade Union Committee, 20,000 francs from the Co-operative Union, 15,000 francs from the General Council of the Belgian Labour Party, and 2,000 francs from the National Federation of Socialist Mutual Benefit Societies, making a total of 62,000 francs subscribed by working-class organisations. This income does not include that of the Workers' College attached to the National Committee, which is even larger. The funds of the school, however, are raised by a special method described later.

Before the war, for political reasons, the question of public grants to workers' educational institutions did not arise. After the Armistice, however, the situation altered. The Socialists entered the Government in 1918 and remained in office until the autumn of 1921, while their influence in provincial and municipal administration increased considerably. As a result, the movement for workers' education was able to rely to a certain extent on the support of the public authorities. On the whole, however, public grants are of very small importance as compared with the resources of the workers' educational bodies themselves, and these grants in no way influence the character or opinions of the bodies which receive them.

At the present time the National Committee for Workers' Education and the Workers' College, which it founded in 1921, employ a total staff of 17 secretaries and clerical workers, and their joint turnover for administrative purposes exceeds 250,000 francs per year. This figure only applies to the national

committee of the organisation, which is fundamentally only an initiating and co-ordinating body. By far the largest part of the educational work properly so-called is carried on by the local and district workers' education committees.

### LOCAL AND DISTRICT COMMITTEES

The system of local and district workers' education committees which now covers the whole of Belgium grew up gradually. Before the war in almost every town there were various forms of education, usually undertaken on the initiative of the National Committee for Workers' Education (e.g. Socialist schools, Socialist Extension work, organisation of lectures, libraries, study circles, etc.), but these institutions existed side by side without any organised connection between them. Only in Brussels had the Committee succeeded before the war in setting up a local workers' education committee to centralise the work of a dozen bodies which had previously been independent. After 1918 the movement for the creation of local committees became general. In 1920 the new rules of the Belgian Labour Party, adopted at the Easter Congress, made the institution of such committees compulsory under the following rules :

Rule 48. Branch organisations shall undertake the establishment of local workers' education committees in all important towns within their area.

Rule 50. These committees shall include delegates of the political, trade union, and co-operative organisations of the locality. Organisations of young people and other groups shall be represented.

Rule 52. District workers' education committees may be set up on a basis similar to that of the local committees ; their chief function shall be to supervise the working of Socialist schools of the second grade.

Rule 55. The working expenses of local workers' education committees shall be defrayed by all local branches of the Party.

Rule 56. Working expenses of district workers' education committees shall be defrayed by the main central organisations of the district or province.

It took some time to carry this plan into effect, especially to infuse life into local committees, many of which at first existed only on paper. This was only achieved on any considerable scale after the creation of a complete system of district committees, which was carried out during 1921. At the end of that year there were 161 local committees in full working order. The district committees at present number 14, and most of them discharge extremely useful functions as links between the National Committee and its local committees.

It will be observed that the organisation of the local and district committees is based on the same principle as that of the national body. These committees do not depend on educational bodies or special organisations with limited membership, but on the whole body of organised labour (trade unions, co-operative societies, political organisations, mutual benefit societies, etc.) in their town or district. There could be no better illustration of the principle that the movement for working-class education is subordinate to the purposes of the labour movement as a whole.

The political and industrial organisations appoint a number of their members for this special work ; naturally they also assume responsibility for the financial cost of the work of the workers' education committees. In no case are these committees dependent on subscriptions from members of educational organisations, since they apply to the working class as a whole and refuse in principle to ask for any financial sacrifices from individuals, even for institutions like the Socialist schools, which involve heavy expense. The National Committee has similarly always refused to subsidise local or district organisations in any way whatever, on the principle that these organisations should raise their funds among the workers' organisations whose ends they serve and which are responsible for their management. In a few rare cases the National Committee has advanced money to newly established district committees in order to facilitate their initial work until they could obtain sufficient funds on the spot.

