



Unionization: *An Association View*

MARSHALL O. DONLEY, JR.*

"UNIONISM—organized militancy—by teachers is a new phenomenon; it was brought about by pressure from the organized labor movement; it is aimed at getting more teacher money for less instructional work; and it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Educators who believe any of these assertions are uninformed; for, indeed, all are false.

Rather than springing into being like Athena, "fully formed and fully armed and uttering her war cry,"¹ organized teacher militancy has a long and varied history. Teachers in the United States began forming organizations as early as 1794; statewide associations of teachers date back to 1840, with nearly every state organized before the start of the 20th century. Although the birth of these organizations was attended by a kind of schizophrenia—educators were torn between their desire to promote and improve public education and their desire to improve their own conditions—it is clear that many state teachers associations considered economic justice a major goal worth fighting for.

The related belief that teachers have come only recently to look for a dollar is

belied by this report, describing a meeting of the West Virginia association at about the time of the Civil War:

... State Superintendent William R. White delivered an extemporaneous address in which he said that the teacher should make teaching the business of his life, should have the missionary spirit, and should follow his vocation whether or not he made any money at it. Considerable opposition to this view developed, with one member asking if there was any person present who, if he could make more money at another business, would not give up teaching without much hesitating.

This question was then asked of the president himself. Upon the remark of a Captain Gould that he knew of a young man who had refused to leave teaching for a more lucrative position, a voice said, "Barnum ought to have that man." After much discussion, the general opinion seemed to be that the position of the president was an untenable one, and that teachers were . . . afflicted as much with a hankering after "the mammon of unrighteousness" as other people.²

Nor are teacher strikes but recent oc-

² Charles A. Lord. *Years of Decision, 1865-1955: A History of the West Virginia Education Association*. Charleston: the Association, 1966. pp. 14-15.

¹ Bergen Evans. *Dictionary of Mythology*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Centennial Press, 1970. p. 31.

* Marshall O. Donley, Jr., Executive Editor, NEA Reporter, Washington, D.C.

currences. Strikes by American teachers are recorded as early as 1802. Strikes that involved large numbers of teachers and sometimes large losses in man-hours worked began occurring after 1920. From that year until 1942, for example, 17 teacher strikes are recorded in Pennsylvania alone.

Following the Second World War, teacher strikes increased in number and frequency; in 1947, for instance, 20 strikes brought about 21,100 man-hours of idleness. Teacher strike frequency continued at about this level through 1966, when there was a sudden, but historically brief, upswing in their number.

The assertion that the organized labor movement prodded teachers into militancy fails of support. Nonunion teacher organizations long preceded unions in the fight for economic equity for teachers. Further, the work of teacher unions in the 1920's and 1930's—at first blush, ripe times for labor organization—went nearly all for naught. Although the number of teacher unions grew during this period, most disbanded or became relatively inactive.

In the 1940's and 1950's, teacher unions regained some strength, but again they suffered from assorted problems and failed to capture the support of large numbers of teachers. As late as 1960, nationwide teacher union membership remained below 60,000.

In the 1960's unions did in a few instances influence teacher militancy in the United States. The event that typified this influence was the success of the United Federation of Teachers of New York City in winning bargaining rights.

This event—the victory of a well-financed labor group in a strongly pro-labor city over a hastily formed merger of 19 educators associations—served to nudge the majority organization of American teachers, the National Education Association, into acting a year or two sooner on its collective bargaining plans for teachers. These plans had been under way for years (well before the union threat became a reality in New York City). By 1957 the National Association of Secretaries of State Teachers Asso-

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ciations was giving close attention to the topic, and by 1960 NEA leaders had approved a preliminary document spelling out what they preferred to call "professional negotiation."

A major effect of the dramatic New York union drive was to cause NEA leaders to step up the calendar and seek official approval of this document sooner. A second effect was to cause NEA to begin directing more of its services toward urban areas, lest more of them fall to the teachers union (as many of them did).

Yet these were effects upon teacher associations' timing, not upon their long-term goals. The forces at work to bring the teachers of the nation into more militant action were released long before 1960. In fact, the causes of teacher militancy in our time are multiple, rooted deeply in our society. These causes include:

- The *economic injustice* suffered by teachers from the earliest days of our nation. One obvious demonstration of the relationship between the economy and teacher militancy is the rash of teacher strikes that occurred after each of the world wars—times of inflation that hurt the teacher's pocketbook. Teachers have never been well paid, and they have been consistently unhappy about it.

