

# Classes and Schools:

a radical  
definition for  
teachers



20¢



*This pamphlet was prepared by the Teacher Organizing Project of the New University Conference, a group of school teachers and education workers who believe in schools which liberate the potential of students and teachers and in a society based on human dignity and equality. There are many issues confronting teachers today: student "unrest", community control, standards, discipline, grading, oppressive bureaucracies. To understand these issues and to know how to act on them, we feel that it is necessary to have a theoretical framework that places these issues and our own roles in the schools in a deeper perspective.*

*This pamphlet formulates that perspective and suggests a strategy and direction for teachers. This is an introductory pamphlet, the first in a series that will deal specifically with many of the issues we have raised. Subsequent pamphlets will document the conclusions discussed in this introduction.*

*Our hopes are that this pamphlet series will contribute to the growing movement of radical teachers across the country.*

*To receive the additional pamphlets, please send \$3 to the Teacher Organizing Project of NUC.*



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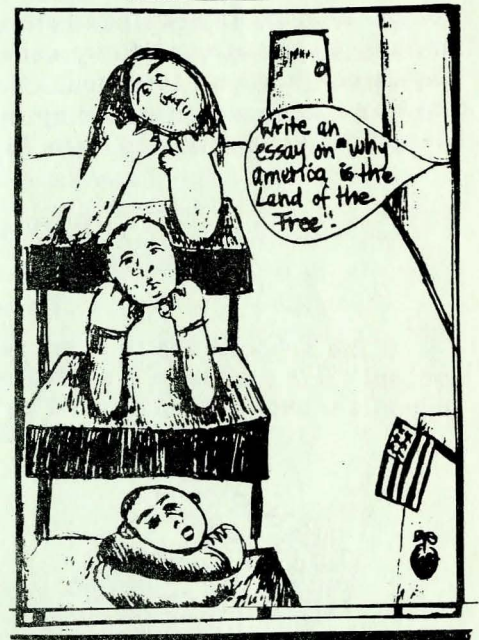
Beyond the common proposition that the schools are failing is a vast array of explanations: a lack of funds, an outmoded and irrelevant curriculum, a lack of experienced teachers, segregation, graded classrooms, squelching of creativity, downtown bureaucracy and so on. But the corresponding solutions --- effective use of technology, a humane and relevant curriculum, performance contracting, integration, alternate schools, the "open classroom", decentralization --- are piecemeal. They deal with symptoms and sidestep the fundamental reality: that schools are functional within American society and have served their functions well. Even progressive teachers often believe a myth about public education; that the schools can be a vehicle for equal opportunity and upward mobility. But this myth obscures the inherent role of public education in American society: to maintain, not eliminate hierarchies of race, sex and social class.

Schools maintain and even reinforce American social hierarchies by training the labor force; preparing students to fit into manpower categories as established by market demand. While some students are prepared to be professionals, others are "trained" to be service workers. Schools also socialize students to accept their training and the place in the social structure for which they are channelled. And schools, consciously and unconsciously, inculcate the beliefs and values of the American political, social and economic order.

#### HOW THE SCHOOLS GOT WHERE THEY ARE TODAY

To understand why and how the public schools work the way they do, we should examine the roots and functions of public education in 200 years of American history. Such a perspective can illustrate the response of the educational system to social, political and economic forces and show how it has forced teachers, students and communities to oppress each other, rather than to unite against the system which damages us all.

The ruling elites in the United States have used the educational system to maintain social stability and to meet the needs of the economy. Working class groups demanded access to public education as early as the 1820s. Yet the school system began in the 1830s as the ruling Yankees attempted to pacify potentially disruptive immigrant groups. In a period of political conflict as tumultuous as our own, Horace Mann established the first Common Schools as places where "the duty of changing laws and rulers by an appeal to the ballot, and not by rebellion, should be taught to all the children until they are fully understood."