The activities of the local committees vary as widely as their administrative structure. A fairly large number of them, certainly more than a hundred, generally only manage a small local library. These committees are not included in the 161 mentioned as in existence at the end of 1921. Local committees are not regarded as in full working order until they at least run Extension lectures or Socialist classes. The majority of them also possess libraries. The type of committee most frequently found covers all three forms of work : classes, lectures and library. This, however, is only a minimum, and there is no limit to the variety and amount of work which a well-organised local committee can undertake. The following have been selected at random by way of example from the work of local committees, especially those in great urban or industrial centres : reading rooms, special schools for municipal councillors, co-operative accountants, and election workers, departments for excursions and educational travel, and temporary work for strikers or the unemployed. In addition, there is a growing tendency to include in the sphere of activity of the local committees independent organisations with educational objects, such as physical training societies (gymnastics and games), dramatic societies, musical societies (instrumental and choral), and organisations for young people and children. In such cases the organisations are generally represented officially on the local workers' education committee in addition to the chief political and industrial organisations which provide the funds of the committee.

It is obvious that the activity of the local and district committees depends finally much more on the enthusiasm and efficiency of the persons at their head than on the details of their administrative structure. The old labour leaders are generally too much occupied with the work given them by their own organisation to do more on education committees than act as advisors and supervisors, which is no doubt most valuable ; the moving spirit of the committee is usually one of the young leaders who has already received a certain amount of training under the

National Committee for Workers' Education and is particularly interested in educational work. There is thus gradually being developed a specialised type of leader for educational work such as has already been created for political, trade union, or co-operative work. The old type of young Socialist, more interested in agitation than in methods, more inclined to wordy eloquence than sustained study or administrative work, has been replaced by a new type indubitably superior, represented by a group of young people who are men of ideas, and are advancing their own education by helping to advance that of others.

### SOCIALIST SCHOOLS

The most vital function of the Workers' Education Committee from the beginning was the organisation of Socialist schools. This name was given to series of regular classes which it was endeavoured to substitute for the rather chaotic activity of the study circles. In the Socialist schools a small number of selected workers, about thirty on an average, meet for a number of weeks to study fairly thoroughly some subject connected with the social sciences. Often this comes down to weekly classes of two hours each for six or seven weeks, and the title of Socialist school may seem rather high sounding; but it was deliberately chosen to show the difference which should exist between an institution of this kind and the old study circle or course of lectures.

The characteristic features of Socialist schools may be outlined as follows. As distinguished from the study circle or course of lectures, the schools only admit a limited number of students, generally chosen by the local workers' organisations; the students have to make a sustained effort and co-operate actively in the instruction given by taking part in discussions and practical work, by reading, or possibly by written work at home. In short, the schools are so organised as to prevent the students, as far as possible, from being passive listeners. An attempt is made to apply the principle of the English workers' tutorial classes, of which it has been said that, in a room where there are 30 students and one instructor, there should be 31 students and 31 instructors. The Socialist schools are further distinguished from the old study circles or lectures in that the classes are taken by instructors selected, sent out, and paid by the National Committee and using textbooks or syllabi drawn up by the Committee. Thus the drawbacks which previously resulted from the unsystematic fashion in which lecturers and subjects followed one another have been overcome.

The Socialist school involves a certain initial cost and considerable expenditure for instructors' salaries and travelling expenses, as the majority of them come from Brussels or other cities; it is therefore much more expensive than the study circle, which found its lecturers on the spot or even among its own

members. In spite of this the advantages of this form of instruction were so apparent that the number of schools rapidly increased. The number of local Socialist schools throughout the country was as follows :

1911-1912	21	1917-1918	28
1912-1913	41	1918-1919	6
1913-1914	62	1919-1920	67
1914-1915	0	1920-1921	72
1915-1916	31	1921-1922	87
1916-1917	53		

In drawing up their programme the local Socialist schools may choose between a large number of classes on different subjects, arranged in two grades according to their difficulty. The first-grade course, with a single syllabus and textbook drawn up by the National Committee itself, includes seven lessons under the general title of "The Principles of Socialism". The seven lessons deal respectively with : the growth of towns ; growth of capitalism ; machinery and the factory ; concentration ; crafts and small shop-keeping ; the proletariat ; the reward of capital and the reward of labour.

