

A Grievance

By Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

I submit this grievance to the Minister of Education and to the councils of our universities, confident that they will receive it with the care, kindness, and fairness it deserves. It concerns those who give to the sons and daughters of the nation the very essence of their souls, hearts, and minds from morning until evening—teachers, who go to their schools and institutes at dawn with the greatest strength, the keenest energy, the firmest resolve, and the purest spirit, only to return to their families at the end of the day having expended all that strength, energy, resolve, and inner clarity.

They return not with the fullness with which they departed, but as bodies worn by fatigue, spirits stripped of serenity, and wills dulled by exhaustion. For they have spent their day teaching and disciplining, drawing upon every reserve of strength they possessed, until material and moral weariness overtakes them. They give the best of themselves to the school, and return home with little more than tired remnants scarcely fit for anything. Such people are the most deserving of care, the most worthy of consideration, and the most entitled to the state's solicitude, so that it may lighten for them the burdens of life and remove from them as much of its anxiety as it can.

I know of no one more in need of having burdens lifted and worries dispelled than the teacher, who is required to give his whole heart, his whole mind, and his full devotion to children and young people entrusted to him—entrusted with shaping their bodies, cultivating their minds, and preparing them to bear the burdens of life with strength and dignity.

A teacher weighed down by anxiety—distracted from preparing his lessons, denied the calm needed for his pupils, embittered toward life and work, disinclined to effort and diligence, and prone to distress at everything and everyone—is a man who benefits neither himself nor others. Yet we demand of him complete devotion and full energy for the education of young and old alike, and then we call him to account—fairly or unfairly—for every flaw that appears in the lives of children and youths, whether or not he is truly responsible for it.

The heavier the obligations imposed upon people, the more necessary it is to provide them with the strength and means required to discharge those obligations well.

The Minister of Education and the leaders of our universities know well that the material burdens of life in these days are neither light nor easy, and that bearing them requires effort, patience, and resourcefulness. Teachers' salaries scarcely suffice for their needs and the needs of those who depend upon them. They accept this with forbearance, awaiting the ease that God may grant—an ease that would widen life for them and for other citizens

alike. Yet the burden that was lifted from teachers some years ago has now been restored to them this year: the university fees, as they are commonly called.

I address the Minister of Education and the university authorities on this matter because I myself was the one who removed this burden from teachers when I was responsible for educational affairs. I assure the Minister that I did not do so to court teachers' favor, nor for their children, nor to win their praise or gratitude. I have never cared whether people were pleased with me or displeased, nor whether they praised me or criticized me. I lifted this burden solely to free teachers for their task, to devote them wholly to education, and to relieve them of an anxiety that weighs heavily upon them and that the state can more easily bear.

Nor was this relief an invention of my own. I found that civilized nations, advanced in culture, regard it as their duty to exempt teachers from the costs of educating their children, for teachers give society the strength of their bodies and minds. At the very least, their children should be spared educational fees. This exemption should not be regarded as favoritism toward teachers over other citizens, but as a practical means of enabling them to perform their duty as well as possible.

When a teacher performs his duty, he does not perform it for a single group, but for the nation as a whole and for all its citizens. Easing the teacher's life, therefore, is not a personal privilege but a public service rendered to his pupils of every class and station. In this, the teacher resembles the soldier whom the state requires to be ready at every moment to perform a grave national duty. The state facilitates life for the soldier not to grant him special favor, but to enable him to devote his strength and his very life to the service of the people.

The teacher, in the final reckoning, is a soldier as well—one who fights ignorance and drives it away from the minds of children and youths, in times of peace as in times of war, in hardship as in ease. If anxiety fills the teacher's heart, distracts him from preparing his lessons, and diverts him from full care for his pupils, the loss is not his alone. We all lose with him, for it is the innocent children and young people who reap the consequences of the teacher's hardship or comfort, of ease or misery, of peace of mind or constant worry.

It is enough to look at the salaries teachers receive at the end of each month—especially the many who receive very modest pay—and at the burdens they are asked to bear for themselves and for those they support. Consider the teacher with many sons and daughters attending schools, institutes, and universities. How is he to manage the material life of his family? How is he to deduct from his limited income what he must return to the state as fees for his child's university education?

Is it not crushing and deeply distressing to demand of a teacher whose salary scarcely exceeds ten or twenty pounds—or only slightly more—that he surrender half of it, or a third, or even all of it at the start of the academic year to pay for his child's education? Or that he borrow an equal sum, or twice as much, if he has two or more children at university?

It should not be said that this is the condition of all civil servants, for the teacher's situation is not like that of other employees. He gives knowledge to children and youths, expending far more in the process than the state gives him in wages. It is unreasonable that he should give knowledge freely to the public, only to be forced to purchase that same knowledge for his own children at a cost he cannot bear—a cost that may drive him to conduct unworthy of his profession.

Nor should material circumstances compel educators to turn their children away from learning and hold them fast to ignorance. I understand, of course, that the son of a teacher should not be favored over others when it comes to admission to university faculties. Such preference would indeed be unjust, so long as universities are few and places limited. Universities must admit the most qualified applicants, and the teacher's son should take his place among them without advantage or disadvantage.

But the matter on which I insist most urgently, before the Minister of Education and the university authorities, is this: that the burden of university fees must not be returned to teachers, and that the relief and facilitation once granted to them should be preserved. I do not believe that citizens of any class would resent this or regard it as injustice or favoritism. All citizens recognize the teacher's place among them and the service he renders in educating their children. There is none among them who does not wish to honor the teacher, treat him with kindness, and enable him to perform his duty in the best possible way, with the fullest devotion to it.

Let the Minister of Education reflect on this—deserving of thanks and praise—and let the leaders of our universities reflect on it as well. Let them lift this burden from people already weighed down by obligations they willingly bear. We should not add to these beloved burdens others that they detest, for such hateful burdens may distract them from duties dear to their hearts—duties in which they find fulfillment, and from which the nation derives immeasurable benefit.

Al-Gumhūriyya, 25 November 1954