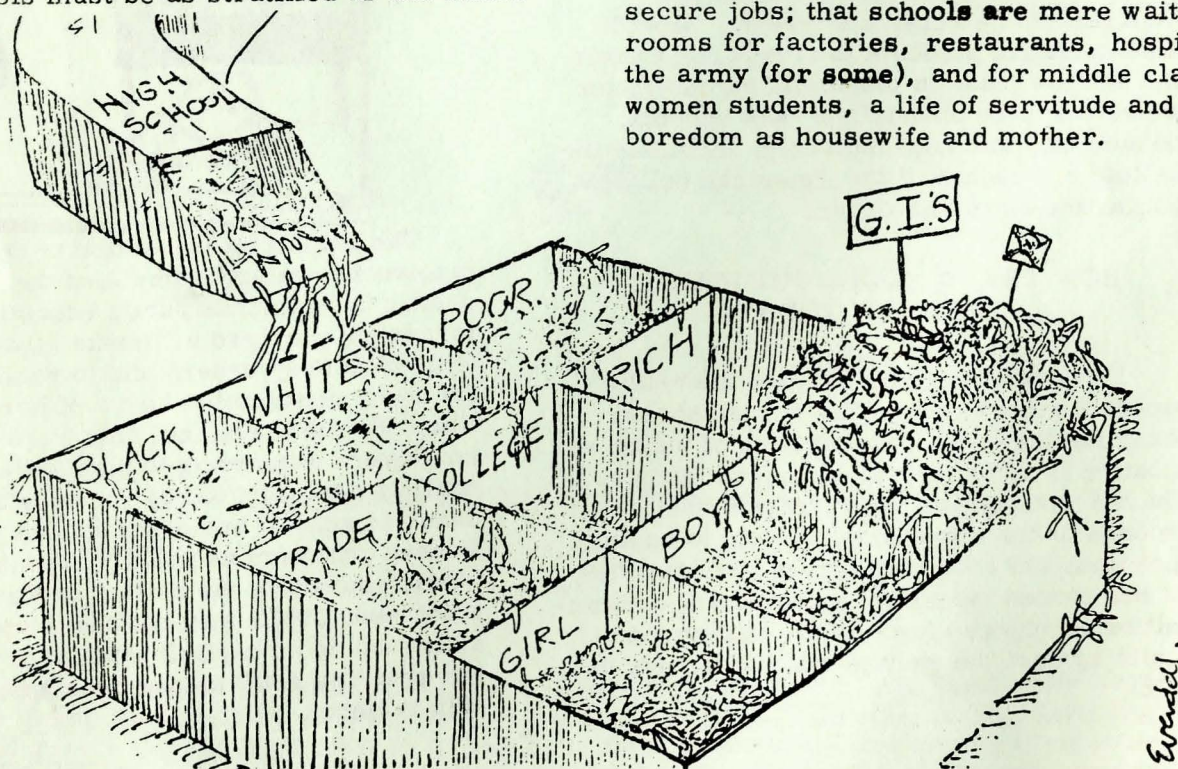
The industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century stimulated the great growth of American public education. Factory work required a literate labor force trained to obey orders and to remain still for many consecutive hours of boring routine. By the 1860s, not only were industrial employers attempting to hire workers whose docility was certified by successful attendance in school; businessmen had joined the Yankee pacifiers as political sponsors of public education. As skilled craftsmen unionized, public schools added vocational education as an explicit attempt to break the power of the craft unions over apprenticeship training.



Severe poverty of the early twentieth century and the Great Depression of the 1930s led to the sponsorship of welfare legislation by trade unions and the more farsighted corporate executives. Among the more significant reforms were the prohibitions of child labor which for decades had underbid adult labor and forced millions of adults out of jobs. Keeping children out of factories would have been disastrous if they were free to roam the streets making trouble. So complementary to child labor laws, compulsory school attendance laws were strengthened and extended. As the productivity of American industry increased over the last thirty years, manpower requirements decreased. In part, this was handled by reducing the work week to 35 or 40 hours. And in part, the work force was reduced by increasing the school leaving age to 16 or 18.

#### TRACKING: UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

If the schools are to prepare students to accept their places in a stratified society, schools must be as stratified as life itself.



