

Brookwood Labor College and Peace Education

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Established in 1921, in Katonah, New York, Brookwood's existence was due mainly to the efforts of reformers—pro-labor intellectuals and progressive unionists—within the ranks of American labor. These reformers recognized the pressing need for unionization of unskilled workers in mass production industries as part of the much larger movement for progressive social change. During the post-World War I period, Brookwood was in the unique position of accepting experienced workers from the ranks of labor and training them to become effective organizers. Brookwood's rural setting evoked the atmosphere of a workers' utopia quite unlike the surroundings students had left behind, and living on campus enabled these worker-students to intensify their academic skills and exchange ideas on the development of the labor movement—accomplishments which would not have been possible if they'd spent most of their time on the job. Tied to the goal of unionization, moreover, was a peace education program unlike any other workers' education endeavor in American history (Howlett, *Brookwood Labor College, passim*).

Brookwood offered a two-year program in the social sciences and labor organization (in 1930, the program was cut to one year, a casualty of the Great Depression and aftereffects of its struggle with the AFL). Though not registered by the New York State Office of Higher Education because no degrees were granted, Brookwood's unorthodox curriculum challenged even the most enterprising students. The first year, courses included history, social studies, English, social psychology, sociology, economics, and its most popular offering labor drama. The second year, labor history, techniques of labor organization, union skills, foreign labor movement history and tactics, and speech and rhetoric were taught. Each of these courses contained curricula emphasizing the importance of world peace and developing harmonious relations between labor and management.

Brookwood's educational program also caught the attention of social and industrial critics. Some of the better-known visitors were novelist Sinclair Lewis, who called Brookwood "the only self-respecting, keen, alive, educational institution I have ever known,"; John Dewey, Columbia University philosopher and member of Brookwood's board of trustees; W.E.B. DuBois, African American civil rights leader and author; Norman Thomas, Socialist Party leader and presidential candidate numerous times; and Rexford Guy Tugwell, Columbia University economist and New Deal architect.

There were usually no more than twenty students per class. Professors taught two classes in their major areas, with two sections offered per semester. Lectures were the method of instruction, with group discussions encouraged at the end of each. These often turned out to be a medium of mutual education between the academically well-trained instructors, who were experts in labor history, and students, who could bring the test of their experience to bear on those theories. Among the professors were A.J. Muste, the popular peace activist who was later dubbed "America's Number One Pacifist" by *Time* magazine in 1939; David J. Saposs, author of numerous works on unionism and nicknamed "Mr. Labor History"; Mark Starr, editor of the *International Labour Review*; Katherine Pollak Ellickson, later appointed by President John F. Kennedy to the Commission on the Status of Women in America; and Arthur W. Calhoun, author of the acclaimed three-volume work, *A Social History of the American Family*.

Based upon Muste's 1924 article "American Labor and Peace," Brookwood's workers' education program insisted that modern warfare subjugated workers by allowing industrialists to restrain labor's access to real economic power (Muste, "American Labor," 48-50). The intense patriotism

generated by World War I carried over into the industrial sphere in which state militias were called out to crush striking workers seeking decent wages and better working conditions. The College's curriculum stressed the importance of peace in interpersonal relations. Establishing a new economic order devoid of war and industrial oppression was one of Brookwood's main educational objectives. Brookwood's teachers encouraged their student unionists "to renounce wealth, position and power accruing from a social system based on violence...and...to devise a more excellent way, a technique of social progress less crude, brutal, costly and slow than mankind has yet evolved" (Muste, "Sketches," 104-105, 185).

