Labor Education for Women Workers

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"When I had to stop school at thirteen to go into the factory, I felt as though a door had been slammed in my face. Now I see that the door is a crack open and I can see through to a beautiful country beyond." ¹ These words, written more than fifty years ago by a young student at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, capture the significance of educational opportunity for working-class women in the twentieth century. Established in 1921, the Bryn Mawr Summer School was one of a number of education programs designed to meet the intellectual, economic, and social needs of working women and to train them for more effective workplace and community activism. The programs were unique, reflecting the collaborative efforts of women educators, social reformers, feminists, YWCA staff members, and wealthy alumnae of "blue stocking" women's colleges, along with representatives of unions and the worker-students themselves. They aimed to give working women a total intellectual and cultural experience through which they could develop skills for analyzing, evaluating, and appreciating American society as well as their own ethnic and work backgrounds. Many women trade union leaders and their allies participated in these interdisciplinary, humanistic approaches to education, either as students, planners, or teachers of the early women's summer schools and workers' education classes.

The programs reflected their optimism that educated women workers could help rid society of social evils, bring about democracy in the workplace, and contribute more knowledgeably on social issues in their communities. In philosophy and pedagogy, many of these programs were the forerunners of adult and labor education activities today.

**Workers' Education for Women: The Early Years**

Even in the first trade unions, workers' education was perceived as an important aspect of union work. Yet only a handful of unions actually sponsored workers' education programs. In the early years, the unions and workplace organizations that demonstrated a commitment to education were those with predominantly female memberships. Women mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts, wrote and published the first women's newspaper, *The Lowell Offering*. Sponsored by the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (organized in 1846), an Industrial Lyceum offered programs on working conditions and issues for social reform at regular public meetings, at social gatherings, and through an education committee that established a library and reading rooms for the women textile workers. In 1850, tailoresses in the Industrial Union of Philadelphia, an organization of female garment workers, initiated a series of meetings on the labor question to involve and educate their members, perhaps one of the first experiments in workers' education in the United States.

Workers' education in the United States had its roots in the European labor movement. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the influx of European socialists and union activists into the U.S. labor movement encouraged union-sponsored classes and discussion groups on economic and social problems. By the early 1900s, two predominantly female unions—the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America—set up liberal arts and humanities classes for their east coast members. In 1913, members of the women's local of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union initiated a number of recreation and education activities to provide for the "intellectual and emotional life of the workers." This program became the first of many "Unity Centers" organized by the ILGWU for its membership.

These early experiments were followed by programs in other ILGWU locals, and in 1916 a convention resolution mandated a union-wide education program; a committee was to allocate funds to hire an education director and set up courses in economics, trade unionism, labor problems, American history, women in industry, literature, and psychology. Short-term workers' education programs were held at Unity Centers throughout
New York City, while the ILGWU itself created the more extensive Workers’ University. The next year, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the United Cloth Cap and Hat Makers’ Union—both with many women members—started workers’ classes, lectures at union meetings, concerts, theater parties, cultural festivals, and trips to museums.²

Although these activities were coeducational, women were their mainstay in the early years. The classes and cultural events were important contributions toward organizing women workers and integrating them into the labor movement. “On the whole,” wrote Theresa Wolfson in 1926, “the extent of participation in the educational work of women members of the union is extraordinary considering their limited activity in actual union business.”³

The National Women’s Trade Union League

The successful organizing and educational activities of the National Women’s Trade Union League encouraged a reexamination of the importance of the woman trade unionist and the need for organizing women workers. The WTUL, founded in Great Britain in 1874, organized a U.S. branch in 1903. In its first ten years in this country the League provided financial support, publicity, and staff assistance to women’s organizing drives and strikes in a variety of industries. In 1909, the NWTUL played a significant role in supporting and publicizing the shirtwaist makers’ strike—the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand—and the issues raised by the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire two years later.

The organizing skills demonstrated by NWTUL activists were in high demand. While education courses and programs had been offered by local league chapters for several years, NWTUL leaders recognized the importance of offering more extensive training for rank and file women unionists. In 1913, the NWTUL established the Chicago-based Training School for Active Workers in the Labor Movement. It was the first full-time national labor program in the United States and one of the first leadership training programs for adults. In its thirteen years, the program involved forty-four women from seventeen trades. Thirty-two remained active in the labor movement throughout their lives.

