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A NOTE ON WORKERS EDUCATION

Education of workers with a view to prepare them for a more important role in the trade union movement and as responsible citizens of the country rightly belongs to the trade unions. In view of the fact that most trade unions were not prepared to undertake this responsibility, the Government of India had to take upon itself the task of running the workers educational programme under tripartite auspices. The Central Board of Workers Education, with its regional and local counterparts, has now been in existence for many years. Statistically it could be possible to produce an impressive figure of the number of units opened and the number of workers who have been put through the educational programme under the scheme. But it is our unfortunate experience that the education imparted to them have made them no better. There has been little impact of this educational programme on either discipline, or industrial relations or productivity or the trade union movement of the country. The reasons are not far to seek. The workers education programme has become a purely bureaucratic show, although it is supposed to be governed by semi-autonomous tripartite body; and now and then, trade union leaders are invited to lecture to the trainees.

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Those who are supposed to give training themselves have no experience of either organising or running a trade union. They have no experience of the several problems that crop up in the regulation of industrial relations. The education and lectures are, therefore, merely bookish and leave no impression on the minds of the workers. Considering the inputs into this scheme, the productivity is practically nil, and it would be a waste of public funds to the tune of Rs. 60 lakhs every year if the scheme is to continue. We are conscious that scrapping this scheme may work as a hardship to the employees working in this scheme but that could not be a justification for continuing this scheme. This, however, is not to say that we are against workers education. We only recommend the scrapping of the scheme in its present form.

Intelligent labour is even more valuable an asset to industry than plant, machinery and building. Ignorant labour, on the other hand, is not merely a liability, but is also a stumbling block to the progress of industry and the country. It is, therefore, imperative that labour should be properly educated and trained if the pace of our country's industrial progress is to be accelerated.

The term "workers education" should not be understood to mean merely 'literacy'. Literacy is, of course, important, but it is not all. It is only one aspect. In fact, in a country like ours, workers education must be many-sided of which literacy is only one.

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FIVE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF WORKERS EDUCATION

A properly devised workers' education programme must aim at catering to atleast the following five different aspects, viz.,

1. to make him literate;
2. (a) to make him an efficient, enthisiastic and disciplined operative at the plant;  
(b) to train him on the job or the machine he has to handle;  
(c) to educate him on the important economic and technical aspects of the industry and the plant he is employed in, so as to prepare him to participate intelligently in the management of the industry in due course;
3. to make him an understanding, loyal and steadfast member of his union and to prepare him to take up an increasingly responsible role in his union affairs and thus developing in him qualities of leadership;
4. to make him lead a clean and healthy life based on a firm moral foundation, and
5. to make him a responsible and patriotic citizen in the democratic set-up of the country.

Naturally the education, training and equipment required in these various directions cannot be catered to by any single agency. They require specialised agencies. In fact, certain types of education fall within either the exclusive sphere, privilege or responsibility of different institutions.

LITERACY - A STATE RESPONSIBILITY

For instance, making the workers literate is as much the responsibility of the state as spreading

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literacy generally among the people as a whole. Only in view of the peculiar circumstances in which an industrial worker is placed, because of his age and his inability to spare the usual hours for study, the programme for workers' literacy must be suitably designed and directed. In industries which work more than one shift and workers are consequently liable to change-over from the day shift to the night shift and vice-versa, their study hours too must undergo similar change-overs. This problem, however, will not be present in the case of women workers who are, as a rule, employed only in the day shift. In short, the literacy programme must be such as will be suitable to people beyond the school-going age; and in order to cater to the psychological factor even the age of the person who teaches is of importance. Retired teachers will, therefore, be more suitable for educating these persons, who will be older than the workers, than younger teachers who are just entering the profession.