The second-grade classes study a variety of subjects, and the Socialist schools may select which they prefer, combining them in many different ways according to the instructors who are available and local preferences. The subjects include the following : work of trade union movement ; work of the co-operative movement ; political work ; socialisation ; labour legislation ; social insurance ; history of the Belgian labour movement ; the class war ; workers' control of industry ; elementary Marxianism ; what and how we should read in order to write well ; social hygiene, etc. Most of the courses consist of six lessons. Syllabi for all these classes, printed by the Workers' Education Committee, are sent to the local schools and distributed gratis to the students.

As the National Committee has to supervise the working of all these schools from Brussels, a considerable amount of administrative machinery is obviously necessary, especially as the Committee is most anxious to follow the work of the schools in every detail. It does this chiefly by statistical methods based on the registration forms filled in by students in the Socialist schools and sent in to the National Committee. It is thus possible to draw up general statistics of the number of students, their age, sex, and occupation, the organisations to which they belong, the age at which they left the elementary school, any other previous education, the library which they use, Socialist schools which they have previously attended, any office which they have held in labour organisations, etc. By means of regular reports the Committee keeps check on attendance, etc. It also pays the instructors, who receive a fee of 15 francs per lesson in addition to travelling expenses. These expenses are subsequently refunded by the local committees.

The National Committee sends to secretaries of the schools very detailed instructions on the preparation of the necessary

accommodation and other material arrangements in order to secure as regular working as possible. These instructions, together with those regarding the organisation of lectures, were issued for the session 1921-1922 in a booklet of 117 pages for the French-speaking part of the country. In the Flemish-speaking districts the number of schools is smaller owing to the less advanced stage of industrial development of these districts, and in consequence there is less need for extensive administrative machinery.

#### SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLS FOR SHOP STEWARDS

In addition to the Socialist schools, which are intended mainly for general training of workers in the labour movement, the National Committee for Workers' Education organises various types of schools with special objects, which are not included in the number given above. It has already, in agreement with the National Federation of Provincial and Municipal Councillors, set up classes for municipal political workers before the municipal elections, and classes for municipal councillors after the elections. These were held in twelve localities in 1921. The importance of the need which they were intended to meet is shown by the fact that in the local and provincial elections of April 1921 the number of Labour Party candidates elected as municipal and provincial councillors rose from 1,172 to 3,379 ; a special syllabus was drawn up for these classes.

Among other special classes organised more or less periodically by the National Committee, mention should be made of classes in financial method for trade union leaders, in which the necessary instruction is given for the analysis of balance sheets of capitalist companies, and classes for accountants in co-operative societies. The latter give fairly thorough instruction, and cover about thirty weeks with one full day's instruction per week.

The most interesting and important form of special instruction undertaken by the Committee, however, is the special work for shop stewards and workers' delegates in two of the chief industries of Belgium. These schools have only recently been established, as the need for them only appeared after the Armistice. The system of direct representation of organised labour on works councils and local, district, and national committees for conciliation and determination of labour conditions developed considerably during the period of economic reconstruction, mainly as a result of the encouragement given by the Minister of Industry and Labour in 1920-1921. Although in Belgium, unlike Germany, for example, there are no works councils established by law, labour conditions in the chief Belgian industries are determined by joint committees on which employers and workers are represented in equal numbers, and which are recognised by the government. In great industries like the iron and steel industries, the metal-working trades, coal mining, glass works, etc. the system of



joint representation has been extended even to isolated undertakings. Throughout most of the iron and steel and metal trades, the shop stewards appointed by the trade unions to watch the interests of their shopmates have become workers' delegates recognised by the employers and by the employers' organisations as permanent negotiators in all questions connected with the internal organisation of undertakings.

In the coal industry the National Joint Commission, under the patronage of the Ministry of Industry and Labour, set up a system of workers' delegations in the mines and local and district committees to which the organised workers directly elected their representatives. Similar systems, enforced, if not by law, at least by administration, and even more by the power of the trade unions themselves, are in existence in most other industries, though in different stages of development. Some account of these was given in the report presented to the Trade Union Week held at Morlanwelz in September 1921, when the question of workers' control of factories was discussed.

