

# *Militancy— Old and New*

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**D**URING the depression in Chicago, the board of education was considering a 25 percent cut in teacher salaries. At a public hearing on the proposal, a representative of the local teachers association asked the Board president: "Could your daughter live on a teacher's salary?" The Board president, a wealthy and respected captain of industry in the city, responded, "No, she could not—but her maid could."

Such incidents, repeated thousands of times across the nation, probably contain seeds of much of the teacher militancy seen widespread at the present time. But with a difference. Somehow, in these earlier times, teachers were "beholden" to the community that gave them a job; there were more teachers than jobs. If you had a job, you were indebted to the community that, in its grace, saw fit to let you teach.

Militancy was restricted to the few who dared raise a questioning voice: "Gentlemen, we know the decision is yours to make, but might we respectfully suggest—?" In some places, boards with unusually liberal tendencies were known actually to listen to teachers. Not really listen, rather to let teachers submit written "petitions." These the board accepted with due pomposity, thanked the teachers for their submission, and then said in effect, "Don't call us, we'll call you."

## **Craft—or Profession?**

How far we have come in so short a time! Across the nation today, in really a matter of a few years, full and complete collective bargaining has become the order of the day. And it is working. For every dispute that is headlined in our daily papers, there are thousands of unheralded agreements that have been worked out at the bargaining table. What should have been seen long ago is now becoming apparent to all: Collective bargaining, conducted in good faith, is a means to the resolution of conflict, not a wild scheme devised to create conflict. Collective bargaining is working, not perfectly, but well.

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Certain problems of bargaining in the public sector have yet to be resolved. The matter of the use of the strike is an example. If this right must be restricted in relation to schools, and the New York situation may suggest this is the case, then other reasonable means for the final resolution of impasse must be put in its place. You cannot have real collective bargaining if "all of the guns are on one side of the table."

We are also learning that procedures and tactics used in the private area are not always applicable in the school field. Teachers have special needs, special problems, special relations to the society they serve. Labor leaders, unaware of these matters, have seen teaching as a "craft," when the fact is that the very act of collective bargaining is bringing about the final recognition of teaching as a "profession." The reason is simple to see: In a craft someone tells you what to do; however, in a profession you have a wide area of freedom in what you do and how you do it. Collective bargaining is earning this freedom for the teacher.

If collective bargaining is bringing about a new relation between the teacher and the board of education, the relation between the teacher and the school administrator has not yet undergone a similar readjustment. In particular, principals and supervisors seem as yet to be unable to imagine and try out new relationships based on new patterns of actual power. The reason probably rests on the unhappy role that has been forced on principals and supervisors for so many years—the role can be simply described as that of "the enforcer." Pious, democratic words were often mouthed by the people in the central office. "We believe in the democratic way," they told teachers, "see our lily white banners."

Teachers who accepted these pronouncements at face value were brought up short by the voices of the "second line"—principals and supervisors. "Indeed," they said, "cooperation is the order of the day—you coo and we'll operate." Supervisors often acted as sort of "traveling inquisitors," moving from school to school, enforcing often conflicting programs, each with some new patented nostrum that was, by supervisory fiat, to "receive top priority." Larger "quality" school systems often possessed 10 or 15 teams of such inquisitors, each armed with a course of study, teacher guides, textbooks, and other tools of uniform enforcement. And each possessed the ultimate "enforcement tool," a centrally administered testing program designed to assure conformity—and uniformity.

Back of all this was the principal, with his often complete unconcern for any kind of instruction. His goal was to "run a smooth ship," to be sure that no beefs got back to the central office, to be sure that no "dissident elements" developed in his part of town, either among teachers or parents. If the teacher could find the time to meet the needs of individual pupils among all this, well and good, but "order" was the order of the day for the principal.

### **Clash with the "Enforcers"**

The sad fact of the matter is that probably most principals and supervisors did not want to be this way. Indeed, they still perform an annual "cleansing rite" by assembling someplace in the nation for an annual convention where they go through democratic rituals and pass resolutions of an "Alice in Wonderland nature," having no relation to what they do

during the year, and what, indeed, they were in reality hired for—to enforce. It seems they have always known better, “but what is a guy going to do?”