Participants were selected based on previous activism within their unions; their expenses were covered through scholarships. They enrolled in college-level courses at Chicago universities and were tutored to compensate for

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their lack of formal education. Course work included economics, history, and labor problems. In addition to the academic work load, participants took NWTUL classes in public speaking, drafting trade union agreements, running meetings, union administration, English, bookkeeping, and typing. As part of their on-the-job training, they participated in union meetings and organizing campaigns.

The Training School for Active Workers was one of the League's many educational projects, which included lectures and classes, pamphlets and curriculum materials, leaflets and labor fiction. The NWTUL requested that unions set aside one hour each month for educational purposes. The League's newspaper, Life and Labor, was an important source of current work place and legislative information.

Young Women's Christian Association

The welfare of self-supporting young women had been a major objective of the Young Women's Christian Association since its founding in 1858. Boardinghouses for working girls, employment bureaus, libraries, and classes in typing and other job-related skills were included in their early work. Staff members conducted their industrial extension program through talks and lectures during noontime factory visits and, by the early twentieth century, encouraged women workers to organize self-governing groups to plan education and recreation activities for noontimes and evenings. Concern for women's working conditions committed the National YWCA to set up an Industrial Department, which helped local Y's to plan classes and programs on social issues and to lobby for labor legislation. Y staff around the country worked closely with unions, the Women's Trade Union League, the Consumer's League, the American Association for Labor Legislation, settlement houses, and other organizations concerned with labor problems.

YWCA Industrial Department staff, frequently from middle-class, college-educated backgrounds, became members of the WTUL; joint programs were developed in many areas. The Y contributed funds to the WTUL to help its training program for women workers.

Throughout the next three decades, this close cooperation continued between the Industrial Department of the YWCA and the labor movement. Year-round industrial girls' clubs and summer industrial conferences focused on working conditions, trade unionism, labor and social legislation, and leadership training. The Industrial Department of the Y branches recruited and financed students for all of the residential schools for women workers. Classes at the summer programs were frequently taught by YWCA Industrial Department staff, who also served on the planning committees.
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for the residential schools and the year-round community workers' education councils.

Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers

Among the early developments in the field of workers' education, the resident schools for women workers made outstanding contributions in their philosophy, format, curricula, and techniques.

The Bryn Mawr Summer School was the first long-term summer education program for women workers and one of the first residential workers' schools in the United States. In 1916, the National Women's Trade Union League convention urged women's colleges to make their campuses available to working women during the summer months. Four years later, impelled by the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and inspired by her visit to workers' education programs in Britain, Bryn Mawr College president M. Carey Thomas created an eight-week session at Bryn Mawr. She put it this way:

I . . . saw . . . that the coming of equal opportunity for the manual workers of the world might be hastened by utilizing the deep sympathy that women now feel for one another. The peculiar kind of sympathy that binds women together seems to come only to those who have not been free. It belongs at the present time to all women because of their age-long struggle, which is not yet over, for human rights and personal civil liberty. 4

Organized in 1921 under the leadership of Hilda Smith, a Bryn Mawr graduate who was director of the program, the Bryn Mawr Summer School met on the college's campus in the Philadelphia suburbs for eight weeks each summer. Until 1937, when the Depression seriously impaired fundraising for scholarship support, about a hundred women enrolled each session. Most came from the needle trades and textile mills and had been recruited from or by YWCA industrial clubs, NWTUL, and garment unions in eastern cities. Full scholarships were offered to those who had worked at least three years in industry and who had at least a sixth-grade education. Many of the students were from immigrant families; a few came from European countries each summer and beginning in 1927, at the students' request, black women were recruited. Many of the women came from unorganized industries. A special effort was made during the 1930's to

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recruit students from specially selected areas such as the Pennsylvania anthracite region, where union organizing campaigns were in progress.

Year-round committees in 75 communities selected applicants, raised scholarship money, and worked with summer school graduates to follow up with winter classes and education programs. Bryn Mawr alumnae helped support the school financially and served on selection committees. Bryn Mawr undergraduates helped tutor students during the summer program. Leaders of the WTUL and YWCA, officers in government agencies, union education staff, and women union leaders served on the community committees and taught or tutored during the summer terms.

Summer school students were grouped into units of fifteen to twenty women staffed by three teachers. Courses included economics, history, speech, composition, literature, and science. Each unit developed its own progression of study. The students’ own work and experiences were utilized to develop an integrated curriculum focusing on a central economic theme relevant to their lives. Discussion, audiovisual techniques, and student involvement and participation were encouraged. Creative and innovative teaching methods helped make the BMSS a unique experience. In addition to the classes, the women participated in a full program of extracurricular activities: field trips to factories, mines, and museums; writing for a magazine that they published two or three times each summer; running their own cooperative store on campus. Other special events included study hikes, picnic suppers, special forums, and Sunday evening concerts.

