THE ACTION PROGRAM OF THE

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

Address to the Hawaii Federation of Teachers

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Education in America today is, at best, standing still. We in the American Federation of Teachers want to start it moving again, and we have an action program to accomplish this goal.

It is my intent to examine with you the priorities and needs facing American education today; to explain to you the professional action program of the American Federation of Teachers which is designed to help meet these priorities and fulfill these needs; and to explore with you the larger social movements of our age which will, we believe, invigorate and re-enforce the AFT program.

All of this is geared toward a two-fold program of militancy and dynamism on the one hand and a higher degree of professionalism on the other.

Although my subject is national in scope, it is my hope that the officers and members here will recognize that the Hawaii Federation of Teachers has an ongoing program that is a particular and important element in the national program. What we are attempting to create is a national movement based upon state and local action; therefore, you will agree with me that the veteran leader, the dedicated activist, and the enthusiastic new member must provide the leadership, imagination, legwork and spirit to make this movement a success.

In affluent America, there are 83,000 full-time classroom teachers now teaching who have not met the regular state certification requirements. On the average, these teachers do not have the professional preparation necessary to teach effectively. We are still minus 125,838 classrooms in the United States. Children stand in many classrooms or double up until the occupants of seats have been wedged in elsewhere, become habitually truant, or just drop out.

The national beginning salary for teachers with a bachelors degree is $4,536 which is well below the official standard of living labelled "modest but adequate" for a family of four. Since this figure is an average it conceals more than it reveals. The hard working teachers in the six lowest paying states start teaching at salaries ranging from $3,897 in West Virginia down to $3,323 in South Carolina. Parenthetically these six states, all southern, lead the nation in non-union education association membership.

These same teachers can look forward, in many cases, to working year after year with piecemeal salary increments stretched out over thirty-five years. Thus, throughout our nation, teachers nearing retirement will be earning a little more than $6,500 if their state is near the national average but substantially less than $5,000 if they are, again, in the six lowest paying states.

To earn these inadequate salaries, our teachers work long hours both in school and in lesson planning and marking papers after school, as well as in extra-curricular activities, in-service training, and summer courses. Nor are they free from insecurity: only twenty states have some type of tenure and three of these provide for no court appeal, while in the other thirty states, teachers may be fired almost at will. Upon retirement also, teachers can look forward to woefully inadequate pensions, in most cases less than one hundred dollars a month.

Our educational parsimony has hurt not only teachers but school children as well. Our curriculum is so obsolete, our classrooms so unattractive, and our job counselling so inadequate that thirty per cent of those who enter high school drop out. There are more than 750,000 youngsters in the 14 to 24 age group who are out of school and out of work. This is the parade of youngsters who, when they were called for the armed services, found that half their ranks were not fit. Moreover, one-fourth could not pass the mental examination, primarily because they lacked even the most basic of educational tools. These failures, whether in urban Chicago, rural Mississippi, or the incipient suburban slums, are the "social dynamite" of America.

These, then, are the dimensions of the educational dilemma in the United States. Now we must work toward their solution. We in the American Federation of Teachers have designed a bold, startling and radical program to meet these problems. Our program is bold because it asks teachers to act; startling because it seeks to upset rather than contribute to educational stereotypes, and radical because it will not accept "no" or "go slow" for an answer. The crisis is too deep and complex.

The action program of the AFT begins and ends with the idea that united teachers can act with responsibility and power where individual teachers are helpless. To achieve unity, teachers need to join together. This means "union." Teachers may "associate" all they want, but if they are not willing to "unite" under labor union principles then the efforts at collective action will disintegrate upon the first frown of the superintendent.

Remember that the craftsmen of the nineteenth century, the industrial workers of the nineteen thirties, and the public and professional employees of today have banded together in unions to further their self-interests. In so doing, they have improved the stability, morale, and attractiveness of their occupation. In the same way, we too can improve not only teacher salaries and conditions, but also the prestige and morale of the profession.