A mechanism is required to control the flow of manpower to fill specific "needs" of the economic system. This mechanism is called channelling or tracking.

Assigned to different tracks (i. e., ability groups and multiple course levels) by school measured "intelligence", social characteristics and teacher recommendations, children find that early in their school lives they are slotted for their future work roles. The lower tracks are populated with poor children, black children and working class children. The upper tracks (the college-bound, "honors" tracks) are filled with children of the white middle and upper-middle class. Paradoxically, while perpetuating stratification and the class structure, the existence of tracks encourages false belief in the myth of educational mobility. Because upper tracks exist, black and poor parents often try to get their children into them, or to create them where none exist; rather than to challenge the total system of differentiated and unequal education.

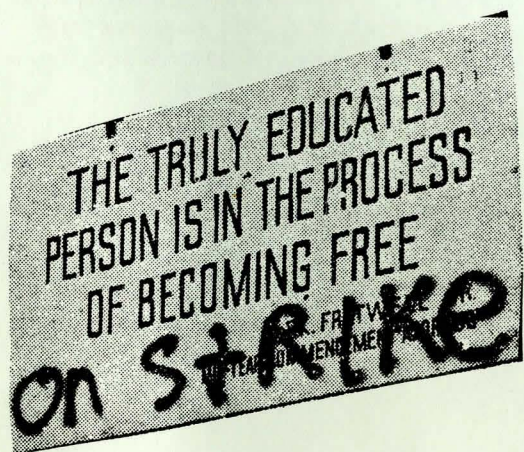
Black, brown and most white working class youth often understand that schools do nothing more than keep them off the street until they can move into poorly paid non-secure jobs; that schools are mere waiting rooms for factories, restaurants, hospitals, the army (for some), and for middle class women students, a life of servitude and boredom as housewife and mother.



Teachers should recognize the truth that many of their students see so well: rather than training all students for the labor force, a function of the classroom is to keep some students out of it. Despite the rhetoric of school boards and teacher training institutions, many teachers fulfill their mission as wardens, not as educators. The rebellion of their low-tracked students, who are being held in school for unskilled work later, is not an irrational flight from education but in part, the rational response of inmates unjustly imprisoned.

The future of the American economy in the '70s calls for increased numbers of both poorly paid service and clerical workers and for well paid technicians and professionals. Tracking in schools may become more rigid despite the increased foundation and government sponsored rhetoric of equal educational opportunity. More students must be low-tracked if corporate needs for clerks and service personnel are to be met. The alternative is an increased mass of unemployed graduates, overeducated for the jobs available, a source of vastly increased political ferment.

Some educational "experiments" are attempts to disguise tracking. Sold as reforms, examples are: the use of computerized programmed instruction within heterogeneous classes, more guidance classes and vocational training programs. These are attempts to convince students that they are not in fact being tracked - that they are either working "at their own speed" or that they "belong" in a certain training program.



Theoretically, it would be possible to design a school system which structured intense competition among students of all races and social classes for the limited privileges which "better" education brings. In fact, the ruling elites are interested in rationalizing the tracking system in this way. Watts, Detroit and Newark taught them that social stability is threatened by trying to contain an entire race. But so long as the privileged places in professional and executive roles remain so limited, some mechanism for screening the masses out of the higher tracks must be found. A tracking system which was truly based on some racially and economically neutral definition of "talent" or "ability" would hardly be tolerated by those middle class communities which expect for their children at least the privileges they themselves enjoy. The alternatives are culturally biased I. Q. tests which screen out the black, the brown, the poor; theories of cultural disadvantage which condition teachers to expect (and thus coax) stupidity from black and brown students; and unemployment and underemployment rates among black, brown and poor white youth which instruct these students to turn off school.

## RACISM

In the past decade, black people began to question and challenge the inferior education their children were receiving. A rash of theories emerged, attempting to explain away the poor achievement of black children. Variouslly called "cultural deprivation", "social disadvantage", etc., these theories blame the child, not the school, for educational failure, and have led to a spurt of compensatory education programs designed to "make-up" for the shortcomings in a child's background and to "intervene" in the "pathological" family life of the poor. From Head Start to Upward Bound, theories and programs diagnose "lacks" in the poor



family, rather than in the racist institutions which control their lives and in the social system which perpetuates inequality. Though more subtle than theories of genetic inferiority,\* they nevertheless operate on the premise that black children are, if not defective, at least deficient.