School events marked the progress of the summer and became annual traditions: the International Peace Festival on July 24, where students in hand-made costumes danced and sang the music of their native countries; the Trade Party, where students dramatized the work of their industries through songs and skits; and the final Lantern Ceremony, held each year in the campus cloisters at dusk around a symbolic “altar of wisdom” where the women sang and marched with lighted candles to carry on the light of the education they had gained.

Back in their communities, former students helped set up evening and Saturday classes for working women and worked on the community committees to recruit and raise funds so that other women from their unions, workplace organizations, and communities could attend the school.

Expansion of Residential Programs

The model of the Bryn Mawr Summer School prompted the initiation of a series of summer residential programs for women workers. The University of California Labor Extension opened soon after Bryn Mawr’s Sum-
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mer School, followed in 1924 by the University of Wisconsin, working in cooperation with the Madison YWCA. In 1927, graduates of the BMSS, aided by progressive southern educators and community leaders, started a southern summer school. That year, Barnard College in New York City proposed that its classrooms be used for a non-resident summer school and asked Hilda Smith to help organize it. Former instructors and tutors from the BMSS taught from twenty-five to forty-five students each summer in a full program of daytime classes that paralleled the Bryn Mawr curriculum.

In 1929, after two years of planning and fundraising, an eight-month resident program was started for the graduates of the other summer schools, utilizing Hilda Smith's large family house on twenty acres of land on the Hudson River, about two hours from New York City. For the next four years the Vineyard Shore School, as it was known, drew classes of fourteen, sixteen, twenty-four, and thirty young women who studied economics, science, history, and English, did their own housework, discussed labor problems, and carried on more advanced and independent work than was possible at the two-month summer schools. Organized by the teachers and former students at the Bryn Mawr Summer School and administered by Ernestine Friedmann together with a joint committee of college and worker representatives, the Vineyard Shore School also provided in its general curriculum for the training of teachers for workers' classes.

By 1931, Depression-related financial problems forced the school to shorten its term to four months, then two months, combining in the summer of 1932 with the Barnard Summer School, which was also scraping the bottom of its treasury. Although students and staff made desperate efforts to save the school through various fundraising activities, including selling school-made grape jam and wooden stools to nearby educational institutions and restaurants, in 1932 both the Barnard Summer School and the Vineyard Shore were forced to close for lack of funds.

Wisconsin Summer School for Women Workers in Industry

During this period, the movement of summer schools for women workers began to extend throughout the country. The Wisconsin School for Women Workers in Industry became the first resident program on the campus of a state-supported university. Impetus for the program emanated from the Industrial Department of the Madison YWCA. This active chapter had organized evening discussions on labor problems for college students and working women, and in 1924 had experimented unsuccessfully with sponsoring eight women workers to attend regular
summer classes at the university. In 1925, forty women workers from nine midwestern states were recruited by YWCA industrial departments to take part in the first eight-week residential program planned for women workers by a committee of university faculty, YWCA staff, and university students connected with the Y’s.

The school melded a progressive, “inspirational” ideology with a traditional, conservative approach. There were no labor members on the planning committee, and the program used no labor-problem orientation or workers’ education techniques. The women workers lived in dorms and co-op houses alongside students enrolled in the university’s regular summer session. Classes in literature, composition, and drama took on a feminine role perspective with extracurricular sessions in beauty culture, lectures on “what is a lady,” and the proper way to set tables and serve food for sitdown dinners. Recruited largely by the Y’s, the women came from non-unionized industries. There was little positive response or financial support from the labor movement in the state, which saw little reason to raise money to send non-union women to a university summer program. Much of the funding was raised by the Y’s from members of women’s business and professional clubs, who assumed, as a 1942 report stated, that the working girls would enjoy a pleasant vacation from the monotony of labor and would return to their work breathing “sweetness and light.” Their financial backing cooled when the club women found that the women workers returned to their jobs eager to turn “‘sweetness and light’ into practical service in and for the labor movement.”

In order to solicit organized labor’s sanction and financial support, YWCA leaders, representatives of the Wisconsin Federation of Labor, and the staff of the Milwaukee Workers’ College met to form a coeducational School for Workers at the University of Wisconsin. Alice Shoemaker, a YWCA Industrial Department secretary with teaching experience at the Bryn Mawr Summer School, was hired as the first executive secretary. The new school, financially supported almost entirely by the unions, emphasized steward training, collective bargaining, and union administration, along with courses in labor history, economics, and politics, conducting one- and two-week on-campus sessions. Courses on women in industry were eliminated. Nearly all of the students attending after 1928 were union members. Most of them were men.