To that end, we are giving first priority to organizing. Our membership was 100,109 strong as of May 31, 1964. We fully expect to double that by the time today's first graders are third graders and quadruple it by the time they have entered the sixth grade. We have adopted a new, modern, cooperative organizational program that relies first upon the local volunteer member, then the local and state leader, and, finally, the technical and inspirational abilities of the national representatives. Where we find locals with an ambitious program to achieve collective bargaining and little cash,

we shall help them finance their expectations. Where we find timid locals with large treasuries, and there are fewer and fewer of these, we will attempt to instill confidence by the boldness of our national program and by victory after victory in similar or nearby locals, but, throughout, we will never dictate to anyone at any time. Where we find state federations or area groupings of locals ready and willing to actively represent all the teachers within their jurisdiction, we will give them self-liquidating funds on a matching basis so that they can bring their militant program to all teachers. This is a cooperative venture involving every level of our union and our supporters in the AFL-CIO as well.

We will organize. We will organize teachers in the cities, the suburbs, the towns, and the rural areas. We will organize wherever there are leaders willing to lead or teachers ready to move. Because today's teachers need effective representation, we must organize. Because our program has met with tremendous success wherever it has been introduced, we know we can organize. Because children cannot wait; because a million and a half teachers cannot wait - we will organize: NOW.

The heart of our program is collective bargaining. Collective bargaining is the process by which teachers vote for one teacher organization to represent all teachers for the purpose of negotiating with the board of education a written contract containing the rights and benefits under which teachers will teach. Rules for negotiations are set jointly; one teacher organization must represent all the teachers until it is voted out in another election.

It is equally important to note that collective bargaining is efficient. Competition between teacher organizations is confined primarily to election time, allowing the victorious teacher organization to concentrate upon effective negotiations. The teacher organization that negotiates the written contract is then responsible to see that it is properly implemented. Collective bargaining brings stability where there once was turmoil. It enlists the greatest number of teachers in the process of gathering, culling, arranging and negotiating those rights and benefits most desired by the faculty.

Yet the right of collective bargaining is meaningless without the concomitant right to reject each other's proposals. If teachers are given collective bargaining rights, but must accept without question the final terms and conditions set by the board of education, then the entire process is without meaning. We in the AFT believe that good faith bargaining involves an honest attempt to arrive at an agreement, and that teachers as well as boards of education must be capable of negotiating in such a way that there is pressure on both sides for a settlement. Various methods of exerting pressure are still being worked out by teachers across the country, but, whatever the method, the purpose is to solidify the teachers and to alert the community at large. This can be done by speeches, petitions, pickets, pamphlets, demonstrations, and even strikes when unavoidable. The severity of the measure is governed by the degree of lethargy, disorganization, or disinterest of the community, how responsive the members of the school board are to the community,

and how ready the teachers are for a particular kind of activity. In some particularly alert and well articulated communities, flyers or picket signs are enough to bring community attention to the dispute. In more apathetic communities, only the strike will bring the proper focus.

To those of you who honestly shy away from the use of pressure in general, or the strike in particular, let me state that without pressure in today's complex and inter-dependent workd, little can be accomplished. Remember: those who believe that teachers should be content with six or seven thousand dollars a year, large classes, heavy paper work, small pensions and no security are not going to be moved by sweet reason alone. Martin Luther King, Jr., writing in a somewhat different context, puts this point succinctly, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

In the same booklet, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," Dr. King states that the purpose of applying pressure, or, in his case nonviolent direct action, is to bring about negotiations. Thus pressure is not an end in itself, but a way, perhaps the only way, to create the climate for negotiations.

Just as teachers should use the pressure method, they should not abuse it. Teachers must not become enamoured with militancy because it is defiant and exciting. To the contrary, they must wield their militancy with a sense of proportion and responsibility. They must demonstrate only when reason has failed, and strike when demonstrations have failed. Use only the amount of power necessary to achieve your rights, never more.

Thus the right of collective bargaining backed by the opportunity for equal pressure is basic if teachers want to participate in decision making, if they are to be an integral part of the system, if they want to materially change their conditions of work.