- The *growing professionalism* of the teaching profession. As the degree requirements for teaching have increased, as other well-rewarded professional and semiprofessional classes have grown, as teachers have become more concerned about the quality of education, so teachers have become more demanding. The more professionalized a group becomes, the more it is in a position to demand further status.

- The *bureaucratization of the schools*. As the teacher found himself more and more



Organized teacher militancy has a long and varied history. Here, Chicago teachers demonstrate in the early 1930's.

in an urban or suburban school situation where decisions were further and further removed from him, he reacted by forming or joining organizations that gave him a larger voice to cry in the bureaucratic wilderness. The more remote the school administration, the more dehumanized the school situation, the more the teacher needed organization.

● *Changes in teacher organizations.* As teachers came to have greater need of organization, organizations began to adapt to those needs. The democratization of NEA and many of the state teachers associations—as classroom teachers became organizational leaders, increasingly replacing administrators and college people—paved the way for effective use of the associations for militant action.

● And, as the organizations changed, so the *availability of mechanisms* for activism increased. Negotiation laws, legalizing teacher bargaining, began to appear in 1955.

By 1964, 100,000 U.S. teachers were working under legally negotiated contracts. This year, negotiation legislation in 28 states affects about 1.3 million professional school employees. Other mechanisms—association sanctions, for example, and lawsuits—have spurred teacher militancy.

One further factor has influenced the American teacher's militancy—the social setting, the framework in which teacher activism has operated in American society. Part of this setting was the view the teacher had of himself. In the 19th century, the teacher maintained a genteel tradition that led society to expect him to be quiet, moral, unpolitical, and penniless. In the 1920's and 1930's, the influence of the Depression and the consequent loss of business support for the schools, combined with the progressive education movement, led the schools to a more activist position.

By 1947, teachers felt a deep resentment toward the communities in which they taught; they began to feel that they were not appreciated. Adding to the teacher's alienation, the society began to demand more of him, expecting him to solve all the problems of complex modern life (think, for example, of the Sputnik reaction and the demand that the schools do something).

Another aspect of the change in social setting is what James Cass has called "the changing etiquette of social protest." This means, in effect, the acceptance by teachers and by society of such protest actions as those taken by civil rights workers and anti-war demonstrators in the 1960's and early 1970's.

These changes in the society around the teacher, backed by the causes already cited, helped the teacher become convinced that, in one NEA president's words, "he can change the destiny of his profession only by taking an active part in determining what happens to him and to education."

The assertion that teachers organize just to get money for themselves is another false one. In fact, as noted above, economic injustice was but one of the causes of increased teacher militancy. Other concerns of the teacher—for more status, better teaching conditions, more say in professional matters—played a central part.

In oversimplified form, here is what happens today when teachers become organized: (a) They achieve a contract—a say in the school system; (b) they win salary equity; (c) they begin to work on the basic problems of their school lives: the class load, the curriculum, the working conditions, and

so forth. The abiding interest of the teacher in the negotiation process lies in this area of school improvement (of course, assuming salary equity has been won and is on a continuing basis).

Ironically, those who denounce teacher unionism as a mere fight for money sometimes fear the democratic sharing of educational decision making more than they do the simpler process of bargaining for better salaries.

Finally, there is the assertion that things are going to get worse: more teachers will strike, additional unreasonable demands will be made, further losses will occur in the power of supervisors and administrators. To a large degree, this assertion too is false. Teacher strikes, for example, dropped 27 percent in 1970-71 over the previous school year. Significantly, the number of strikes fell as the number of written collective bargaining agreements increased. This means that, as teachers organize, as contracts are drawn up, as roles are spelled out in writing, fewer crisis tactics are necessary. Once school boards accept the inevitability of negotiation with teacher organizations, the need for strikes and other weapons lessens. And for all practical purposes, all districts will come under negotiation laws in a matter of years.

The assertion that supervisors and administrators will lose more power is probably a true one. Whether this assertion means that things are going to get worse depends mainly on the philosophy of the person making the assertion. Those who accept the concept of a full role and responsibility for the teacher in decision making would say things are going to get better. □

Freedom, Bureaucracy, & Schooling

Prepared by the ASCD 1971 Yearbook Committee
VERNON F. HAUBRICH, Chairman and Editor

304 pp., clothbound

Price: \$6.50

Stock No.: 610-17508

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

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