Southern Summer School

The Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry was established in 1927, again by graduates from the Bryn Mawr Summer School program together with southern Y leaders, progressive educators, and community leaders. Directed by Louise McLaren, its goal was to give working women a clearer understanding of politics and the economic system; it emphasized collective responsibility for social change rather than individual growth. Founders aimed to train women leaders for an insurgent southern labor movement and to give them an understanding of the processes that would help to bring about industrial democracy.

Most of the young women came from textile mills, cigarette factories, laundries, and telephone companies. Young and eager, they were a more homogeneous group than the students in other summer residential programs. Although the administrators of the school stressed the identical interests of black and white workers and ran short-term classes for black workers in many southern communities, they reluctantly acquiesced to the segregated mores of southern communities in setting up the program. As one visitor to the school said of the participants, "They are 100 percent American, almost 100 percent Protestant, and about 200 percent exploited."

The models for the school were Brookwood Labor College, the Bryn Mawr Summer School, and the workers' education programs of the garment worker unions. Funds for the first year came from the American Fund for Public Service, administered by former IWW activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Facilities for the first eight-week session were provided at Sweet Briar College in Virginia and each year, for the next fifteen years, the Southern Summer School rented facilities on different college campuses. A typical summer curriculum would include economics, labor problems, problems of white-collar workers, southern labor, cooperative movements and labor movements in other countries, parliamentary procedure, labor legislation, and current events.

Among the founders and faculty of the Southern Summer School were graduates of women's colleges in the south and New England who had been trained in the social sciences. Many had worked with the YWCA and were committed to using education as a means for social change.

By the mid-thirties, CIO organizing campaigns in southern mining, textile, and garment industries spurred the number of students who were union members, and by 1935, 80 percent of Southern Summer School

participants came from southern locals. Financial support and scholarship money increased as newly formed unions realized their need for workers schooled in parliamentary procedure, effective speaking, labor history, and economics. Support from southern middle-class women's groups decreased, however, as the south faced an increasingly militant trade union movement. Most southern communities were hostile to aggressive labor organization. After 1935, the school became increasingly dependent on the labor movement for funding. Although the staff still stressed the importance of organizing and educating women workers, the school under union pressure began admitting men in 1938.

By the early forties, as unions established their own education programs and the residential education program for workers lost participants, the Southern Summer School changed its focus. Renamed the Southern School for Workers, its director Brownie Lee Jones and her staff began running literacy classes for black workers and organizing voter registration drives and campaigns to eliminate the poll tax. Lack of funds led to the school's disbanding in 1950.

For many of the 300 women who had attended the Southern School during its fifteen-year existence, the experience had been their first step out of a mill town or mining village, a chance to share some social space with other working women and sympathetic faculty, and a means to self-confidence and some tools for community and union participation. In 1928, Grace Mills, a telephone operator, wrote, "I consider the school has great value in what it will mean to the South in the future," and cotton mill weaver Eula McGowan added, "What the Southern Summer School did for me mostly was to make me think. I couldn't get a complete education in six weeks but I got a good beginning."

**The Affiliated Schools for Workers**

In order to avoid duplicating recruiting and fundraising efforts, the joint administrative committee of the Bryn Mawr Summer School created in 1927 a coordinating agency with clearinghouse functions for the residential programs for women workers. Four programs were associated with the Affiliated Schools: the Bryn Mawr Summer School, the Wisconsin Summer School for Women in Industry, the Southern Summer School for Women Workers, and, after 1933, the Summer School for Office Workers. In addition to

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heading the Bryn Mawr School, Hilda Smith served as director; and in 1929, Eleanor Coit, a YWCA Industrial Department staff member, was hired to head the organization's new education department. The Affiliated Schools coordinated publicity and community contacts, prepared students for the summer programs, improved teaching materials and methods, and helped students set up classes in their communities when they returned. In addition, its staff conducted special studies on the industrial background of women at the schools and their follow-up activities.