There are no culturally disadvantaged students in America, only materially deprived ones. Social and cultural differences are not relevant to learning to read and to getting a good education. Rather, it is a question of whether an educational system exists that allows learning to take place, and whether a social system exists which rewards learning with decent jobs. When someone is motivated to learn to read and knows that there is a reason for doing so, that person learns.

Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, American Indian and Appalachian white cultures may be healthier than that of the American middle class. Yet even this insight can lead well-intentioned teachers to a form of educational racism; for example, only emphasizing the creative arts with black kids and not the literacy skills necessary to survive and struggle.

This "cultural relativism" still avoids the undeniable educability of every culture. In recent years we have not only the Cuban example where literacy was taught to an entire population of illiterate peasant adults in ten years, but even the example of the U. S. army, which when military manpower is scarce, has had little difficulty in making recruits from "culturally deprived" backgrounds literate within a few months. If Nixon's "all-volunteer army" is adopted, the Pentagon will surely find efficient ways of educating the black and brown mercenaries, while H. E. W. continues to preach that their younger sisters and brothers need compensatory cultural treatment to be educable.

Racism infuses educational reform in other ways as well. Uniform pupil integration has ceased to be the hope of liberals searching for "equal opportunity". But token forms of integration are increasingly used when necessary - not to create "equality" but to prevent the control of black education by black people. In Chicago, for example, racially homogeneous student bodies are accepted, but all young white teachers must be assigned to schools with black students; young black teachers must be assigned outside of the ghetto.

School busing is implemented in some cities, not to "integrate" inner city or white perimeter schools, but to bus black kids out of those racial-border schools which are in "danger" of becoming black majority schools.

The racism of white working class "backlash" communities is a rational response to the government and educationist pretense that school reform can solve the social problems of capitalism. With a limited number of professional, technical and executive positions available, any attempt to increase black students' access to them will require downward mobility for the white working class. Unless the white working class and black communities can unite around a socialist program to equalize the wealth and privileges available in American, racist tension between white and black students (and their parents) will continue to be a byproduct of a focus on the schools.

#### DISCIPLINE AND AUTHORITY

Expressions of the authority of the school are everywhere. Endless rules and regulations demand order and conformity. Grades are used to induce attendance and attentiveness. Teachers are powerless before administrators, and students are powerless before both. Parents are treated as intruders.

\*Theories of black genetic inferiority have also been revived in "respectable" biological and educational circles. For a discussion of this new racism, see Scientific American, October, 1970.



TEN FORTY-THREE.  
IN EXACTLY TWO MINUTES  
I'LL RING THE  
FIRST BELL AND  
THEY'LL ALL  
STAND STILL!



ALL, THAT IS, EXCEPT  
YOUR POTENTIAL DEVIATE!  
YOUR FLEDGLING REBEL!  
YOUR INCIPIENT  
BOAT-ROCKER!  
THEY'LL TRY TO  
MOVE ALL RIGHT!  
THEY'LL HAVE  
TO LEARN THE  
HARD WAY  
NOT TO MOVE!



SO I'LL  
SCREAM  
AT 'EM  
AND  
TAKE  
THEIR  
NAMES, AND  
GIVE THEM FIVE  
DETENTIONS AND  
EXTRA HOMEWORK!  
NEXT TIME THEY  
WONT MOVE AF-  
TER THE FIRST BELL!

As one moves down the social scale, from executive to professional to production worker to servant, the needs for externally imposed obedience, order and repression increase. So too do teachers perceive the teaching of obedience to be more important as one moves down the tracks of a school. Experiments with the relaxation of grades, with student directed courses and self regulation are common now in white middle class suburban schools but are rarer in the inner city. These experiments are tolerated because self direction and independent initiative are important skills in which the potential rulers of the society must be trained. They are more explosive for those whose sole social destiny is to follow orders.

