

How We Reward THE A Devoted Teacher

By I. F. STONE

THE BEDFORD-STUYVESANT AREA is the Harlem of Brooklyn. Its schools are dilapidated. The turnover of teachers is large. Few want to stay.

Mrs. Mildred Flacks proved one of the few. She went to P. S. 35 as a substitute in 1931, more than 20 years ago and has been there ever since. Until a few years ago, P. S. 35 was housed in one of the worst rat-traps in that slum area. Mrs. Flacks stayed on anyway.

Some people stay put out of inertia. Mrs. Flacks stayed put from other motives, motives teachers and mothers will readily grasp. These were indicated by those who testified on her behalf before a special trial committee of the Board of Education this week. Two witnesses may be singled out, both named Coleman though they are not related and come from quite different walks of life.

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THE REV. JOHN M. COLEMAN, pastor of St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, a member of the Bedford-Stuyvesant committee, startled his fellow "judges" by stepping off the bench to testify on behalf of Mrs. Flacks. Dr. Coleman testified that he had known her for 15 or 16 years, as the teacher of one of his own children, and as a fellow member of the P. S. 35 Parent-Teacher Association. Dr. Coleman testified to her good reputation and said, "I have always been particularly appreciative of her great effort in community work."

The other, Mrs. Anna Dickerson Coleman, a housewife, who has lived 18 years in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area, said her daughter was in the class of Mrs. Flacks and that she saw the teacher "nearly every day" during that period, and later worked with Mrs. Flacks in the Parent-Teacher organization. "She had to deal with many problem children," Mrs. Coleman said, "but though they were problem children when they came to her they weren't when they left . . . She is a person above reproach . . . She is a good mother herself, and she looked on all those children in her class as a mother would. She loved every one of her children."

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WHY IS A TEACHER with a reputation of this kind on trial? Mrs. Flacks is the first of eight teachers put on trial for refusing to answer questions about their political beliefs. She is one of those against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed in the current Red hunt in the schools. The New York Times says the "unregenerate" Communist teacher should not "be permitted to promote his conspiratorial philosophy in the classroom." The World-Telegram and Sun says parents have a right to be protected against teachers "whose continuing Communist allegiance permits them to find subtle ways of injecting Communist influence ideology even into classrooms."

Are the writers prepared honestly to look at the facts in these cases? Mrs. Flacks is a test. She has always taught first and second grade. Are there hysterics so idiotic they believe she managed to inject Marxism-Leninism into minds grappling with alphabet blocks and how-to-do-sums-without-fingers? Is there evidence that she taught her little ones that D stood for Das Kapital or that two-plus-two added up to surplus value?

The respectables pretend the only purpose of the Red hunt is to shield immature minds from dangerous ideas, from the abuse of power by "subversive" teachers. The principal of the school, Thomas F. Nevins, testified that an anonymous letter accused Mrs. Flacks of being a Communist. After that he watched her in the classroom "very carefully" for months. He saw no evidence that she was "subversive." He not only praised her work but said the school was injured by her suspension last year pending trial. An assistant superintendent of schools, a primary supervisor and a former assistant principal also testified in her favor.

A postal employe—which means a man who works in the shadow of the loyalty program—had the courage to come forward and testify as an officer of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Neighborhood Council. He said among other things that despite the omnipresent poverty of the neighborhood, Mrs. Flacks saw to it that the children in her classes were somehow decently clothed and shod. Maybe this is subversive.

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WHO WERE THE WITNESSES against her? Only a secretary of the Board of Education. What did he testify? He testified only that the Board last December 6 adopted a statement declaring that superintendents had a right to question teachers about Communist Party membership. What was the charge against Mrs. Flacks? Insubordination. In this as in the other seven cases, there was no charge of impropriety or misconduct as a teacher, no charge of "indoctrination" in the classroom.

What is there left but interference with private political beliefs? What is there left but an attempt to coerce a teacher into disclosures which might subject her to prosecution in these days of sedition trials? Or into risking hopelessly one-sided battle against some pet perjurer? Or being asked to accept the moral degradation of turning informer? A letter read into the record from Superintendent of Schools Jansen said Mrs. Flacks was to be asked to name others if she admitted Communist Party membership past or present.

To the respectables who claim they believe in individual guilt and justice, there is a challenge in these cases. Are they willing to examine them one by one on the evidence? Are they prepared to apply the standard they claim to be applying—the right to prevent teachers from abusing their power in the classroom? Are they willing to give accused teachers some semblance of fair trial by requiring evidence of impropriety in the classroom? Or are teachers like Mrs. Flacks to be rewarded for a lifetime of devotion by discharge and disgrace?

If there is subversion here, it is subversion of faith in our society and its pretensions. The subverts sit on the Board of Education and turn to sham the very principles they are supposed to be protecting.

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