When the Vineyard Shore School and the Barnard Summer School closed in 1932 for lack of funds, Hilda Smith applied for federal money to continue those programs and to help finance the other residential schools that were financially disabled. Although federal aid to these schools did not materialize, Miss Smith was offered the job of establishing a national workers' education program under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Challenged by this opportunity to expand workers' education, she resigned from the directorships of the Bryn Mawr Summer School and the Affiliated Schools and moved to Washington. Eleanor Coit became Affiliated Schools' new director. Within a few years, it had expanded its services beyond its member programs to an educational service for any workers' group setting up courses and conferences. It carried on continuous work with the Women's Trade Union League, labor schools, the Y's college groups, and many community organizations. In 1939, the agency changed its name to the American Labor Education Service.

Summer School for Office Workers

By the thirties, the impact of the Depression and the deterioration of the status of workers led to an increased awareness of the common bonds between industrial and white-collar workers. Until 1933, the primary focus of workers' education had been industrial. In that year, the Affiliated Schools for Workers responded to the growing crisis in clerical work by establishing a labor education program aimed at developing union and class consciousness and training union activists among office workers.

The Summer School for Office Workers offered a two-to-four week residential program for union and non-union clericals. It was interracial and coeducational, although most participants were women. Courses in economics, collective bargaining, labor history, corporate organization, social ethics, labor literature, drama, and music encouraged solidarity with the labor movement. In addition to the summer institutes, weekend
conferences on such subjects as “The Place of the White-Collar Worker in the Labor Movement” were offered.

Held at different midwest campuses (the first at Oberlin College), the school operated under the direction of a national committee of former workers' education students, trade union members, faculty, and representatives of the Affiliated Schools for Workers. This group received support from white-collar and office worker unions and associations and organizations such as the Y's, the Urban League, the National Women's Trade Union League, the League for Industrial Democracy, and the Socialist Party. In later years, the school was held at Sarah Lawrence College near New York City.

In 1939, the Bryn Mawr Summer School left the Bryn Mawr campus and was reestablished as the Hudson Shore Labor School at Hilda Smith's home, where earlier the Vineyard Shore School had taken place. Now a seven-week summer session, it attracted approximately sixty women industrial workers each year, while shorter institutes also were conducted for and financed by various unions. The training course for union education leaders that Hudson Shore established before its closing in 1951 later continued at Rutgers University.

**Schools and Camps for Unemployed Women**

Meanwhile, in an attempt to meet the challenge of the Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration had established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to provide federal funding for relief and welfare programs and agencies. One of these programs, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), offered an extensive program for unemployed male youths. In response to the allegation that women were not receiving their fair share of relief funds, the FERA approved a plan for providing relief funds to establish a program of camps and schools for unemployed women workers. Hilda Smith, employed as a FERA Workers' Education Specialist, was asked to plan and direct this program.

The “She-She-She” Camps, as they were satirized by the press, were the only federally funded education and relief activities concerned with the impact of unemployment on working women. For the two years of its existence, the FERA and the National Youth Administration set up 75 programs in 33 states for over 5,000 women. Five areas of instruction were emphasized at these six-to-eight-week programs: home management, vocational counseling, health education, recreation, and current economic and social issues. Workers’ education was considered a vital part of these programs. The Camps and Schools for Unemployed Women were located in rural and
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industrial settings and were aimed at the women who lived in each region. In certain states, programs were geared to specific communities or populations; for example, in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Montana, young women from mining towns were recruited; and in Missouri only young women from isolated mountain families were selected. The programs for the most part were segregated, with only seven programs for unemployed black women.

Most camps attempted various degrees of participatory government. Student responsibility varied from camp to camp, depending on the individual program. Although program content was far less controversial or provocative than in traditional workers' education, freedom of discussion was encouraged. The Camps and Schools for Unemployed Women came under attack by right-wing media, organizations, and individuals. Newspaper headlines such as "Federal Funds Used for Red Schools" were not uncommon.

Although the Camps and Schools for Unemployed Women were largely designed on a workers' education model, many difficulties prevented the effective realization of these goals. Workers' education curricula, for the most part developed for use by industrial workers, assumed a general knowledge of the labor movement and trade unionism. Yet less than 20 percent of all the women attending the programs were employed as factory operatives, and the majority of the participants were unfamiliar with industrial work place issues. Thus many of the workers' education components were revised as citizenship training, including discussions on current events and community and social studies. In some camps, student-organized skits and newspapers and trips to local museums, factories, government projects, union meetings, and educational centers supplemented the course of study. The citizenship training focused primarily on causes of and remedies for unemployment and depression, and attempted to provide a basic economic framework for understanding society.

