



Unionization: *A Labor View*

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TEACHERS stand at a crossroads. From one direction, the new "professionists" beckon, promising the teacher an elite status, promotion up the ladder of an educational hierarchy, and the chance to join a closed corporation which, like the American Medical Association in its field, seeks to oversee educational policy making. The alternate path—that of trade-unionism—challenges these assumptions. Those who follow this path believe that true professionalism includes, first, occupational autonomy, and second, the responsibility of working as a partner in a community of parents, students, workers, and other clients of the schools.

Growing numbers of teachers are choosing the second alternative. The American Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the AFL-CIO, which now includes paraprofessionals, school secretaries, and other educational workers in its ranks, has doubled its membership in the past five years. In the 1970-71 school year alone, it increased its rolls by nearly 25 percent, so that today, it has some 250,000 dues-paying members. Adding the number of nonmembers in its collective-bargaining districts, the union represents close to 300,000 educational employees in the United States.

True, there has been some blurring of the line separating the two approaches to

teacher organization; from time to time, even talk of merger crops up. Yet while education associations have been turning to tactics traditionally identified with unions—the negotiated contract, picketing, the strike—essential differences remain.

Essential Differences

Unionism holds that teachers should organize on an occupational-class basis, with supervisors and administrators in their own separate organizations. *Associationism* generally holds that teachers and administrators have a commonality of interest that transcends their occupational relationships. Further, teachers who choose affiliation with the AFL-CIO make a conscious identification with the aspirations of other workers for economic and social change. Associationism sees labor as a "special interest," of which teachers should be wary (although administrators, seemingly, are not a special interest to them; close to half the members of the NEA's board of directors are administrators). The new NEA president, in his inaugural address last June, reiterated the view that Association

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members would never pay dues to the AFL-CIO.

Benefits to the Schools

What is the meaning of these differences for the schools? Will unions be any more effective than associations have been in helping to solve the problems of the teaching profession? An examination of what has happened in school districts where unions have won representation rights appears to support the following theses:

- Teacher unions strengthen and stabilize the profession by giving teachers professional self-confidence, and power to improve their economic and working conditions and to shape school policies. Generally, they write more comprehensive contracts than do associations.

- Teacher unions, because of their unique link between organized workers and the school establishment, have emerged as a key agent in democratizing and humanizing the schools. Their relationships with other unions have prevented teacher power from being deformed into teacher elitism.

Economic Welfare

At times, there has been a snobbish stereotype painted of teacher unionism—that it is interested only in bread-and-butter issues and is not concerned with educational innovation or change. Such a stereotype, first of all, ignores the obvious fact that low salaries and poor working conditions keep the profession unstable by forcing teachers into other, higher-paying jobs.

For years, teaching was plagued by such instability; there was always a high rate of turnover. Among the larger cities, where unionism is strongest, this is no longer true. In 1965-66, the average gross annual salary of teachers was \$6,512; in 1970-71, the pre-

liminary estimate of such average was \$9,111. The figures, when adjusted for inflation, show that teachers have kept barely ahead of the rise in the cost of living in those same years, but enough to make teaching a somewhat more stable profession.

During the past two or three years, the attractive new contracts in New York City, Chicago, and other urban districts have resulted in thousands of qualified applicants for teaching positions, far more than jobs available. Besides salary increases, these new contracts have included such things as free medical, dental, and optical-care plans. For the first time in decades, teaching jobs have not gone begging.

Professional Advancement

The stereotype falls down on another count. Unions have been concerned equally with professional and educational matters. In most union contracts, teachers have won full equality with administrators in deciding policies. Under the binding-arbitration clause common to most AFT contracts, a neutral third party, usually named by the American Arbitration Association, is called in to settle disputes when teachers and administrators cannot agree. The day of arbitrary rule by supervisors has ended. Most union contracts also provide for professional advancement by containing provisions for in-service training in which teachers have an equal share in planning and scheduling.

Social Reforms

The old stereotype of teacher unions also breaks down on a third count. Unions have pioneered in writing educational reforms and social policies into their contracts. Lower class sizes, innovative programs, and racial integration have been key union demands, sometimes won only after strikes.

For example, in San Francisco, where there has been only a handful of racial-

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minority teachers in the past, a union strike-settlement agreement last spring provided funds for the hiring of 80 new teachers—all of them from racial or ethnic minorities. In Newark, N.J., all students will get sickle-cell anemia and lead-poisoning tests in school this year as a result of a union-contract provision. In New Rochelle, N.Y., students will be able to attend a "school without walls" and a British Infant-type school because of union-initiated programs that wound up in a contract. In Detroit, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, union contracts have cleared library and textbook shelves of books that inaccurately portray minority groups. Perhaps the best known of the union's educational reforms is the More Effective Schools plan of compensatory education, first initiated by the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and now in operation or on the planning boards in a dozen other cities.

An Important Link

Such social-policy demands can only be made, I believe, because of the consciousness of teacher-unionists that they are, indeed, an integral part of the broad masses of American society and that they must use their power at the bargaining table to advance the aspirations of their fellow workers for better schools. In Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, teacher unions schedule public hearings prior to formulating their contract demands so that parents, students, and community members can help formulate the contract package. In at least two school districts, teacher unions have attempted to put student representatives on their bargaining teams so that their rights and interests will be represented when policies are hammered out.

Recent studies bear out these qualitative differences between unionism and associationism. The North Central Association, a leading accrediting agency, surveyed contracts negotiated by union and association affiliates in Illinois, and found that 71 percent of AFT contracts contained policies on nondiscrimination in hiring, compared to 18 percent of the association contracts. Other findings: 54 percent of union contracts pro-

vided for teacher participation in textbook selection; 58 percent provided for teacher participation in curriculum study. The corresponding figures for associations were, respectively, 28 and 22 percent.

Oria Brinkman, assistant director of school-building planning for the Minneapolis schools, surveyed a sample of 1,202 teachers in seven Minneapolis-area counties, along with Professors Gerald Ubben (University of Tennessee) and Richard Williams (UCLA). The "older" and "experienced" association members "appear more silent, conventional, practical, dependable, and unsophisticated than the older MFT [union] teachers," the trio reported. "The younger MFT teachers appear more cheerful, talkative, eccentric, unconventional, and sophisticated when compared with younger MEA [association] members," they concluded. A research study published last year by the California Teachers Association drew the conclusion that union teachers "exhibit a relatively strong professional power drive and professional orientation in all its dimensions."

Dewey's Dream

In sum, the institutional bureaucracies that strangled schools, short-changed students, ignored the communities, and de-energized teachers for so long have been successfully challenged. Teacher unions have put new hope into the profession and new life into the schools. In doing so, they have achieved the dream expressed by John Dewey, one of the founders of the teacher-union movement, in 1928:

Let me say that the time will come—I am not sure that I shall live to see it—when the question will not be, Why should I join the teachers union? It will be, why should I not, or why has not this person and that person done it? The time will come when the principles of organization and cooperation and the recognition of common interests of all those who work in any way, whether mostly with their head, or with their hands, or mostly with their voice, will be so clear that the explanations and the apologies and arguments will have to come from those who are not members of the teachers unions. □

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