My first experience with collective bargaining occurred in New York City. There, as a result of a free, democratic election, the United Federation of Teachers, Local #2 of the American Federation of Teachers, won collective bargaining rights for over 45,000 teachers. Since that time, approximately three years ago, we have negotiated salary increases of over 1,575 dollars for the average teacher and, more important still, we have lowered class size, freed teachers from many clerical and policing chores, added more than one hundred new benefits and increased professional incentives and opportunities to do a more satisfying job.

Yet the UFT was not alone. Before our enlightened era of collective bargaining in New York City, other AFT locals, on a scale conforming to the size of their school district, had gained exclusive bargaining rights. Proviso, Anaconda, Eau Claire, East St. Louis, and Pawtucket are names that ring of bargaining election victories and successful salary settlements to everyone conversant with past and present events in the AFT.

Since the beginning of the new era in New York City, many additional AFT locals have also won bargaining rights, bringing the AFT total to nearly fifty locals. But we have much to learn about the collective bargaining process. We have too long looked to politicians as our saviors, and too often neglected our own strength, the strength which comes from union solidarity and determination. Teachers do not know what every carpenter, auto worker or blacksmith knows. We do not yet know all that should be in a union collective bargaining agreement, nor enough about how to negotiate one. Teachers must go back to school and take a few lessons from the rest of organized labor.

Then, as we learn, we will extend the area of collective bargaining by pressing for free democratic elections to determine an exclusive bargaining agent for all teachers in each district, thereby fixing responsibility and avoiding the internecine warfare that comes with proportional representation, joint bargaining, or multiple bargaining; we shall maintain the initiative in the election campaign by turning our demand for collective bargaining into a victory at the polls, and when we have achieved collective bargaining rights, we will win increased benefits through vigorous negotiations in such an exemplary manner that the results embodied in a contract, will be emulated in every school district of this nation.

The national office of the AFT pledges itself to provide the tested techniques, the legal arguments, the election strategy, and the negotiating know-how to any and all AFT locals with the willingness and leadership to mount a collective bargaining campaign. We will help our locals through matching funds to hire local activitists to work full time. We will disseminate educational materials on collective bargaining, attractive and informative leaflets to the community at large, and detailed suggested techniques for our local leadership. Finally, we will, when necessary, station our growing corps of talented national representatives in each of those key locals or areas across the country which is on the brink of a collective bargaining breakthrough. The AFT will provide leadership in collective bargaining.

Yet we cannot rest with such a program of direction and momentum, for we know that what is won at the bargaining table can be lost in the legislature. Moreover, the ability to provide professional rewards is not always, or even usually, solely a factor of local taxes. Thus state and federal legislation is needed to protect and extend the benefits won locally through collective bargaining.

Accordingly, we aim to strengthen every state federation of teachers, first by organizing more and more teachers everywhere through the cooperative organization program, then by hammering out advanced, modern bills that will pledge the top priority of every state legislature to classrooms rather than highways, teachers rather than liquor agents, and children rather than cement contractors. While our sponsorship of tenure, pension, and equalization bills has been initially successful, I know that educational legislation at the state level has just begun. We will be ready.

At the same time, national legislation in support of public schools must be enacted if we wish to transform our educational dilemma into educational accomplishment. The nation as a whole must pay its share, both to increase opportunities everywhere and, even more importantly, to increase dramatically our educational commitment in our pockets of poverty. We in the AFT must fight for President Johnson's program to assist local boards of education and state legislators in the attempt to provide quality education for all. To that end, we have laid the foundation for a massive campaign to win "federal support for community-based schools."

As you may know, we have already stirred up some controversy, mostly based upon incomplete facts, concerning federal aid to non-public education. Undoubtedly you have received your December and January issues of the American Teacher and read of Council action in this area. Without repeating what is said there, I would simply add that the AFT Executive Council has indicated a willingness to negotiate with men of good faith on this issue within the bounds of AFT policy and the Constitution of the United States.