As part of its curriculum development in the area of peace education, Brookwood invited a number of notable speakers to its residential campus. Among the European visitors were John Strachey, a Labour Party member of the British Parliament and later part of the "Shadow Cabinet," Andre Philip, French economist and socialist leader, Kurt Klaber, a World War I German pacifist, who discussed European experimental schools for social change, and J. Olson, the Norwegian Labour Party editor, who presented three lectures entitled, "The Importance of an International Working Class for Lasting Peace." American guest speakers were Harry Elmer Barnes, author of *The Genesis of War* and a revisionist historian at Smith College and later Columbia University, theologian and Fellowship of Reconciliation member Reinhold Niebuhr who argued that "A society which tries to create truth, beauty and goodness while it rests upon untrue and unjust foundations deserves to be convicted of hypocrisy and must inevitably lose the good will of those who are victimized," Roger N. Baldwin, founder of the National Civil Liberties Union (later ACLU), and former Rhodes Scholar, World War I conscientious objector, and *Federated Press* correspondent Alfred Haessler, who presented a talk on "Prison Experiences of a Conscientious Objector" (Quoted in Barton, pp. 99-100; Brookwood Labor College Papers, Boxes 6, 47, 53). The anti-war speakers who came to Brookwood did so because of the challenge of conveying their views to student unionists in the hope that they would then bring their messages of peace to their respective locals. In fighting for social justice against powerful economic interest groups, the College relied on the crusade for world peace as one importance step for promoting domestic social reform.

The driving force behind Brookwood's peace and justice curriculum was the belief "that the continuation of the labor movement...eventually determine the survival of democracy because only with organization could laborers achieve self-respect, self-expression, and some control over their own destiny" (Barton, 121-138-39). Violence against peaceful strikers and protestors at home is an indication of how governments, in general, react toward one another in the international sphere. In their lectures, Brookwood's teachers constantly reminded students of the wartime suppression of the Industrial Workers of the World and the anti-war socialists. War, itself, generates passionate patriotism that constantly breeds intolerance.

Brookwood's peace education efforts were taken to heart by many of the student workers. Len DeCaux, a British war veteran who later became Publicity Director for the Congress of Industrial Organization, noted that "I was enraged at the propaganda that bamboozled millions of decent people into hating and slaughtering each other for four long years" (DeCaux, 14-15). Rose Pessota, who attended Brookwood in 1924-1925 and later became a vice-president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union argued that "American munitions makers add to their millions by selling to other countries. It is not self defense that motivates their patriotic concerns" (Pessota, 12-13). Perhaps the most telling impact of Brookwood's peace education program was expressed by Charles Moore of the Postal Clerks Union. A paper he wrote for his psychology class, patterned after William James' "Moral Equivalent of War," captures the true spirit of Brookwood's peace curriculum: "For him [James] the fatalistic view of war was nonsense. He said that the combative forces in many should be directed into the dangerous jobs of life. Let the gilded youth, sighing for adventure in coal and iron mines, climb skyscrapers and become tough but harmless" (Quoted in *Brookwood Review*, 3).

Why Brookwood became the beacon for social change in American labor circles was because of its drama program. It was a unique feature to the interwar workers' education program. Students and faculty energetically participated in writing, directing, and performing plays that dealt with labor and social issues in America. From the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, the Brookwood Players performed numerous dramas. The troupe visited Boston, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Cleveland, and Baltimore, and in 1932 alone performed fifty-three shows, traveled nearly 2,300 miles, and saw a total audience attendance of over 13,000. In 1934, the players traveled over 4,000 miles to fifty-three cities and performed before audiences totaling over 14,000. Some of the original student productions were *The Tailor Shop*, *The Starvation Army*, *Gimble Sprockets*, *What Price Coal*, *Sit-Down*, *Miners*, and *An Open Shop Summer*, whose titles and content reflected the worker-students' understanding of American culture and a vision of unions' place within it.

