

EDUCATION in SOVIET RUSSIA

Two Sketches from Life

Scott Nearing, who has just returned from a tour in Russia, has written a study of the Soviet educational system, a special PLEBS edition of which we hope to publish shortly. These two short sketches give an idea of the book's interest.

I

THE INSTITUTE FOR RED PROFESSORS

MORE interesting, in many ways, than any of the other higher technical schools that I saw in the Soviet Union was the Institute for Red Professors, in Moscow. In this school the university teachers of economics, philosophy and political science receive their training. It corresponds to a graduate school in an American university.

Each student who is a candidate for admission to this school presents a thesis on some problem in social science or philosophy. This year some of the topics were: "Marx and Ricardo"; "American-English Diplomatic Relations"; "Influence of Foreign Capital in Russia," and the like. If the thesis is accepted the student is permitted to take four examinations: political economy, philosophy, history of the West, and Russian history. These examinations successfully passed, and the student is ready for his three years' course in the school.

When I reached this school, the Secretary, Maria Dodonova, asked me to take a seat. In a few moments a young man came in. She introduced him as the Chairman of the Students' Pedagogical Committee. "He will answer your questions," said she.

We three sat together, I asking, the student answering, and occasionally referring to the Secretary for details. Students are generally members of the Communist Party, he told me. All are expected to have two foreign languages.

Work in this school is divided into six groups: political economy, philosophy, Russian history, history of the West, jurisprudence, and co-operation. Students pick the groups in which they wish to work, and are expected to do two pieces of research per year during the first two years. In the third year they prepare a thesis which is published.

All work is done in seminars. There are twelve such seminars in

the first year class, twelve in the second year class, and six in the third year class. Each seminar has the right to select its own teacher. This teacher may or may not be on the regular faculty. This year one student seminar wished to study the Social Democratic Party of Germany. There was no member of the regular faculty who was an authority on this subject, so the students called in a man from outside the school. In such cases, the administrative board of the school must pass the qualifications of the desired teacher.

Seminars are small. Themes are typed and distributed in advance of the session at which they are to be presented. All are specialised and technical. For example, a student who decides to work in the economics group, must cover during his first year the theory of wealth and distribution, and the history of political economy ; during his second year, money and credit and markets and crises. A thesis theme must be selected for his third year's work.

Each year about 30 per cent of the graduating class is picked by the student organisations, confirmed by the school administration, and sent for a year of study in some western country. During this year, all expenses are paid by the school. All students, during their residence in the school, receive 130 roubles per month.

Each student is therefore in the pay of the school. During his school course, as a part of his work, he must : (1) Teach workers in a factory for at least four hours per week during the whole three years. This keeps him in touch with the labour movement. (2) Teach, during his first year, not less than six hours per week in some elementary school, factory school or "rabfac." This provides his training in pedagogy. (3) The second and third years he must teach in higher schools and universities. This gives him his contact with the higher educational work of the Republic.

All students belong, of course, to the Education Workers' Union. They are also organised administratively and pedagogically. Each of the thirty seminars has a secretary, and these secretaries, with one of their number selected as chairman, make up the student administrative body of the school. Students in each of the six general courses (political economy, Russian history, etc.) select a decan. The six decans, with one of their number selected as chairman, make up the student pedagogical body of the school.

All course outlines and proposals go first to this student pedagogical body. If they are acceptable, they are passed on to the school administrative body for approval. Pedagogical proposals from faculty members or students must first secure the endorsement of this body, however. The school administrative committee consists of the director, the secretary, three teachers and two students (the chairmen of the administrative and pedagogical student committees).

You may easily believe that a person familiar with the organisation of graduate schools in American universities would open his eyes in wonder at such an institution. The matter is easily explainable, however. First, the whole Soviet educational system is on a foundation of administrative and pedagogical self-government. Second, some of the strongest of the younger men are taking technical work in these higher institutions, and it is their wish that they should learn to carry responsibility. The man who had been relating these facts to me in such careful detail was perhaps thirty years of age. He was chairman of the student pedagogical group, and he knew his business thoroughly.

"Tell me," I asked, "how you got into this institution."

"From the army," said he. "Eighty per cent. of the students now in the school were in the army during the Civil War."

"How did you get into the army?"

"I was a student of history when the war broke out. After the Revolution, for three years, I was a political representative of the Communist Party in the army. Then the Civil War came, and I went into active service."

"How did you come to leave the army?" I asked.

"My interests do not lie in the field of military operations," he replied. "As soon as the Civil War was over I got leave of absence and came here."