But, important as it is, we must not let such an issue deter us from our major task; rallying all educators and citizens to the cause of federally augmenting the financial foundation now only inadequately supporting our educational system. You in Hawaii, faced with the drying up of all local sources of revenue, know how much federal aid, along with new state funds, could mean to your educational system.

The necessity for state and federal legislation brings us to the fourth part of our action program -- political activity. Teachers need more than just good legislative intentions, they need to use their votes so as to give them political power. Our legislative program will be enacted, our gains protected, and the financial base for collective bargaining expanded only when we have the votes necessary to make legislators jump. We must unbutton our starched collars, drop our "holier-than-thou" attitude, and take the plunge into grassroots political action.

Groundless fears by the community at large (or even by timid teachers) that those who teach should not politic must be dispelled. Politics is the American system of government. Confused thinkers insist, on the one hand, that teachers are professionals and, on the other hand, that if allowed to participate in politics, these same professionals would be unable to refrain from introducing their political convictions into the classroom. You cannot have it both ways. The teacher is a professional and fully capable of separating his political life from his classroom life. We in the American Federation of Teachers believe that it is not politics entering the classroom, but teachers entering the community that strikes fear in the hearts of the local educational watchdogs.

Political power is one of the many reasons why the AFT is affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Through its political action arm, COPE, our members are given the opportunity voluntarily to register voters, screen candidates, and campaign vigorously -- all for the platform and candidates of our choice. In return, we have the legislative force of 13,000,000 Americans and their families behind our progressive educational legislation.

Our participation as educators in politics was of signal importance this year because Senator Goldwater could have come to power. Even more importantly, his election would have given an aura of respectability to the frightful fanatics who flitted frantically around his lantern. Barry Goldwater and his supporters lost all who support the free public school system when he made such statements as the following:

"If we get back to readin', writin', and 'rithmetic, and an occasional little whack where it will help, then I think our educational system will take care of itself." (Quoted by Richard Rovere in the New Yorker, November 2, 1963)

In reaction to these ideas and many even more extreme, I took the initiative to organize my fellow teachers (both within and without the AFT) into the National Educators Committee to Oppose Goldwaterism. We notified this nation that there are many active political protagonists in the field of education who stand firmly opposed to the extreme irresponsibility of Goldwaterism.

Yet, although the candidate of the far right has been defeated, the far right is still strong; Goldwater may now be writing a newspaper column, but Goldwaterism remains a serious threat to our traditional liberties and democratic way of life. As long as books are banned, white crosses burned, new Negro home owners hooted, vicious literature distributed, and citizens' reputations smeared, all democratic and democracy-loving organizations cannot rest or refuse to become involved.

In addition to our fight against extremism, we fought for Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey through the Educators for Johnson-Humphrey Committee. It was my pleasure to serve, along with Mary Ellen Riordan, president of our Detroit Federation of Teachers, on the Board of Directors of this committee. While the active intervention of many AFT leaders and members on behalf of Johnson and Humphrey was undoubtedly prompted by their record of progressive accomplishments in general and their pledge to seek massive federal aid to education in particular, we also took personal delight in the fact that Hubert Humphrey is a member of the AFT and, in his words, "mighty proud of it."

Thus these four thrusts -- organization, collective bargaining, legislation, and politics -- give direction and discipline to the propulsive AFT program. We expect to bring about a dynamic, nationwide movement that will transform American education - to the delight of all long-suffering teachers and the despair of the entrenched autocrats who now maintain their suzerainty over the educational establishment.

Yet, the end product of our movement is not simply social transformation, but also personal growth. This is true because the militancy and dynamism which our program requires is paralleled by a higher degree of professionalism which the attainment of our program imports.

The paid staffers of the education associations are fond of pitting "unionism" against "professionalism". This is a phony contest. If one defines professionalism in a meaningful way as involving "control over one's working life," then unionism, far from being antithetical to professionalism, is its source of greatest strength.

