

06: Cogen Speeches

LABOR EDUCATION,
LOCAL 189,
AND THE AFT

Remarks by Charles Cogen, President,
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Chicago Area Chapter
Local 189, AFT
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DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION • EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

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I find it especially gratifying to be here with you today because I believe that members of Local 189 can play an increasingly important role in the development of the American Federation of Teachers. According to your just published directory, you define the content of Labor Education as the

"Goals, history and achievement of organized labor, operation of the economic and political system, issues facing workers in all parts of the world and the skills of grievance handling, negotiations, organizing, conducting meetings, and program planning"

This description of your goals pinpoints several areas of critical concern to the AFT, problems that must be solved if we are to successfully continue our growth and maintain our vitality.

Describing the American Federation of Teachers is sometimes difficult because of the quick changes in our organization's structure. For example, the AFT is an old union -- fifty years old this year -- with a long and honorable history. Yet more than half of our members have come into the AFT during only the past 5 or 6 years. The AFT is a large, mature union, but not large enough -- and it is still growing rapidly, with a potential membership of over two million teachers. From the standpoint of statistics -- membership and income -- the AFT may appear to be "prosperous." But our continuing battles for teacher rights, against a giant

company-union rival, means a heavy load and a tight budget for all of us in the Union. The AFT is the acknowledged pioneer in calling for collectively bargained contracts covering all teachers in a school system, and the implementation of this philosophy has been one major source of our success and growth. The AFT now has nearly 100,000 teachers covered in collective bargaining units throughout the country. Yet in a number of places, the National Education Association is able to maintain the status quo because, hand in glove with the administration, it forces, in many areas, membership in the NEA as a condition of employment.

These conditions create many problems for us, but I am confident that a well-planned and executed program of labor education can soften their impact in many cases. Let us look at some of these problems in detail and see where the unique resources of the labor educator can be used to our mutual advantage.

The AFT is a decentralized union in power and structure. Although we have expanded our national office to provide back-up services for our locals (in research, legal defense, organizing, CB negotiations, etc.), and to enhance the image of the teaching profession and of teacher unionism, the AFT is endeavoring to build strong state federations, area councils and independently strong locals. Put another way, while we maintain the principle of the strong helping the not-so-strong, major decisions are still made on the local level. This creates problems, with local leaders assuming leadership rapidly and without formal training or experience. The AFT has been holding conferences and seminars for local leaders

and these have been highly successful. But I look forward to a school for leaders, whether they be local officers, newly appointed organizers, grievance representatives, or other key personnel. In this kind of school, labor education specialists, such as the persons here today, could make available a huge reservoir of knowledge and, at the very least, our new leaders would be made aware of obvious pitfalls. More importantly, such training would give these persons a renewed sense of confidence so essential to leading teachers in sound and militant action.

Another problem is in the area of union democracy. The AFT has always been in the vanguard of democratic unions. We are not staff-oriented, and, in most cases, even where we have the most dynamic leaders key decisions are still made by the rank-and-file. Special training is needed for AFT leaders and activists to insure that we maintain the highest levels of democracy and, at the same time, function efficiently on a practical level. We are a union at war with the establishment, and too often governments at war - and I consider a union to be a kind of government - declare a partial or full moratorium on democracy until peace prevails. We will not and cannot allow such a moratorium to exist while our war is fought. To this end our leaders need training in such areas as conducting a union meeting so that democracy flourishes while decisions are still made without an undue waste of time, so that all points of view are aired while the majority view prevails, so that the minority is protected but it does not dominate or obstruct.

We in the AFT cherish our affiliation with the labor movement, and each attack by the NEA or other anti-labor forces in our

society serves to reaffirm the wisdom of this partnership. Labor has been and will continue to be one of our most potent allies in our struggle. Teacher strikes have been settled, and many times averted, because the good offices of local labor leaders have been used to bring the parties to the negotiating table. Where we have been forced to take strike action, as at St. John's University, the labor movement has rallied around our cause, providing financial and moral support. And, as every student of labor history knows, the American labor movement has been one of the staunchest supporters of the public school system.

We encourage our locals to affiliate with local and state central bodies, to participate in community campaigns sponsored by labor, to become integral members of the labor community. Again, orientation and training sessions which teach labor history and the labor movement's structure and functioning are needed.

As more and more of our locals win collective bargaining rights, new areas of concern arise. The art of negotiating is a novel one for most teachers, and the responsibilities that go with it are great. We are being judged now by the value of our negotiated contracts and therefore it is of utmost importance that we write and enforce good contracts that contain important improvements for teachers and their students. Just recently the AFT has added to its staff Harold Ash, a man with more than thirty years experience in contract negotiations. His main job is to train our local leaders in the practical skills needed to be good negotiators and to assist them in writing good contracts. Notice I said "train"

and "assist", because it is not our intention to centralize negotiating for locals at the national level, but to help them gain and utilize their own skills. Here, again, labor education is needed. We need intensive workshops where we minutely analyze present contracts. Our locals must be able to tell the difference between a good, tight grievance procedure and one that is unenforceable or has loopholes. They must learn why they should press for exclusive representation and full-scale agreements, and shy away from mere memoranda of understanding for all or part of the teaching staff. They must learn the difference between a "should" clause and a "shall" clause. They must know the difference between binding arbitration and advisory mediation. In short, we must clear up the mysteries inherent in contract jargon, provide model contracts, and indicate examples of contract language which are good or bad.

We must train our building representatives or shop stewards. They represent the union on the most personal level, and it is they who help teachers interpret their rights under a contract and who will process most grievances. At contract renewal time, or other periods of stress, it is the shop steward who will mobilize teachers on the school level. For several years now, the United Federation of Teachers, in New York City, has been sponsoring institutes and classes for chapter chairmen, i.e., shop stewards, in cooperation with Cornell University. Gratifyingly, these courses have been well attended and the reactions of the enrollees have been excellent. The AFT, on a regional and a national level, sponsors

conferences, leadership institutes, and workshops. We need more and more education of this type in every area of the country, and members of Local 189 can form a cadre for this effort.

I have presented here just a sampling of some of the problems we face. Ignorance in any area of human endeavor is assuredly a hindrance to progress. Ignorance in the techniques of unionism is no exception. It must be countered with a sound program, well-administered and made available readily and broadly to our teacher leaders. You may rest assured that we intend to call upon labor educators with increasing frequency in the months and years ahead, so that the American Federation of Teachers may have an alert membership, a dynamic leadership, an efficient operation, and the highest level of service to the teaching profession.

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