Although authoritarianism that serves only to make students docile and submissive must be attacked, many progressive teachers have reacted with uncritical libertarianism - advocating schools that are free from all discipline, where what counts is to "do your own thing", where the pursuit of pupil whims and individualistic behavior is encouraged under the guise of freedom and libertarian ideals. Many of the "new" critics of education, as well as the promoters of alternate

or "free" schools suggest a libertarian education which is attractive to both teachers and students in rebellion from the stifling and oppressive atmosphere of public schools. However, substitution of laissez-faire individualism for competitive individualism is no progress. Instead teachers must encourage collective work, social responsibility and self-discipline. We have to build an individual strength that is integrally tied to an identification with others.

Teachers have a responsibility to teach their students those skills which they will need to struggle for a new society and to run it once it has been won. There are many things students should be taught: the true history of their country and the role they play in it; communication and literacy skills needed to understand the social system as well as to fight it (research, leaflet, pamphlet and book writing, public speaking, the conduct of meetings, the use of media - electronic, art, music and drama); the technical and scientific knowledge necessary to reorganize the world's most complicated distributive and productive apparatus on the basis of equality; and the ability to teach these skills to others.

BECAUSE WHEN THEY'VE  
LEARNED NOT TO QUESTION  
THE FIRST BELL, THEY'LL  
LEARN NOT TO QUESTION  
THEIR TEXTS!  
THEIR  
TEACHERS!  
THEIR COURSES!  
THEIR  
EXAMINATIONS!



THEY'LL  
GROW UP  
TO ACCEPT  
TAXES!  
HOUSING  
DEVELOP-  
MENTS / INSURANCE!  
WAR! MEN ON THE  
MOON! POLITICAL  
SPEECHES! TELEVISION  
COMMERCIALS! FUNERALS!

NON-  
MOVEMENT  
AFTER THE  
FIRST BELL IS  
THE BACKBONE OF  
WESTERN  
CIVILI-  
ZATION!





## THE CHANNELING AND SOCIALIZATION OF WOMEN

Schools which track children by class and race, which support and institutionalize racism, which demand obedience and conformity from students, also oppress women. From her earliest days in the kindergarten kitchen and doll corner, the girl student is continually socialized for her inevitable future role as wife, housekeeper and mother. Children's literature, social studies texts and even math books show women primarily in these roles; when they do work outside the home, it is as waitresses, salesgirls, unskilled factory help, clerical workers and occasionally as teachers (plain, motherly, but self-sacrificing for her children), nurses or social workers - the "women's" professions.

Teachers frequently point to girls in class as the "good" students; but "good" is often a euphemism for passivity, acceptance, obedience and conformity. Girls behave, they do their lessons on time, they make fewer demands.

The teacher's feelings are ambiguous. While she praises girls' docility, she admires boys' aggressiveness. Boys are scolded and punished often but are made to understand that their strength and toughness are superior characteristics. "They are all boy." At the same time that girls' assertiveness is frowned on and squelched, boys' sensitivity and emotional sensibility is rooted out.

Education available for girls is different from that for boys. Ten year old girls interested in chemistry or how the human body works and grows may be encouraged to become nurses, while boys with the same interests will be told that they should become doctors. A girl student is confronted with the low expectations the society has for her by teachers' attitudes, the curriculum, the books she reads and the ads she sees on television or in her mother's magazines.



In high school girls and boys are separated within the social class-biased academic and vocational tracks. In college-bound programs, girls are rarely found in the advanced math and science courses; in vocational training programs, girls take typing, hair styling and home economics, not shop or auto-mechanics. Women are taught very early that their life choices and alternatives are severely limited.

## INDOCTRINATION

"I've Looked at Life From Both Sides Now"

From kindergarten games to high school texts, servile and passive images of women and blacks are presented to students. The genocide of Indians is described as "westward expansion" and presented as necessary for American survival. The history of labor conflict is virtually ignored in American history



courses and unions are described as organizations belonging to Samuel Gompers, George Meany or Walter Reuther. Social problems are treated extensively - in terms of the efforts government is making to "solve" them.