Not all the plays performed focused on unionization. There were others highlighting Brookwood's interest in world peace and represented a unique feature of its social reform curriculum. The chilling effects of World War I disillusionment and the setbacks of the postwar labor movement were a constant reminder of the deleterious effects war has on capitalistic societies. Brookwood's interest in world peace and social change made it unique in the history of workers' education. For instance, in the play *Peace Is No Job of Ours*, Brookwood players pointed out "the greed of munitions makers as they profit from the murder of human beings" and criticized the way patriotic executives glorified American society. The play was performed at Cooper Union in New York City and Boston Labor College. It served as a prelude to the Nye Committee hearings on the "merchants of death theory." Another play, *Coal Digger Mule Goes to War* depicted the "false glamour and folly of war. In *Guncotton*, the drama focused on a young munitions factory worker's plea for peace. Moreover, in *God and Country* the fate of four soldiers killed in action (Tommy, a cockney cab driver, Fritz, a German woodcarver, Pierre, a French small farmer, and Bill, an auto mechanic from the Bronx) is dramatically driven home as they discuss their tragedy in the afterworld. And in the humorous but serious play *Uncle Sam Wants You*, the players warned worker audiences in Providence and Boston "against a coming war with its lure of pay after years of unemployment" (*Brookwood Labor College Plays*, Brookwood Labor College Papers, Boxes 97, 98).

Brookwood's anti-war plays were an important part of its educational program, one designed to highlight the pitfalls of overzealous patriotism. These dramas were written to demonstrate that a conservative social and economic philosophy impeded those activists who called for reform. Its dramas implied that popular activity might affect the decisions of government and, through it, society. These plays, in keeping with the College's avowed educational objectives, were designed to arouse the spirit of social awareness within the ranks of American labor and to encourage greater awareness to the importance of peace education.

Brookwood's last peace education effort was the establishment of a Worker's Anti-War Summer School, conducted July 13 to August 1, 1936. It was organized by Tucker P. Smith, an FOR member who replaced Muste as Dean of Faculty. The three-week session was inaugurated with two basic background courses. One course, "Imperialism, Nationalism and Fascism," was taught by Smith. The other, "Economics of War," was instructed by Vic Reuther, bother of United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther. In addition, Brookwood teacher Joel Seidman offered a practicum entitled "Methods of War Resistance" that emphasized the effectiveness of Gandhian non-resistance tactics, which were successfully employed in the sit-down strikes in the Detroit auto plants. Labor's "First Anti-War Summer School" also enriched its program with the appearance of guest lecturers. Rose Stein, author of the popular *M-Day*, spoke about the dangers of the army's proposed industrial mobilization plan. Paul Reid presented an address on the American League Against War and Fascism. Talks were also presented by "representatives of the

socialist and communist parties on their peace programs" (Frenyear, 11-13; Brookwood Labor College Papers, Box 97).

Brookwood's peace education efforts were designed to arouse workers' consciousness against the evils of war. Throughout its history, 1921-1937, some 400-student unionists were taught to comprehend the economic and psychological forces driving nations to war. The College's curriculum called for the elimination of war was a means of curtailing domestic industrial violence, while also addressing such traditional issues as the failures of the Treaty of Versailles, the breakdown of the prewar European labor-peace movement, war debts and reparations, economic imperialism, the munitions industry, and the rise of military dictatorships. Brookwood's peace education program was the only one of its kind between the world wars. Part of its uniqueness stemmed from its ability to reach out and attract to its residential setting socially concerned laborers. Not other workers' education programs in American history duplicated Brookwood's efforts in this regard.

Furthermore, what made Brookwood's educational program unique was its attempt to convince workers that they possessed power over their government, which, if exercised in unison, might dissuade elected officials from declaring war in order to consider alternatives in the best interests of society, at large. Brookwood's peace formula ultimately rested on the premise that workers from all occupations must focus not only on the "bread and butter issues" (higher pay and better working conditions), but also on their own society and government in order to recognize that war prevention actually begins at home. As Brookwood's teachings consistently declared: "...there is no other adequate means of carrying on the war against war than the 'concerted action of workers...and all who are exploited and oppressed'" (Quoted in Braatoy, 156-57). Educators from all occupations should not ignore that peace message. Historians who write about the history of education in America, moreover, should not overlook Brookwood's efforts to awaken workers' consciousness to the importance of peace.

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