It did not take long for the trade unions to realise that this system of workers' representation in factories would only produce good results if the shop stewards or delegates had the necessary knowledge to carry out their duties. There was a great task to be performed, especially in view of the fact that the Belgian trade union movement had rallied its forces during the three years following the Armistice, but had grown more in extent than in depth, and was suffering more than ever from a lack of experienced leaders.

The metal workers, who had reached the highest stage of development in the system of workers' delegates, were the first to respond to the appeal of the National Committee for Workers' Education for special instruction for these shop stewards and delegates. After one local experiment, the National Committee and the Metal Workers' Union agreed to establish a system of schools for shop stewards and delegates, and to base their programme on a manual which would serve as a textbook for instructors and students. This textbook, which the National Committee had printed in Flemish and French during the summer of 1921, is a volume of 216 pages<sup>(5)</sup>, on which nine authors collaborated. It is planned on the basis of three groups of four lessons.

The first group gives a general idea of the structure of industry under the headings: (1) raw materials and finished products; (2) metal works; (3) methods of wage payment; (4) industry in the past. The second group gives thorough instruction on the activity of labour in industry, including lessons on trade union organisation, work of the trade unions, beginnings of the trade unions, and trade union centralisation. The third group deals chiefly with protective labour legislation, social insurance, the labour agreement and its maintenance, and workers' control.

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<sup>(5)</sup> *Manuel du sectionnaire métallurgiste ; édition de la Centrale d'Education ouvrière n° 9. Brussels, 1921.*

During the session 1921-1922 the National Committee organised 33 schools for metal workers' shop stewards and delegates ; 25 of these were in the Walloon districts, and 8 in the Flemish-speaking districts. As a general rule, the different sections of the course are given by different instructors, some of whom are engineers and technical experts specialising in the technical sections, while others are trade union leaders specialising in the rights of labour and the section dealing with the labour movement and social institutions.

A little later the National Miners' Union imitated the experiment of the metal workers, and, on the initiative of the Workers' Education Committee and in collaboration with it, drew up a textbook for pit delegates. This book is similar in its general arrangement to the metal workers' textbook, but takes into account special conditions in the mining industry.

Classes for pit delegates were taken by instructors chosen by the Miners' Union itself for each of the five coal basins of Belgium. Negotiations are at present in progress with the trade unions in other industries with a view to setting up similar schools for the benefit of their shop stewards and delegates.

It will be observed that the institutions set up in Belgium for training works delegates, unlike those in Germany, are not the same for workers in different industries. Our idea in establishing special schools for each industry was to give full weight to the fact that the most important instruction to be given to workers' delegates is in the knowledge which they require immediately in order to carry out their duties, which are governed by conditions peculiar to each industry, and differ too much between themselves for general instruction to be of much value.

The rapidity with which this type of instruction has been put into effect and its success among trade union leaders leads us to believe that it will develop greatly in the future. Its chief value is that, unlike the Socialist schools, it appeals to selected workers coming directly from the masses of labour in the place where they actually work. In this way the work of the Workers' Education Committee reaches a recruiting ground which will make it much easier to touch the lowest strata of the proletariat. The fact that this special training meets the need for education arising from the actual conditions of industrial life suggests unsuspected possibilities for the development of educational methods which will link the education of adult workers to their activities as producers.

#### THE SOCIALIST EXTENSION

The Socialist Extension is a special department of the National Committee for Workers' Education for organising educational lectures throughout the country. These lectures differ from the classes in the Socialist schools in that they are addressed to the general public and deal with isolated subjects. In organisation,

however, they resemble the schools, since the lecturers are sent out by the National Committee, which guides the choice of local organisations, and provides them with lists of lecturers and their subjects, outlines of the subject treated, and apparatus for lantern lectures when necessary. Socialist Extension lecturers, like instructors in the schools, are paid by the National Committee, which recovers this expenditure from the organising committees.