Beyond the traditional texts, major publishing firms and universities like Harvard and Amherst are now issuing "new" curricula, relevant to today's social problems. This new material for high school social studies teachers is as ideological as its predecessors, but a lot more subtle. The assumptions of liberal managerial capitalism are implicit in the "inductive method" and "value clarification" approaches. Both teach "tolerance" and the false theory that "each child has a right to his or her opinion," that there is no authoritative right answer, that a teacher's job is to help children "clarify" their views - be they racist or humanitarian, militarist or pacifist -- as though children were born with the views they are clarifying; as though schools were apolitical and had no responsibility for student views. This new teaching methodology may legitimize student opinion and thus be an indirect stimulant to student activism, but its deeper function is to inculcate a commitment to moderation and a tolerance of moral error. These central tenets of liberalism are wholly inappropriate to a nation bent on the destruction of peoples at home and around the world. Melvin Laird does not have a right to his "opinion."

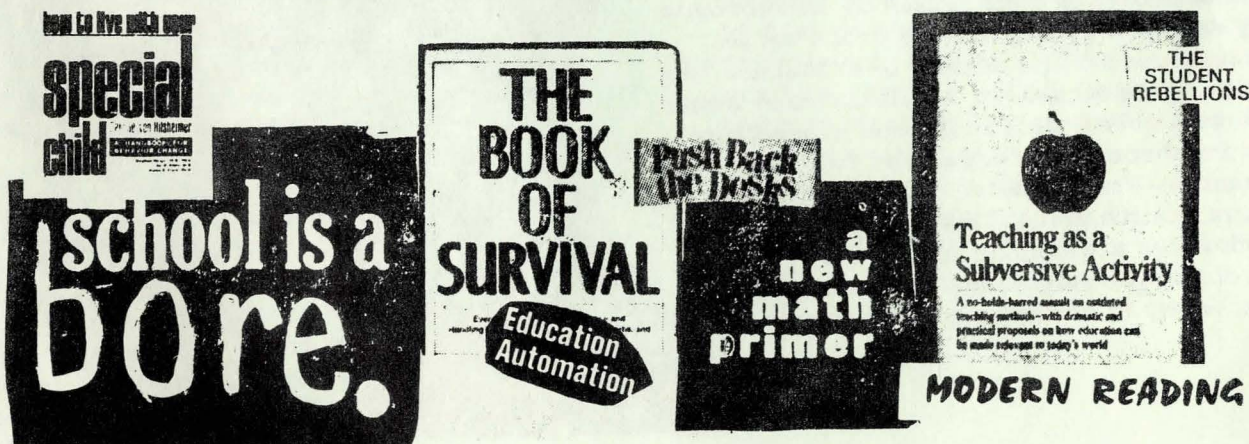
These new methodologies are only new

variations on the old theme -- that a teacher must be "objective" by presenting a view half-way between all "extremes". This kind of objectivity enables texts (and teachers) to defend the tweedledum-tweedledee two party electoral process, to argue a mild anti-communism (we hate commies, but McCarthyism was extreme), and to infuse all social history with the benevolence of authority.

Authority is implicit in all subject matter of course. Standard teacher training handbooks argue that the best justification for a teacher's lesson plan objectives is that the "experts in the field say it is important". From Shakespeare to Beethoven to Renoir, the watchword is "appreciation", not even understanding. Written work is corrected for conformity with "standard" English. Black students and white youth freaks must learn that their dialect and thus their community is illegitimate, not blessed by the dictators of style.

#### THE SYSTEM IS BREAKING DOWN

Middle class white students rebel against discipline for which they see no incentive. Their material needs have been met and they cannot be convinced that school obedience is the only protection from starvation as adults. Black and brown students rebel against that same discipline, in part because they know it will not win an adequate life for them anyway. Small insurgent





teacher groups are increasingly refusing to play the roles required of them. Larger numbers of teachers have turned to active union militancy, pressing demands for higher wages and better working conditions. Oppressed communities demand reforms - community control of schools, an end to ability testing and tracking, and open admissions for colleges.