#### SHOP-FLOOR TRAINING IN EVERY PLANT

The training required for making the worker an efficient and disciplined operative at the plant can be better imparted by suitable shop-floor training by the management itself. At present there is hardly any planned effort in this direction. A worker is recruited from the streets and is straightaway put on a machine whose working he

has had no opportunity to familiarise himself with. With modern technological progress, machines are becoming more and more delicate, complicated and costly; and it would require trained personnel to operate them if productivity is to go up. This requires a regular preemployment Shop-floor training and retraining, in all major units in important industries, the latter whenever redeployment schemes have to be introduced following, rationalisation. Such a scheme should be regulated by well-defined rules in order to avoid the possibility of the system being misused. The scheme must guarantee reasonable payment to apprentices both as an incentive for them to learn and as a disincentive to the management to abuse the scheme. Otherwise the management may go on calling him an apprentice in order to avoid paying their full occupational wages but take from his work as from a regular full-fledged worker.

#### EDUCATION ON TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL ASPECTS

Then there is the other aspect of education needed by the workers. Productivity in industries can go up if only there is willing co-operation by understanding labour; and if labour is to be made intelligent, knowledge of the basic facts about the industry, both in its technical aspect and its economic aspect, should be imparted by the

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management to the workers. This would remove any element of suspicion that might exist in the mind of labour and make it an intelligent partner in the process of production. Most managements are reluctant to give labour any information it might ask on the financial side of the industry. At the same time, they also complain that labour is making irresponsible demands. It should be the endeavour of all progressive managements to keep their labour informed from time to time about the financial side of the undertaking also so that labour will be able to appreciate the management's position and adjust its expectations accordingly.

Imparting of such knowledge is not possible by merely giving the workers or their union a copy of the balance sheet or the profit and loss account. These documents only show the financial position as at the end of the year, assuming that they really indicate the true and correct financial position. But the workers must be kept informed of the progress of the industry from month to month or from quarter to quarter so that the financial result, whatever it may be, will be understood by the workers at every stage.

Such sharing of information about the working of the industry would require a change in the attitude of an approach towards labour by management. And this can be achieved only by educating managements too simultaneously. A management education programme is,

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therefore, as essential even as a programme for workers' education, if there is to be increased productivity and sustained progress in the industrial sector of our country.

EDUCATION TO BE PROVIDED BY TRADE UNIONS

Then there are the other aspects of the education needed by worker, viz. (i) to make him an understanding, loyal and steadfast member of his union and to prepare him to take up an increasingly responsible role in his union affairs as well as the remaining two other aspects also viz. (ii) "to make the worker a responsible and patriotic citizen in the democratic set-up of the country and (iii) to make him lead a clean and healthy life based on a firm moral foundation". It is only the trade union that can promote this aspect of education. It is however true that many trade unions today have no programme for training their members. There are nevertheless some established trade unions in the country who are having a regular education programme for the workers. We realise that this is not adequate. We also realise at the same time that every union cannot be expected to have an educational wing, for the unions themselves may be small and their resources meagre. In so far as the small unions are concerned, the national centres or their state counterparts or the industrial federations,

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to which the small unions may be affiliated, can undertake this educational programme on a systematic basis. As for resources, the amount spent at present on the Central Board of Workers Education, which is roughly about Rs. 60 lakhs a year, may be diverted as grants-in-aid to these institutions. The procedure for making available such grants should be simplified and there should be less of form-filling and other wearisome formalities. This, however, is not to say that there should not be any supervision by Government. Audit of the accounts relating to the educational programme may be entrusted to an auditor nominated by the State. There could also be periodical inspection by officials of the Labour Ministry to satisfy themselves that the educational programmes are in fact being conducted and the money is not diverted for other purposes.

The assistance by the Government to educational programme under the auspicious of the trade unions could also be in kind, such as equipping them with a suitable library on matters connected with labour, trade union, economics etc., together with such other equipments as furniture, audio visual aids, and simple literature explaining the different aspects connected with labour and industrial relations.

We realise that in the workers education programme run by the trade unions there may be need for a higher



type of training too. The type of education so far outlined is basic and will be catering only to the needs of the rank and file of workers. A higher type of education and training will be necessary for higher trade unions officials and leaders. These can be organised by the national centres in collaboration, with the universities so that the national centre provides the practical training and the universities the theoretical education in Economics, Labour Laws, Trade Unionism, Industrial Relations, etc. Government should encourage universities to provide for extension courses for union leadership training as a supplement to the education programme conducted by trade unions.

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