

Building a Movement of Militant Professionals

**Address to the Kenosha Teachers Union
by Charles Cogen, President - American Federation of Teachers,
March 27, 1965**

AFL-CIO

The more than 100,000 educators in the American Federation of Teachers are using their union to sustain and lead a movement of militant professionals. They believe the professional spirit compels one not to acquiesce in piecemeal changes that are doomed to inadequacy and failure but, instead, to demand and fight for a total renovation of our sagging educational structure.

C A dedicated teacher today is an angry teacher, angry that his curriculum materials, classroom conditions and rate of pay are measured against mediocrity, not excellence. A professional teacher today is a militant unionist who is not afraid to let his community know that the teaching and learning environment in all too many schools is poor, that favoritism rather than equity governs too many school decisions, that teachers' salaries are too low to maintain a decent standard of living. In a word, teachers today are demanding professional status, and they will not simmer down until they obtain it.

P Teachers began to move when the demand for their services increased so sharply that school boards could not lower qualifications for licenses fast enough and, consequently, had to raise salaries in order to attract a sufficient number of new teachers. Then the myth of dedication to the point of personal sacrifice was shattered; a little cash in the pocket reawakened teacher appetites; and the resulting influx of career teachers stiffened the determination of all teachers to reach true professional status. With the glimpse of equitable salaries, teacher vision widened even further; why not a voice in controlling other aspects of our professional lives - the type, amount, content, and supervision of our work?

This enlarged vision is good and the movement that springs from this vision is welcome, because, if anyone is going to demand major improvements within our classrooms, and not merely in the "plant and grounds" housing the classroom, it is the teacher. And that teacher is being listened to, more and more, for he has 1,800,000 colleagues many of whom are thinking the same radical thoughts, dreaming the same dreams of quality education, and raising the same conscientious community commotion.

Sparked by partial improvements and brought to a roaring fire of enthusiasm by classroom idealism, the teacher movement has now found its expression in the union movement. While there are education associations left over from the past, just as there are still isolationists and people arguing for a return to the gold standard, it is the teachers union, the AFT, that is giving direction to this movement and drawing from it its numbers and dynamism.

The AFT is able to head the new teachers' movement precisely because it is a fusion of its two constituent elements: concern for self and concern for the profession. In our present program, as well as throughout our history, we have sought "bread and butter" gains at the same time that we have demanded an opportunity to give of fully/our professional services. As teachers we are using our union both for ourselves and for the students whom we teach. We neither apologize for the former nor boast about the latter. To put it simply, we strive to be a professional union, in the best sense of each of these two words.

To make sure our movement reaches every teacher in this country, 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. This "Co-Org" plan has four parts: matching funds for AFT state federations, similar funds for area groupings of locals, support and manpower for locals facing representation elections, and emergency aid for "crisis" organizing. As you can see, we are avoiding centralization by placing our resources in the field where they can be tapped by our state and local affiliates, which, after all, are located where the action is. In this cooperative venture involving every level of our union, we have the guidance and support of the AFL-CIO, particularly its Industrial Union Department. All they ask in return is what we already want: to spend our organizing funds in such a way that every teacher has a free opportunity to join a professional union.

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 nearly two million teachers cannot wait - we will organize: NOW.

The heart of our movement is collective bargaining. Collective bargaining is the orderly 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; ^{for the first time} responsibility is fixed.

Superintendents and school boards should be made to realize 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 our locals 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 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 world, 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 final way, to create the climate for negotiations.

Just as teachers should use the pressure method, so 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, and when the cause is vital enough. 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.

Collective bargaining is producing just such teacher participation and progress in New York City, where I formerly resided and gained my union experience. 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 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, increased professional incentives and opportunities to do a more satisfying job, and made a new dynamic and courageous personality out of a hitherto depressed individual.

Yet, the UFT is not alone. Before its enlightened era of collective bargaining, 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 collective bargaining into every school district of this country. For its part, the national office of the AFT pledges itself to provide the 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 activists to work full time. We will disseminate educational materials on collective bargaining, attractive and informative leaflets to the community at large, and detailed suggested guidelines 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 base our movement exclusively on collective bargaining, 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 had meeting after meeting with officials in Washington urging the passage of the President's legislation. Yet our support has not been undiscriminating; we have insisted that new monies be used first for higher teacher salaries and lower class size. To crystalize this insistence, we held a rally March 20th in the nation's capitol on "Uses of New Federal Aid."