The oncoming and violent clash between the rights newly won by teachers at the bargaining table and the role of second line administrative personnel should be clear for all to see. You cannot have it both ways. Teachers seem unconcerned: “The enforcers are going to sweat—well and good.” Even a smile can be seen. Principals and supervisors are reacting in different ways: One group, out of touch with the new day and possessed only with enforcement authority, is speaking out wildly about the “erosion of its prerogative at the bargaining table.” Some are looking frantically both ways, trying to guess who will win, and thus help them decide on which side of the table they want to sit.

Some of the people never possessed leadership ability, never possessed real educational ideas. They were hired to enforce and that is all they know how to do. Suffer they should, and suffer they will. Other principals and supervisors are heaving a vast sigh of relief as the end of “an era of darkness” seems at hand and they are about to be freed. No longer must they act out an implied central office directive—“keep the troops sullen but not mutinous.”

For this group a new day is at hand: Collective bargaining is about to make their dreams come true, make their hoped-for role a reality. They see that beginning now, they may play a role with real educational promise. This is the role of serving as the link between the administration and the individual school in creating the setting for good teaching with assurance that the tools and the means will be at hand—professionals helping professionals. A new day may have arrived. Power will be evenly distributed. The board and the public will have some. The administration will have some. The teachers will have some. The pupils themselves should possess some. And each must reach an accommodation with the others—it is to be fervently hoped.

## **End of the Charade**

Perhaps a vast educational charade is coming to an end. This saw education as a huge mountain of subject matter that could somehow be subdivided into “grade levels,” “units,” and “assignments.” The assumption was that this could then be “enforced” on children in uniform doses and that the end result would be “education.” In the early days, knowing no better, the profession advanced this nostrum and the public accepted it—wholeheartedly. With new knowledge and wider experience, the profession came to see that things were not really this way, neither so simple nor so certain.

Cautiously, members of the profession tried to seek new ways to advance promising theories. At each turn they were battered down, sometimes by the public, often by other members of the profession, secure in things as they were. Sometimes the attacks came from the right, sometimes from “essentialists,” sometimes from foes, often from friends. It seemed that the whole teacher force finally decided, “Well, let’s pretend that things are right as they are—maybe they will be.” The profession had created a vast myth that it could not change—they simply did not

possess the power to make changes. So each performed his dreary role in the charade—the teacher, the principal, the supervisor, and the central office people.

Seemingly suddenly, a whole constellation of forces has come into being that may herald a new day. The public, especially the public of the poor, has realized the irrelevancy of much of education as it is. People want a change. College specialists with new knowledge to peddle see that it is not as simple as “package and enforce.” Undereducated people of any color are a threat to an affluent society, so educate all we will. The importance of the first years of life in education, so long shouted by our early education people, is now being realized. Everybody, it seems, and for the first time, is ready to step back, take a new look, and start over.

### **A New Weapon—Power**

And teachers will go into this “brave new educational world” with a new weapon—power, power won by militancy and ensured by success at the bargaining table. But power, like all weapons, is two-edged. It can be used to maintain the status quo, or it can be used with imagination to create an educational program built on our new knowledge and experience. Teachers, victimized by past shabby trappings of democracy, will react cautiously; but they can, if they will, use their new power to create a meaningful system of free public schools.

In effect they can say, “If you want *this* out of your school system, *this* is what you must put into it.” Not just in terms of salaries, but in terms of working conditions, class sizes, new methodologies, imaginative arrangements, and technological aids. They have the knowledge, admittedly incomplete, to chart the course and they have the power to enforce their demands—power won at the bargaining table. How they function in this time will be central to our society.

And what of the administrator, the principal, the supervisor? How will they serve their profession in this new setting? Many will be unable to adjust to a new day and it is hoped that some humane way can be found to “phase them out.” Others, long eager for a real leadership role, will find a new zest in these new relationships. The function of leadership, in a professional setting, is to create an environment that makes it possible for the professional to function at maximum capacity. No more, no less.

And so the dreary procession of inquisitors and enforcers will leave the schoolhouse. Gone with them will be their mimeographed courses of study, their single texts, and their destructive and child destroying testing programs. They will not be missed. Some will return in new robes of real leadership. Many will not. □



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