The Worker Goes to School

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THE WORKERS USUALLY arrive early, by train and bus and car. And rather shyly, almost like children, they fill out entry cards and are assigned to rooms. They are going to school again! To many of them, who had gone to work at 14, school is a long-ago memory, and advanced training — of any kind — a forgotten dream.

Every two or three weeks, the scene is the same at the trade union school in Oberursel, beautiful old Taunus mountain village in Hesse. There are approximately 50 in each new class and they vary in age. Some are still fresh-cheeked young men, others are graying men with families. Often there are women among them. All have one thing in common — a deadly seriousness about their studies not characteristic of the ordinary schoolroom.

These students, chosen for their interest in the activities of one of the 16 labor unions which form the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), must take their schoolwork seriously for they are obliged to cram into two or three weeks, courses in labor legislation, political economy, social insurance regulations, history of German and foreign trade unions, basic courses in political science, works council laws and trade union organization. When school is over, they must be prepared to assume a position of leadership in their unions.

THE OBERURSEL TRADE UNION school has come a long way since the re-establishment of the Hesse trade union movement back in the early postwar years of 1945 and 1946. In those days, after 12 years of Nazi domination of labor, training of union leaders presented a difficult problem. During Hitler’s regime, trade union schools were seized by the profligate Nazi minister of labor Robert Ley, and many of the instructors taken to concentration camps to suffer the sadistic horrors reserved for so-called “enemies of the state.” A democratic labor movement, let alone specialists in labor affairs, had long disappeared from the German scene.

With the assistance of the US Office of Military Government for Hesse, the state’s trade union federation ob-
tained return of the old trade union school of Oberursel and set about restoring it as a training center. Sleeping accommodations and a dining room were provided and, in September 1947, the first course was opened. As union membership spiraled, however, the institution became inadequate and plans for a rebuilding program were begun by Willi Birkelbach, chief of the school, and Otto H. Scheugenpflug, Hessian DGB executive.

An estimate of DM 130,000 ($30,940) was given as the cost of enlarging the school and installing adequate furniture and teaching aids. DGB headquarters at Duesseldorf contributed an initial DM 66,000 ($15,700) and the state of Hesse donated 4,000 marks ($952). In the meantime, OMGUS had been replaced by the Office of the US High Commissioner for Germany and the duties of the former Manpower Division were taken over by HICOG's Labor Affairs Division, whose officials, working in close cooperation with the DGB in Hesse, solicited a grant for the Oberursel school from the HICOG Special Projects Fund. A grant of DM 60,000 was made and in addition, 300 books on labor affairs were donated.

REBUILDING WAS BEGUN in July 1950 and on May 3, 1951, the new Oberursel school, now well-equipped to serve the increasing demand for training more union leaders, was reopened. The three-story building, set in the midst of a large, well-kept lawn, has 18 bedrooms to accommodate 50 students and three bedrooms for instructors. There is a new, comfortably furnished library containing 700 books, and the large classroom has 50 brand new desks. Two dining rooms, a reading room and two offices for school administrators complete the picture.

This summer, students are taking their courses outdoors on the lawn. A repaired swimming pool on the grounds is available for hot weather relaxation.

Excellent instructors are provided at Oberursel and in the seven other trade union schools in West Germany. They include lecturers from the Academy of Labor, officials of the labor ministry, judges of labor courts, university professors of political economy and political science, and leading union officials. The entire expense of operating the school, including food, lodging and transportation, is borne by the German Trade Union Federation.

Students come from all over Hesse and represent all of its 16 industrial unions. Not only are they trained as union leaders, but their association with other union members in the far-flung field of West Germany's industrial rebirth is an important means of cementing ties among workers which is lending greater strength to the entire German labor movement.

Meals are taken in two cheerful comfortably-furnished dining rooms overlooking school's large grounds and affording a view of the beautiful Taunus countryside.