During the session 1921-1922, the Socialist Extension sent more than 200 lecturers to local committees and organised 576 lectures with audiences totalling 118,838. A great variety of subjects was handled. In addition to questions connected with the labour movement and its theories, they covered general problems, including moral, physical, artistic, and literary education, popularisation of technical education, natural science, hygiene and eugenics, town-planning, working-class housing, etc. It should be noted that the Socialist Extension refuses to organise partisan lectures. It intends to confine itself purely to educational work, and leaves propaganda and recruiting of members to the political and industrial organisations, as these are practical considerations alien to educational lectures.

In its early years the Workers' Education Committee gave the Socialist Extension a merely subordinate place in its activities. At that time the Committee wished to devote most of its energy to the organisation of schools, and was in revolt against the errors of the past, when the example of the university extension movement was only too influential. After the war this limitation on the organisation of single lectures was no longer necessary. The steady growth in the numbers of Socialist schools showed that this method of intellectual training, which was the only really effective one, had so far proved its necessity as to avert the danger of a return to the errors of the past. Moreover, the achievement of the 8-hour day and the awakening of greater numbers of the working classes to the significance of the trade union movement and of Socialism compelled us to do something immediately to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of much larger masses of workers than could be covered by the Socialist schools.

Under these conditions a further development of Extension lectures was necessary, but there was no idea of allowing this form of education, necessarily superficial and irregular, to take the place of the better form which had been realised in the meantime by the Socialist schools. The Socialist Extension is therefore regarded as an auxiliary means of education for awakening the intellectual curiosity of the masses, giving them a taste for intellectual recreation, and attracting them, in order to find the select few who will join the libraries and Socialist schools.

#### TRADE UNION WEEKS

The great importance of training leaders for the trade union movement led the National Committee for Workers' Education to make special efforts in this direction from its inception. In 1921

it organised two collective educational excursions for Belgian trade union leaders to Berlin. These excursions had an immediate and favourable influence on the development of the Belgian trade union movement in the direction of greater centralisation, more up-to-date methods, and increasing interest in education among the trade unions. In 1911-1912 the Union organised two annual Trade Union Schools, one in French at Brussels, the other in Flemish at Ghent. These schools were especially for the benefit of permanent trade union officials. They gave four hours' instruction per week for 30 weeks.

In 1914 a new form of education known as Trade Union Weeks was substituted for these schools, which had compelled provincial leaders to travel to the school every week. Under the new system trade union leaders, whether permanent or not, assembled at a given spot for a week of intensive education. The first Trade Union Week took place in July 1914 at Cuesmes in the Borinage coal-mining district; 45 persons attended it and studied various questions connected with the history and theory of the trade union movement and the organisation of factories. They also visited a certain number of industrial establishments.

This experiment was repeated in 1921, when another Trade Union Week was held from 4 to 10 September at Morlanwelz, another industrial town in Hainault. On this occasion more than 300 persons took part in the Trade Union Week, and 284 of these were sent by Belgian trade union organisations. A departure was made from the method followed at Cuesmes in 1914, when the subjects studied were too varied to allow of thorough treatment, and the Morlanwelz Trade Union Week dealt entirely with one subject: workers' control in industry. It included three lectures on the theoretical aspect of the problem, nine lectures by trade union delegates on results achieved in the chief Belgian industries, and six lectures, three of which were given by foreign delegates, on workers' control in other countries. Much of the rest of the time was spent in visits to industrial establishments and in musical evenings. The stenographic record of this week was published by the Trade Union Committee of Belgium <sup>(6)</sup>, which has since decided to organise a similar week every two years.

#### THE LIBRARY DEPARTMENT

The Central Department for Socialist and Trade Union Libraries was set up in May 1912 under the National Committee for Workers' Education. Its chief functions were to organise, on behalf of all affiliated libraries, joint purchase of books and the distribution of gifts of books; and to assist Socialist and trade union organisations to establish libraries by supplying them with books and other necessary equipment on the most favourable

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<sup>(6)</sup> *Semaine syndicale de Morlanwelz*. Brussels, Commission syndicale de Belgique, 1921.