This follows for a number of reasons. The absolute authority of the administrator within the school system not only deprives the teacher of professional control over the terms and conditions of his work, but inculcates a feeling of fear. The existence of a strong union checks the abuses of this authority and restores teacher confidence. The teacher is thus more reliant upon his own professional skills and conscious of his dignity. In addition, he is more involved in his profession and responsible to a public which he is now able to serve with imagination and creativity.

In still another way, unionism heightens the degree of professionalism attainable. Through collective bargaining, teachers can negotiate items which increase the opportunity to teach. For instance, smaller class size reduces the amount of record keeping and paper marking while it frees time for individual student consultation and direction - both during class and after. Unassigned preparation periods grant breathing space for the professional spirit to flourish; during these periods, projects can be initiated and completed, lesson plans refined, and a moment of rest enjoyed. Duty-free lunch periods eliminate an element of great indignity and fatigue. Sabbatical leaves tap sources of inspiration unknown to teachers tied to thirty-five or more straight years of teaching.

Professionalism through collective bargaining also affects the students. When, through collective bargaining, class size is reduced meaningfully, the child responds to a teacher who is personable and interested, not mechanical and detached. When reduction in class size is coupled with adequate preparation periods and relief from such non-teaching chores as clerical work, patrol duty, and playground supervision, the child's teachers are less beleaguered, more confident, and better prepared. Children benefit directly from negotiated innovations such as the "effective schools" plan in New York City. Here the UFT and the Board of Education of the City of New York were able to establish a comprehensive plan designed to bombard the ghetto school with increased services - psychological, remedial, and social. Classes are smaller, textbooks and supplementary reading materials more available, teachers given more free time. As a consequence, slum and ghetto schools become more attractive, and resistance to pupil and faculty integration is reduced.

Thus professionalism for teachers is not an abstraction but a practical goal capable of being achieved by a union.

Because we believe unionism enhances professionalism, the AFT is establishing "Educational Councils" on issues of practical, professional substance. We are forming "Educational Councils" on the following problems: effective schools, teacher certification, teacher-administrator relations, professional work loads, and organizational democracy and effectiveness. Each Council will be composed of scholars sympathetic to unionism, community leaders, and rank and file union members. Each will study, publish material, and issue statements on its particular subject.

Other councils will be initiated as new issues emerge. We are limited only by the number of fundamental problems confronting American education and the availability of qualified volunteers. Our original call amongst AFT members has brought forth an enthusiastic response. Evidently our membership is aware of the relationship between hard-hitting unionism and professional control.

Let us now relate the AFT program to the larger American scene. Our cry for quality education is clearly part of the emerging conscience of thinking America. We cannot separate our demands from the other forward moving demands of our age. While we are organizing, other public and professional unions are enrolling thousands of white collar workers. While we are trying to improve the conditions of our work through collective bargaining, entire communities in our Appalachian region and elsewhere are wondering where the chance to work itself has gone. While we fight for a distinguished place for education in our own national priorities, our fellow teachers in the Peace Corps are nurturing the embryonic native educational system of the emerging nations of this world.

Nowhere is the cause of the AFT more effectively joined than in the area of civil rights. Our Negro students, so eager; our Negro teachers, so restricted; and our Negro adults, so often lacking in basic reading skills, are all testaments to the over-riding need to end discrimination here and now. Education can be improved immensely by the stirring, seeking and strivings of the Negro community. Negroes picketing your schools want their children in -- in for better education, in for better jobs, and in for better citizenship -- rather than out - out of the classroom, out of work and out of hope. The high regard given to education by the immigrant waves of fifty to one hundred years ago is being introduced once again by the American Negro.

Education in a modern world, where teachers are free to teach that peace is attainable, progress is possible, and individual achievement a reality, can become a liberated education, immeasurably rewarding to everyone involved. To American citizens who say that their children are uninterested in school, in the community, and in the world at large, I say we must work together to make education as welcome as rock and roll and the newest TV thriller. Treat our teachers with respect, make it possible for liberated men of imagination to make American education work and you will see a resurgence of faith in our society, a society in which teachers and education receive their due status and respect.

This is the ultimate concern of the men and women of the American Federation of Teachers, and this is the practical aim of our new action program.

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