"What was your position in the army?"

"A commandant," he answered. That term is used for all Soviet officers above the rank of colonel.

"How many men did you command?"

"Thirty-six thousand," he said quite simply.

"Then you were a brigadier-general, or something of the sort."

"I do not know," he said. "We do not have those distinctions in the Red Army."

"And now you are studying to be a teacher of economics?"

"Exactly. That is where my real interest lies."

He shook hands and went about his business. I took my leave of the secretary, and came away realising that when brigadier-generals are students in pedagogical institutions the standards of institutional life may well be raised.

II.—THE "RABFACS"

RABFACS are higher technical schools designed to take care of students who come directly from the factory and who have had no adequate educational preparation for higher technical work. They were created to meet an emergency. They will probably disappear as the emergency passes.

Students in rabfacs are mature people. All of them have worked for their living. Many rabfacs refuse to accept students who have not done at least three years of work in industry.

Rabfacs operate on varying bases. In some of them the students do all of their school work by day. In others, the students continue on their jobs by day and attend rabfac classes in the late afternoon and evening. Some of the rabfacs combine both of these plans by having the students attend evening classes for a part of the course and day classes for the remainder.

Whatever the method of school organisation, the purpose of the rabfac is the same—to take men and women directly from the factories and give them a technical training. Trade unions pick these people, and in many cases support them during their school course.

The student who showed me through the Rabfac at Vladikavkaz had spent several years in the United States as a land and timber worker. Now he was studying forestry in the Vladikavkaz Rabfac.

“I did my best in the United States,” said he, “but I could never get a chance. Every time I got a little money saved up I lost my job, so nothing ever came of my plans to get an education. Besides, I was an agitator, and that made it hard. After the Russian Revolution they deported me. There was nothing for me to do but to come back here.”

“Do you still agitate here?” I asked him.

“Every summer,” said he. “I go from village to village and tell the peasants about the new life that is ahead of them if they will just take hold and create it. And here the Union backs me up. They made it possible for me to come to the Rabfac. A chap cannot do this kind of thing for himself very well. It goes much better when he is backed by an organisation.”

We went to the door of one of the class rooms. Immediately a student from the class came out and asked us what we wanted.

We told him, and then I asked: “Why did you get up and come out when we opened the door?”

“I am the chairman of the class committee,” said he. “It is our business to see that things go right in the class.”

Each class had such an organisation. It was the disciplinary and administrative unit of the student life in the Rabfac.

This Rabfac was a day school. Students came to it from the surrounding towns and from the countryside. It was located in an old newspaper office that had been partly converted for school purposes. There were 150 students, divided into four main subject groups, on the Dalton Plan. In pedagogy there were four classes, in agriculture, four classes, in technology one class and in biology, one class. Three quarters of these students were men; one

quarter, women. Those who were not sent by trade unions were sent by village Soviets or councils. All spent from three to four years in the school.

Student organisations provided living quarters. The students lived in small groups of from three to six.

School administration was carried on by an executive committee consisting of the director of the school, one representative of the students and one representative of the faculty. The larger school committee consisted of the director, six teachers, six students, and six representatives of the local trade unions and political organisations.

There were nine rabfacs in the North Caucasus. Seven were day schools and two were evening schools. In Baku there were five—a central school in the city and four in the surrounding country. The central school was particularly well housed. Four rabfacs in Tiflis were conducted in four different languages to meet the needs of the Turkish, Armenian, Georgian and Russian workers.

The rabfac which I visited in Rostov was a large day school with 680 students. There was a night rabfac in the same building with a student body of 180. A quarter of the day students and a fifth of the evening students were women. Ninety per cent of these students were supported in whole or in part by the unions that had sent them.

All work in the Rostov Rabfac was organised on the laboratory plan. I saw some excellent class work and some fine teaching in this school.

The school was controlled by an executive committee of five : the director, two teachers and two students.

Student organisation was thorough. The students were organised in their respective unions : metal, farm and timber, building, wood, railroad, mines, education. The Young Communists had an organisation. There was also a general school organisation of all students with an executive committee of nine, selected for a year, and sub-committees on : academic work, co-operation, health, sanatorium care, food, domicile.

Educationally each rabfac represents the organised effort of a picked group of young workers to get a technical education. Economically it is a self-governing, co-operative group of workers who believe in the workability of Communism, and who try to practise some of its simpler precepts.

SCOTT NEARING

**“THE PLEBS” DEPENDS ON ITS FRIENDS.
WHICH MEANS WE LOOK TO YOU TO DO YOUR BIT.**