terms. While in 1913 the number of affiliated libraries was only 42, it is now 197, of which 147 are French and 50 Flemish. The influence of the central Department on these libraries has been exerted chiefly through the organisation of joint purchase of books. The book-buying department developed very rapidly. Its turnover was as follows :

	francs
1912	682
1913	2,554.70
1914-1918	8,742.92 (war period)
1919	8,763.80
1920	48,540.13
1921	64,988.63

During the current year this joint book-buying department is to be transferred from the Library Department to the Labour Party bookshops. The work of the Central Library Department will thus be limited to directing the Socialist and trade union libraries on the intellectual side (while continuing to assist in establishing new libraries and developing existing ones), guiding librarians in the choice of books, publishing bibliographical notes and model catalogues in the labour press and the journals of the National Committee for Workers' Education, organising conferences of librarians, etc.

#### PUBLICATIONS OF THE WORKERS' EDUCATION COMMITTEE

In addition to books, which now number nine, mostly textbooks for Socialist and shop stewards' schools, the National Committee for Workers' Education publishes two monthly journals, *Education-Récréation* in French and *Ontwikkeling* in Flemish. Before the war it only published a bi-lingual bulletin, which was sent gratis to all its educational organisations and dealt solely with educational work. The two periodicals now issued have a more ambitious object, namely, to combine an educational review with a working-class family magazine.

The two periodicals are issued at a very low price, but thanks to a large circulation succeed in covering their expenses. The circulation of *Education-Récréation* is over 10,000 and of *Ontwikkeling* 5,800.

#### THE WORKERS' COLLEGE (?)

Ever since the creation of the National Committee for Workers' Education its leaders have realised that in order to complete the system of local and special schools it needed an institution for more intensive and permanent education, which would recruit its students from the best elements in the local schools. An embryonic institution of this kind had existed before the war in the form of two National Socialist Schools, one French and one

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(?) *Ecole Ouvrière Supérieure* ; in Flemish *Arbeidershoogeschool*.

Flemish, which in October 1911 replaced the Sunday School established in 1910 by the General Council of the Belgian Labour Party. These institutions suffered, however, from one great difficulty, which was that the majority of their students came from the Brussels district, while the few provincial students had to overcome great obstacles in order to attend the schools regularly. Even in those days, therefore, the possibility of replacing these schools by permanent educational institutions which would not require provincial students to travel continually was being considered.

After the Armistice the National Committee for Workers' Education decided to take definite steps in this direction and to set up a permanent college for external and resident students, with a session of at least six months. The establishment of such a college, for which it was necessary to raise large funds to buy and furnish a building, naturally took some time. It was achieved in 1921, when on 3 October the Workers' College opened its first six-months' session, which was conducted in French. The second session, from 3 April to 30 September 1922, was given in Flemish.

The Workers' College is managed directly by the National Committee, but is incorporated as a co-operative society in order to be able to own property under Belgian law. For this reason its finances are distinct from those of the National Committee; they are also considerably larger than these. The purchase and furnishing of the building cost more than 800,000 francs, and an annual income of about 150,000 francs is required, apart from the expenses of maintenance of pupils, which are defrayed by the organisations which nominate them.

The workers' organisations were so deeply convinced of the need of this new institution that there was no difficulty in obtaining the necessary funds. The purchase and furnishing of the building were partly covered by donations and the remainder by loans granted by the Deposit and Loan Bank of the Socialist co-operative societies and by the Central Union of Metal Workers. The annual income of the college is raised by a special levy of 10 centimes per member per year paid by all organisations affiliated to the Labour Party, the Trade Union Committee, and the Co-operative Union. The payment of this subscription, which was dubbed 'the school halfpenny', was agreed to in turn without opposition by the congresses of the Labour Party, the trade unions, and the co-operative societies. In 1921 the 'school halfpenny' was paid on behalf of a membership of 500,000 in the Trade Union Committee, 150,000 in the Co-operative Union and 560,000 in the Labour Party, providing a total sum of 121,000 francs.

Further financial assistance had to be supplied, when the first session opened, by the organisations who nominated students. They had to supply scholarships of 2,000 francs per resident student (this was reduced to 1,600 francs for the second session) to cover expenses of maintenance and educational excursions, etc.

for six months. In the majority of cases they had also to provide family maintenance and compensation for wages lost, of an amount usually greater than that of the scholarship. The first session was attended by 19 resident students, of whom three were women, and five non-resident, of whom two were women. From the opening of the second session no non-resident students were accepted, and the college enrolled 26 resident students, of whom four were women.