Contributions of the Early Education Programs for Women Workers

The Depression, which forced the labor movement to concentrate on survival techniques, and the expansion of the labor movement during the Roosevelt Administration, changed the focus of workers' education in this country. The rapid growth of unionism in mass production industries following the National Labor Relations Act, and the rise of the CIO, created the need to train local leaders in such tool subjects as union administration, contract negotiation, parliamentary procedure, and labor law. The objec-
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atives of workers' education, which had included helping workers to understand this society in order to bring about social change, shifted to more utilitarian programming to meet the practical needs of the labor movement.

The education departments in many of the new unions, as well as in some of the older labor organizations, now sponsored their own short-term classes and conferences to teach members about the structure of their own unions and to train them to fulfill more adequately their union and related functions. This was in marked contrast to the earlier, workers' education focus of the programs, which had recruited participants as individuals rather than as union members, planned curricula based on the humanities and social sciences, aimed to develop their critical thinking and a legitimation of their work and community roles, and focused on their intellectual, physical, and leisure-time needs as part of their leadership role in the union movement.

This shift in emphasis notwithstanding, the work of the many women leaders of the early workers' education movement made a unique contribution to the labor movement and to the field of workers' education in this country. Studies sponsored by the Affiliated Schools for Workers—later the American Labor Education Service—documented the continuing union and community activities of many of the participants in these early programs. Graduates of the residential schools and the shorter courses went on to become union activists, labor organizers, elected union and community leaders, appointed administrators of government agencies, and union business agents and education directors.

The accomplishments of these early programs included a cross-fertilization with other educational and social movements in this country. There was a constant exchange of experiences between women leaders of and participants in these programs and women in the settlement house movement, in the campaigns for labor and social legislation, and with women and men in government and other social agencies. The schools and programs for women workers were a laboratory in which many leaders in education and in the community gained a clearer understanding of the issues facing working people. That understanding often was reflected in the content and methods of teaching social science courses in colleges and universities, as in campaigns for labor and social legislation and services.

One of the main contributions of the summer schools for women workers was the development of a particular methodology for adult and workers' education. The approach of the teachers was experimental and informal. Subject matter dealt with the daily lives of the students. The test of successful teaching was the participants' ability to use what they had learned. Learning and teaching were reciprocal. The teacher and student together
approached the problem; the information grew out of their common interests. Learning took place in informal settings, using discussion techniques that encouraged students’ questions and opinions.

Student participation in decision making was an important component of each of the residential programs. Students served on all major committees. Any decision-making body was composed of at least 50 percent labor representatives. This concept of self-government became one of the cornerstones of workers’ education programming. A strong belief in freedom of discussion was also a key principle in shaping the summer school experience.

Labor drama played an important role in the residential programs for women workers. In each of the schools, students, faculty, and staff wrote and performed short plays and skits reflecting their workplace and community experiences and their goals and dreams for the future. Students were encouraged to write their life experiences for the school newspapers.

Many methods developed at the residential schools—outside speakers, student-run forums and debates, mock legislative and grievance-handling sessions, field trips to nearby factories, cooperative stores, and cultural institutions—are now incorporated into adult and labor education. Visual education was stressed in workshops where students worked with their hands on charts, maps, illustrations, and statistical materials in an attempt to involve them intellectually, physically, and emotionally in absorbing new information.

Writing in the *Annals* of November 1935 on the role of workers’ education, Hilda Smith synthesized some of the philosophy of these early undertakings in programming for working women.

Workers’ education is designed to meet the educational needs of wage earners who have had little formal schooling. Its purpose is to stimulate an active and continued interest in the economic and social problems of the times and to develop a sense of responsibility for their solution. Workers’ education received its impetus from educational needs revealed by the labor movement and assumes the right of workers to form their own organization, to consider and take action on their own problems. Freedom of discussion and freedom of teaching are taken for granted in workers’ education. Above all, workers’ education leads straight from the classroom to the community, encouraging the student to analyze his own situation as a worker and as a member of that community, to follow the classroom term with further study of industrial and social problems; and on the basis of new facts discovered, to assume definite responsibilities leading to various forms of social action.8

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After attending one of the summer schools in the thirties, an unorganized woman student wrote to Eleanor Coit, reviewing the knowledge and skills she had acquired in the eight-week session:

I never did have a chance to express my gratitude for what the school did for me. People here at home keep asking me, "Just what did you learn there?"—and how can I tell them that I learned more than, say, the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act; that I learned a new outlook on this world and my relation to it; and that the labor movement has emerged for me as something with dignity and power, something that someday will have the force of an avalanche, and I must be a part of it. 9


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