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Teachers, Our Forgotten People

by EDITH M. STERN



Underpaid, overworked, there are no more kicked-around people in America than those who educate our children

T EACHERS, during the war period, have been undergoing unprecedented, exhausting struggle in the class room. And in their ranks have been casualties that add up to a dangerous teacher shortage.

Miss Parks, high school teacher of Averagetown, was well aware of this as she took her chair behind the old familiar desk at the opening of the semester. It is the same desk behind which she has not only taught from nine to three during the past ten years, but which, since Pearl Harbor, has also become a symbol of community service. Across it Miss Parks has sold war bonds, collected books for servicemen and bandages for the Red Cross. Here she has drudged over clerical work until late at night, registering residents for ration books and for civilian defense duties.

Although the semester is still young, Miss Parks is as restless as the 45 reluctant youngsters crowded in front of her. Two of her colleagues have not returned to school this term. She wonders how many others will capitulate to the lure of higher salaries be-

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fore the term ends. She reflects grimly that some of the boys and girls in the seats before her are making as much money after hours as she earns in her full-time job. She hopes that her own tension and tiredness will not react as badly upon her pupils as their tension and tiredness, last year, reacted upon her.

Such male teachers as survive have their troubles, too. "In 20 years of teaching," a Syracuse, N. Y., high school teacher says, "the year of 1943-44 was my hardest. With seniors and juniors earning \$35 a week on after-school and Saturday shifts, they think they are doing me a favor to attend classes at all."

Teachers understand why wartime children are on the rampage. They know that home discipline has been weakened by the absence of fathers and older brothers, by mothers being out working, and that "I do as I please" at home inevitably carries over into school hours. They realize that "doorkey" children, children parked with relatives, children moved from town to town as their parents seek new jobs, take out their sense of insecurity in hostile behavior.

Miss Henderson, high school teacher in an industrial town, like thousands of other teachers in similar communities, this fall faces renewed combat with something almost worse than difficult behavior. And that is the fatigue of working pupils—a deadweight on learning. At least half the boys and girls she is attempting to teach have "part-time" jobs. "Part-time," however, is often a grimly farcical misnomer, and night work is the rule, not the exception.

IN A SMALL high school in Pennsylvania, 34 per cent of the

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pupils reported fewer than eight hours' sleep, many as little as three or four. One 15-year-old, who dozed regularly in class, worked in a bowling alley until 3 a.m. Another 15-year-old, in another town, had a combined school and work week totaling 75½ hours.

To teach effectively against such obstacles is a full-time job as the Misses Parks and Hendersons of the nation realize, all too well. Yet no other civilian group is impressed so often for "volunteer" services.

When ration books were issued, for example, teachers were delegated to handle the job. The schools were convenient places for registration and the teachers were an organized, available group in the community, qualified to wrestle with the complications of filling in this and that and to perform the clerical labor involved.

In some places, schools were closed so teachers could serve full time. In others, tired men and women presided at registration desks after school hours. Housewives and others with spare time volunteered as assistants; stayed on the job for as few or as many hours as they wished and could enjoy the virtuous glow that comes with spontaneous performance of a nobly patriotic task. But teachers carried the responsibility for the procedure.

Teachers make surveys, supervise salvage campaigns, collect for the Red Cross, organize stamp and bond sales in their schools. While the Luftwaffe was still awesome, they were told to be air-raid wardens—and they *were* air raid wardens. When night nutrition classes

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for housewives were organized where was it more logical to hold them than at the local school? And who more logical to conduct them (without extra pay, of course) than the home economics teacher?

Also, in extra-curricular and after-hours work with children, teacher is always a handy little thing to have about. She supervises playgrounds after school and on Saturdays and, like Miss Parks, often all through vacations. She lends a hand with nursery schools to help other women to get fat pay envelopes in war plants.

Now teachers are as patriotic as the next fellow, perhaps more so; and they are quite willing to take on extra duties in addition to their primary and vital war work of indoctrinating future good citizens. But they are only human, and they would appreciate a little more evident thanks, in one form or another, for the double and triple loads it is simply taken for granted they can so frequently carry.

Some states have attempted to give teachers at least the rewards of better salaries. But the increases in pay are far from impressive. With the cost of living upped about 25 per cent, in the course of which time many industrial workers have doubled their earnings, teachers' salaries have risen slowly and no more than 10 per cent. New York City teachers who earned less than the maximum were given an annual increase of \$120 a year at the same time as policemen and firemen were raised \$400.

In September, 1943, 30 in each 100 teachers earned under \$1200

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a year; five in each 100 earned under \$600. Only eight States pay all teachers \$1200 or more. At present, the average yearly teaching salary is about \$1500. According to the National Education Association, "the economic status of teachers has been pushed back 20 years since Pearl Harbor."

Miss Parks once thought of taking up nursing. She now wishes that she could switch careers. The nurse is sentimentalized, but the teacher is ridiculed. Miss Henderson, struggling with her sleepy pupils, grapples at the same time with the cramped sense of her own personality. Were she a writer, she thinks bitterly, she would have the privilege of being eccentric; were she an artist, of being "bohemian!" But the teacher, especially in small communities, is held rigidly to a grim code of convention and propriety. If she doesn't live up to it, she is fired. If she does, she is mocked and criticized as "old maidish."

The combination of overwork, underpay and the thanklessness of teaching has created an army of deserters from the profession. A Dallas firm asked a high school typing teacher to recommend a stenographer. "How much money?" the teacher asked. "Oh, she can begin at \$175 a month," was the answer. The teacher took the job herself, and this instance can be matched almost anywhere in these United States. Between 1942-44 one-third of all teachers left teaching for other, more lucrative, fields.

In 1944-45 we shall be short some 70,000 teachers. What is

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more, prospects for replacements are not encouraging. Enrolment in teacher training schools dropped from 175,000 in 1940-41 to 72,000 in 1943-44. These schools, which normally provide 50,000 new teachers annually, were able to supply only one-fifth of that number this year.

The rapidly vanishing teacher is a matter of major concern to all of us. Whether or not our children will be properly educated depends on maintaining a competent and adequate teaching staff. Yet just at the time we most need fresh, vital, well qualified teachers to hold pupils' flagging interest, and uphold the discipline formerly supported by the home, we have them least.

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