Some idea of the actual instruction given at the Workers' College may be gathered from the syllabus of the first session, which has been very little changed for the two subsequent sessions. It covered 23 weeks' term, one week's holiday, and two weeks of educational excursions. The students at the first session made excursions of this kind to England and Germany, those at the second session to Germany and the industrial district of Hainault. During the 23 weeks' term classes occupied on an average three hours per day, generally in the morning. The afternoons were reserved for excursions (more than fifty different institutions were visited), discussion classes directed by certain instructors, revision and oral tests by the monitors, private study by the students, lectures, etc. One hour per day is reserved for physical training.

The syllabus of the theoretical classes during the first session covered 414 lessons of one hour each, distributed as follows :

	hours
The industrial system of Belgium	23
Conditions and status of labour	23
Economic and social history of Belgium	23
General law	15
History of the labour movement	23
History of economic and social theory	23
Elementary applied social psychology	23
Finance	23
Social legislation	23
The trade union movement	15
The co-operative movement	15
Municipal and provincial politics	23
Social insurance	15
History of art	23
Working-class housing	9
History of music	3
The chief stages in the general history of literature	23
Hygiene	23
Elementary general statistics	10
Elementary administration and office method	10
Workers' education	3
Difficulties of the French language	15
Methods of journalism	8

The various subjects in this list were taught by 27 instructors, including practical workers in the labour movement, Socialist intellectuals, and, for certain subjects, university professors who were not members of the Labour Party.

The students as a whole share in the management of the college through a students' committee, which advises the directors on all questions of internal organisation and is responsible for

discipline. The age of the students varies from 19 to 38, but the majority are from 20 to 25. Some of them before entering the college held paid posts in the labour movement, but the majority came direct from factories or mines. The minimum educational standard required for admission is ability to read and write. The essential factors in the selection of candidates by the organisations who nominate them are intellectual ability, mental maturity, and experience of the labour movement, as shown by the previous activities of the candidate.

Private nominations are not accepted. Every student must be nominated by an organisation, which pays his maintenance expenses, except in a few cases where free bursaries are granted by the college, the Labour Party, the Trade Union Committee, or the public authorities. In fact, the majority of students are nominated by central trade union organisations and only a few by co-operative societies and political organisations, which have not such large funds at their disposal.

The directors of the college reserve the right to refuse candidates who do not appear suitable or to make a selection when a larger number of candidates apply than there are vacancies. The method of frequent oral tests (one hour's test for every four hours' classes) and discussion classes enables the directors of the college to eliminate during the session students who prove by experience to be unable to profit by the course.

The experience gained in the first two sessions enabled the National Committee for Workers' Education to make certain improvements in the organisation as outlined above. The most important of these is the extension of the session to cover a complete scholastic year, with nine months' term, two weeks educational excursion, and 2½ months' holiday. The number of hours of instruction will not be increased, as experience has shown that the present syllabus is too heavy and tends to overwork.

It will be observed that the method of instruction described has certain characteristics which distinguish the Workers' College from similar institutions abroad. Unlike the old Party School in Berlin<sup>(6)</sup> the syllabus gives great prominence to the practical branches of education; even that part of the syllabus devoted to theory is not based on any preconceived doctrine. Socialist theories are taught, parallel with courses in general history and the history of the labour movement, from a purely historical point of view. The students are all the more able to exercise their own judgment in that their instructors profess different shades of Socialist opinion and the revision and discussion classes afford opportunity for the freest expression of opinion. This method is based on the paramount desire to encourage original work, personal reflection, and the development of the faculties of observation and criticism in the students. The college fully realises that it cannot supply a complete education in six

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(6) *Parteischule*.



months, but that it should confine itself to preparing young members of the labour movement to make use in the future of the methods of self-education which are the only right methods for adults.

