

PROLETARIAN CULTURE in AMERICA

Plebs will read with much interest this brief account by Dr. Scott Nearing of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces operating in the field of Labour Education in America. It seems clear that, as Millar points out in his preceding article, a definite break between the real proletarian educationists and the "W.E.A.ers" of America cannot be long delayed.

THE title "Proletarian Culture in America" is not sheer audacity, though it would doubtless appear so to the casual observer of American life. With twenty-two millions of American children in schools and colleges controlled and directed by the same men who control and direct the American banks and factories, with a labour movement, barely class-conscious, with an unparalleled economic power in the hands of the American ruling class, and with many of the most active advocates of proletarian culture serving terms of from five to twenty years in gaol for the expression of unorthodox economic opinions, the outlook for a new culture might seem dark enough. The forces are at work, though, and their results already are apparent to discerning eyes.

There are three main channels of labour education in the United States. The first is a movement, fostered by the colleges, to have workers' education under college control; the second is a movement by the workers to have college education under workers' control; and the third is a movement for a real proletarian culture. A few words will give an idea of the relative standing of each of the three lines of activity.

Colleges like Bryn Mawr and Amherst have opened labour schools. The work at Bryn Mawr was done during the summer, in the college buildings, and by a faculty picked in part from inside and in part from outside the college. Since Bryn Mawr is a woman's college, the classes were confined to working girls. The funds for the support of this work were raised in part by the ex-President of the College, Miss Thomas, a keen-minded, far-sighted liberal. In part they were contributed by the unions whose members were taking the classes. The faculty was made up of liberals with a sprinkling of radicals. It was not proletarian in any sense of the word. The Amherst classes are held in labour union halls, and the instruction staff is provided by the college. The students

pay a nominal fee for the class work. The classes in both cases were small, and the instruction carried forward in the main by the tutorial method.

Many other American colleges have undertaken work of a similar nature. Always it is financed in part or in whole by the colleges.

The second series of experiments consists of a number of classes organised by labour unions, for which teachers are drawn from the neighbouring schools and colleges. Sometimes these teachers are furnished free by the schools. Usually, however, the classes make some private arrangement with the teachers. Thus a professor at Columbia University, New York, will give a series of lectures for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. These lectures will be held in a union hall or in a public school building provided at a nominal rate by the Board of Education. The lecture method is the one usually followed here, because it is the method common in American colleges. No effort is made to limit the size of the classes. On the contrary, large classes are encouraged. The funds are derived from the union treasuries or from student fees, or from both.

There are a few institutions in America devoted to labour education, which are financed by the workers, and which are avowedly teaching those subjects, and emphasising those aspects of history, economics and the like, which will be of particular service to those workers who are actively engaged in the struggle for the establishment of a new social order. There were more of these institutions before the war. The prosecutions and police raids of the past five years have broken up such schools in Chicago, San Francisco and other cities.

The experience of the United States with these three forms of labour education is not as great as the experience of Great Britain, but it has already led to certain pretty definite conclusions, which might be summarised about as follows:—

1. The move of such colleges as Amherst and Bryn Mawr to conduct labour schools is an effort to "get in on the ground floor" of a new movement, to capture it and to direct its course. They are economically and socially attached to the present culture, and by the same forces are opposed to any new culture. They therefore represent *counter-revolution in labour education*.
2. The schools that are conducted by labour bodies with instructors borrowed or hired from high schools and colleges are getting capitalist education in labour quarters. If the teachers were really class conscious, or if they said anything in the labour schools that lined them up definitely with the new culture, they would lose their jobs in about nine

- cases out of ten. The teachers merely give the same courses for the workers that they are giving to their regular classes.
3. It is therefore obvious that if the workers of the United States are to develop ideas looking toward a new economic and social organisation, *they must do this in their own schools, supported by their own funds, manned by their own teachers, and using their own outlines, textbooks and so on.*

There is a good deal of leeway in the application of these principles, but American experience seems to show that, in general, and in the main, they are sound.

As to what should constitute the subject matter of an education looking toward a proletarian culture, there is as yet no consensus of opinion. There is merely the recognition of the necessity that it should be different from and independent of that presented in the American schools and colleges. No greater opportunity is offered to the American workers at the present time than the opportunity to develop an educational machine that will seek, not to duplicate or to compete with the established schools and colleges, but to cover a field that they cannot touch—the field of intellectual activity that has as its objective a revolutionary change in existing economic and social institutions.