Technologically advanced society could support educational opportunity for all, decent class loads and working conditions for teachers, materials and supplies which would allow individual attention and a diversity of educational experiences, but the working classes have been taxed to their limit and the only remaining source for the finance of educational reform is the untouchable super-profits of corporate wealth. The crisis of authority, the crisis of blocked opportunity, the crisis of state finance all converge on the schools, and it seems, on the teachers themselves.

## a socialist alternative

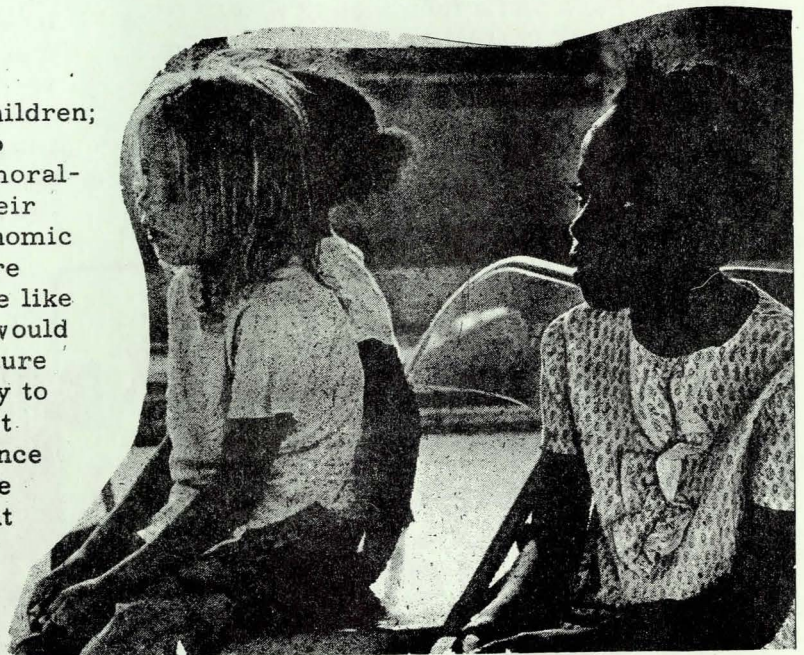
The waste of human potential; the destruction of countless numbers of children; the injustice to women, to black and to other minority group children; the demoralization of teachers, of students and their communities are all caused by an economic system that values private profit before human need. In a society of abundance like ours, good education for all children would be available if production and expenditure of resources were organized rationally to meet real social needs. But capitalist organization makes this impossible since priorities are determined by corporate profit requirements and the consequent necessity to control the labor force.

An alternative principle for organizing American society is socialism. By this we mean an education, occupational, productive and distributive system which is measured by its success in fulfilling the ideal:

*From each according to his or her ability;  
To each according to his or her needs.*

In education, this would still require steps to insure that man and womanpower was available to do socially necessary work, but even in cases where individuals could not enter their first-choice occupation, there would be no resulting economic and social deprivation as is the case today.

With the abolition of private corporate power, a socialist system would be committed to ending needless production and waste. Moral incentives would replace competition and greed in the motivation of individuals and in the assignment of occupational roles. With artificial financial and status superiorities removed from "prestige" occupations, individuals could be free to choose jobs based on their own desires and abilities.





Some teachers are reluctant to work with unions for higher wages, improved job conditions and academic freedom, because these reforms will not lead to basic changes in the structure of schools or society. But any fight for change, short of a revolution, is a reformist one. Reform struggles protect our freedom to operate. They also lead to new fights to prevent the gains just won from being turned to the use of the system.

For example, demands for open admissions to colleges are necessary, but winning them postpones the struggle to a new battleground: colleges with such programs will subvert open admissions by tracking black students within the university, admitting students only to flunk them out after six months, refusing to provide child care facilities so that women may attend, etc.

In some elementary schools, the elimination of I.Q. testing has been an important reform. Yet this victory requires a new fight waged against the schools' increased reliance on reading tests, grades and teacher recommendations for track assignments.