#### EDUCATIONAL METHODS

The work of the National Committee for Workers' Education has been undertaken in a spirit of experiment. Its methods of teaching and organisation are continually being modified, and its leaders are convinced that everything which has hitherto been done only represents the first steps towards a much more distant ideal, the transformation of the life of the producer into a combined process of work and education. During its ten years' work, the National Committee has succeeded in establishing certain facts which justify the statement that the methods of education of adult workers must be radically different from those practised in schools and universities.

The adult worker is generally as ignorant of the subjects taught at school as a child who has just entered the school. The majority of students in the schools of the Workers' Education Committee left the elementary school between the ages of 11 and 14. Too often what they there learned, especially of history and natural science, is so false and dogmatic that their knowledge in this respect is largely of negative value. They have, moreover, forgotten most of what they learned at school beyond reading, writing, and elementary arithmetic. Their minds are less plastic than those of children, and when they enter the Socialist school they are generally tired by industrial labour and often unaccustomed to reading and self-education, habits which the school hardly attempted to inculcate.

Thus, from these points of view, it might appear that adult workers offer even less promising material for education than children of school age. It would be a great mistake, however, to conclude therefore that the only thing to be done is to recommence their elementary training. They must not be treated like schoolchildren. They have one characteristic which children have not: their habits have already been formed by living in the community, and they possess knowledge resulting from their lives as producers and their work in the labour movement. They have a strongly marked personal equation, and they do not accept instruction *ex cathedra*. Their critical faculty is strongly developed by contact with real life and by taking part in politics, reading the newspapers, and attending public meetings. They have often far more common sense and experience of life than the majority of university professors. These factors give a unique character to the problem of educational methods suited to adult workers.

Certain conclusions may be reached immediately. In the first place, instruction in social sciences—history, sociology, law, political science, social hygiene, etc.—should take as its starting

point, not a fund of general knowledge which does not exist, but the fund of experience already acquired. Thus the starting point in teaching economics would naturally be what the worker has already seen of economic organisation in the environment in which he lives and works. He will understand society on the basis of his knowledge of his workshop.

Another practical conclusion drawn from experience is that for a class of adult students life itself is a continual source of education, and their judgment is generally sufficiently mature to enable them to use books and newspapers as means of self-education. In this connection it may be said that the most important thing is not the content but the method of teaching. The essential aim should be to inspire the workers with a desire to learn by themselves and to familiarise them with methods of self-education so that they can continue to draw general deductions from the facts of their individual experience, and thus understand their functions in society and in the movement of which they are members.

Another conclusion which has been reached is that, as a general rule, the best instructor for adult workers is not the university man or teacher, who is too much accustomed to teach *ex cathedra* to passive hearers, but the worker who has educated himself by taking part in the labour movement and attending its educational institutions.

In short, ten years of specialised work have confirmed the conviction of the leaders of the National Committee for Workers' Education that experience is the only source of knowledge, that all that an instructor can do is to guide his students through their individual experience to general knowledge, and that such generalisation, if it is to be fruitful, must be the result of an act of volition on the part of the students, of which the instructor can only be a guide.

## RESULTS

In spite of an almost complete interruption during the four years of war, the National Committee for Workers' Education has been able in ten years to exert on the Belgian labour movement as a whole the valuable influence of permanent and extensive educational work. Obviously it will be many years before institutions like the Workers' College can produce tangible effects on the working class of the country as a whole, but already the extension of education by local schools, lectures, and libraries, and, in general, by the local and district workers' education committees, has indubitably raised the intellectual level of the Belgian labour movement. Among the younger members, especially of the trade union and political movements, it is rare to find any who have not been influenced by education of this kind. It is even rarer to find among the older members of the movement any who still share the scepticism of those who, at the beginning of the work, regarded it merely as a waste of money and strength

which would only benefit a few privileged persons. We believe that the Trade Union Committee truly expressed the unanimous conviction of the active members of the Belgian labour movement when it said recently in its official journal that "those who still believed that the National Committee for Workers' Education was an academic organisation appealing chiefly to those who had not yet entered the struggle or who had done so only in a desultory fashion have realised how closely its work is linked with everything which affects the life of the workers".