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 read your issues of the AMERICAN TEACHER and read of Council action in this area. Taking the most democratic route possible, we have decided to submit the President's program to the membership to see if they support, as we definitely do, the solutions to this issue which are contained therein. As one who opposes direct public support of non-public education, I do favor this program and urge a "yes" vote on the referendum.

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 Kenosha, 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 another propelling force in our movement--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 grass-roots 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.

If you think about it, the political potential of the teachers movement is astounding. What a potent force for quality education we would be if we were organized into an effective political instrument.

But right now we are split over what form that instrument should take.

The education associations want an AMA - type of teachers lobby, neatly controlled by the bureaucratic and state national lobbyists, and isolated from the rest of the community. Such a teachers' lobby would probably share the same public disdain held for the doctors' lobby. Because we believe in the larger labor movement, we want no part of such a narrow interest group; instead, we believe that an increasingly effective instrument exists through which teachers can express their educational and community concern. It is COPE, the political arm of the AFL-CIO, established nationally, and in nearly every city and state across the country.

Along with the corresponding local and state AFL-CIO central bodies, COPE gives us an open community forum where teacher delegates sit side by side with hod carriers, machinists, and newspaper reporters to plan campaigns for items of common interest - a state minimum wage law, a local open occupancy drive, improvements in social security benefits, or an all - out effort to obtain more funds for education.

As public employees, teachers have even more to gain from such organized action than do private employees because our conditions of work are directly controlled by governmental bodies. For instance, our new local in Cincinnati was able to call upon the other affiliated unions in that town to get behind

a millage increase, the passage of which enabled our local negotiators to extract a salary increase of up to \$650 a teacher from their local school board.

But labor affiliation is not a one way street; we are proud of the many just causes we have supported through the labor movement, and such support has had a beneficial effect upon our own members, because the teacher who is conversant with more than his own problems is a better teacher and a better citizen.

Our interest in COPE, and our announced goal of strengthening our affiliation with labor, comes at a perfect time, for COPE and the community action program of the AFL-CIO are becoming more and more effective. In the last three national elections, the candidates backed by COPE have done successively better, until ⁱⁿ 1964, 68% of our candidates were elected. This last election included victory for 10 COPE-endorsed Republican candidates for Congress, a fact often overlooked by those who want to believe that organized labor always backs Democrats only.

One million, eight hundred thousand teachers and their families, acting with thirteen million other organized employees and their families, can revitalize citizen participation in government and improve our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and system of work, and do it cooperatively, without pitting white collar against blue, or one class of employee against another.

As a result of my belief in what teachers can do through political action, I took the initiative this past fall to organize my fellow teachers into the National Educators Committee to Oppose Goldwaterism. I found that there were many (both within and without the AFT) who stood firmly opposed to the extreme irresponsibility of the far right.

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 Lydon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey through the Educators for Johnson-Humphrey Committee. It was my pleasure to serve, along with Mary Ellen Riorden, 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 as a teacher was a member of the AFT and, in his words, "is 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 such a dynamic, nationwide movement that it 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 false contest. If one defines professionalism in a meaningful way to include "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 saturate the slum and 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 these councils on the following problems: effective schools, teacher certification, teacher-supervisor 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.

Already two councils have been formed and are in full operation, one on effective schools and the other on teacher-supervisory relationships. The members of these councils are so enthusiastic that in each case they have had so many ideas our staff could not get them down on paper fast enough. These councils will be the permanent rank and file arm of our growing research effort.

As with these educational councils, so with our entire program: we will not rest until every sound idea by every teacher for organizing his profession is given real expression. For the essence of our movement, of any genuine movement, lies in rank and file participation. Without it, we could become a dried up bureaucracy living off "their" dues. With it, we will be able to bring our movement to continuous fruition, enjoying the fraternal cooperation springing from a union of equals, as we advance ourselves and our profession.

It is, therefore, with great expectation that we look forward to the forthcoming decision in the collective bargaining contest in Kenosha. You did an excellent job in your recent C. B. campaign, and I am confident that an election fairly conducted will bring you victory. You have an excellent central labor council and I know that they will give you their whole-hearted support in the future as

they have in the past. Your leadership is dynamic and intelligent. I am confident that the teachers of Kenosha would like to see democracy in employee-employer relations instituted here.

Let us, then, strengthen the movement of militant professionals right here in Kenosha and go on to collective bargaining victories for our union.

##