Reforms often mean immediate gains which lead to improved conditions for people. In turn, this leads to rising expectations and raises the possibilities of alternatives and choices. Fights for reform give people experience to see that victories are possible through collective action. Reform struggles must not be waged in isolation; connections between issues must be made and comprehension of the role of each reform in the broader political and economic system must underly each program. Reform fights should be waged as much as possible on the basis of what should be, not what can be; that is, not on what is easily achieved within the framework of the existing system, but what is possible and necessary to meet human needs with dignity.

School functions of tracking and socialization are critical to the maintenance of authoritarian capitalism. It is equally critical that teachers committed to basic change in this system stay in the public schools to attack those functions. While the fight for socialism will not be won in the schools, the movement for socialism can be developed by struggles in the schools which parallel attacks on other crucial institutions of capitalism: the military, the profit-making health system, biased "public" media, and the exploitative corporations.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remember, our often perceived "failure" to educate our students is not a result of our own personal inadequacies, of undisciplined or unmotivated students, of hostile communities, or even of over-crowded or under-resourced classrooms. From 8 to 3 each day, facing individual kids, this is easy to forget. We make futile attempts at individual solutions in our classrooms, locking the hostile world outside our door. We may even retreat into hopelessness, seeing the only way out is to leave for a more non-alienating situation in a "free" school. Since our basic involvements lie within a classroom and a school, we tend to think of classroom and school problems as isolated. But we can't escape the social struggle, not us, not our students, not their communities. We must work together to create a society in which the schools will serve the people. We can create our weapons from our own situations in the schools of the United States.



# freedom—I desire by sue aged 15 from cork

AND HER TEACHER. AGE? FROM CORK

## FREEDOM I DESIRE:

FREEDOM FROM WHAT?

FREE FOR WHAT?

This is not needed here

"Liberty" was one of the three aims of the French revolutionaries. This The revolutionary leaders were far from starving starving people wanted freedom from the oppression of an aristocracy which

denied them equal rights. || Man will either revolt violently, or lie down and die under restriction of Freedom. In captivity man will consistently try to gain freedom, no matter how hopeless it seems. || What is the relevance of this to the rest?

The French revolted, the Americans almost simultaneously and then the Irish. Now the negro in America. People without freedom are an (explosive combination) What is this about?

Do you mean private property? I desire freedom as an Irish citizen: Freedom from capitalism and ret-

ained colonialism. We perhaps consider ourselves free as Irish citizens but

free from what? From British colonialism? It is now, we expect, gone for-

ever. We are free but this colonialism remains under the surface. What evidence? these are blank assertions What evidence? We still

tend to be in awe at the English accent belonging to an Irish voice. The major

in the local mansion is a very influential person to know. We retain our feel-

ings of inferiority as a nation. The culture of other countries, music, art,

clothes are all "in". We still think of ourselves as a peasant nation, an att-

itude which was instilled into our ancestors' minds by the English colonialists.

Only now is there a real general awakening of the beauty of Irish culture and

tradition. A dedicated handful have kept it barely alive up until recently.

Our own Government is riddled with capitalism. What do you mean? What has happened to

the ideals of the freedom fighters of 1916? Our ministers travel in black lim-

ousines while old men barely stagger, in worn shoes to the nearest hostel.

Instead of starting at the beginning and getting equal rights and opportunities

for her people, the Government gave subsidies to foreign companies. Perhaps

these gave employment to a few, but education is the basis of every country.

If only the rich can be educated at university, then high offices and top Gov-

ernment posts will be held only by the upper classes, and we are then under what is the alter- ative you have a mind? a capitalist state. It is the implications of this capitalist state which restrict

a poor man from sending his son to the school of his choice or further to un-

iversity, although we are supposedly living under a democratic system. I can

not accept these obvious contradictions and these are what I desire to be free

from.

Please define these terms Democracy, Capital, Capitalism, and decide how the use of them is at variance. Look up meanings of other terms marked above. Though I think the weakness is in thinking rather than in a lack of understanding of language. How much of this writing is echoed rather than first hand thinking?