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THE UNION TEACHER AND EDUCATION

MONTANA FARMERS' UNION

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AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

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The schools are our most nearly vital social institution in a society which everywhere shows signs of malfunctioning and even deterioration. Although our nation is very near full employment, there remain masses of hard core unemployed and under-employed. Although more and more of our national income is being spent for things which were once considered luxuries and non-essentials, <sup>millions</sup> thousands of people in hundreds of socio-economic trouble spots are near

starvation and are daily confronted with the brutalizing facts of poverty. <sup>Although consumers are paying constantly rising</sup> We apprehensively view the approaching summer, not as a time of joy and release, but as a time when our failure as a <sup>in dealing with poverty and race disc</sup> society very likely may rise up to bedevil and perhaps destroy us.

The great unifying forces of American society have been weakened and dissipated. We no longer proceed with the confidence that here in America we will somehow manage to surmount all the difficulties which confront us. For millions of people today the American Dream lacks credibility.

A recital of the grim facts of American life today causes varying reactions. It may cause some to throw up their hands and to lapse into deep depression and pessimism. Others, perhaps less socially concerned, may say, "The whole world's a rat race. To hell with everybody else, I'm getting mine!" Still others may say, "Burn it down and start over again."

prices, the working farmer suffers, and the processor and the others. middle skin of the cream of the gain made on farm products

We in the American Federation of Teachers have, over a period of more than fifty years, persisted in a different attitude. We have refused to give up on society, on our particular social institution, the schools, or on our struggling, beleaguered union. Our persistence has in fact paid off, for now at last we are beginning to see our faith justified.

One of the most consistent threads running through American history is the thread of social concern. From the very outset our union has been deeply concerned with helping to build a better society, not by destroying the good that we already have but by energetically pursuing a program of social reform, including the whole gamut of problems of unemployment, housing, segregation, urban decay, and so on. In any social program the schools must hold a central position.

As a nation we are firmly committed to the idea that good schools are essential for effective democracy. More than that, in an egalitarian society such as ours, we are committed to the concept of equality of educational opportunity as a means of giving every child a fair chance to succeed. The promotion of democracy and successful participation in our social and economic life are the underlying purposes of the whole labor movement. Thus, to the members of the AFT, schools, organized labor and the teacher union are all integral parts of progressivism in American society.

When a teacher joins the American Federation of Teachers he also becomes part of the labor movement. Thus, his contribution to social progress is about as complete as it could be.

Thus far I have been talking about ideals. Good schools are an American social ideal, but ideals are not often achieved. The same forces in American society which oppose liberal reform and social progress also oppose good schools. This is true from the local level right up through the national level of our government.

Some people become members of school boards because of their interest in education, but many others become members of school boards because of their interest in taxation. On most boards of education there is a struggle between those who have a genuine interest in good schools and those who are interested primarily in keeping taxes down. On the state level it is often difficult to enact good state aid legislation because state legislatures, in spite of reapportionment, still are more representative of low budget, low state-aid interests than they are representative of people demanding better schools and an improved society.

At the federal level we find legislators from southern rotten boroughs and representatives from wealthy suburban areas teaming up to block increased federal aid to improve schools in our urban ghettos *and in our rural pockets of poverty.* The American Federation of Teachers, the

AFL-CIO and its affiliated international unions are the most potent organized forces resisting the reactionary congressmen and senators.

Thus progress in America can be seen as a continuing struggle between liberal and conservative forces. Until recently, while union teachers gave whole-hearted support to the liberal side in this struggle, there were so few of us that we were not able to do much to back up our sentiments. In the past few years, however, we have experienced a remarkable change.

Union teachers are participants in the broad liberal movement which has been responsible for most of the progress we have made as a nation in this century, but they are also workers. Before 1960 most teachers did not regard themselves as workers. They thought of themselves as being above that. Collective bargaining, unions and strikes were for workers but not for teachers. Today, seven years later, a tremendous change has taken place. Most teachers now regard collective bargaining as a way of professional life, and increasingly teachers are coming to realize that their on-the-job problems are not so much different from those of other workers.

At this time the American Federation of Teachers is the recognized bargaining agent for nearly 200,000 teachers, and that number is increasing rapidly. Even our long-slumbering non-union rival, the National Education Association and its affiliated

state and local associations, <sup>has</sup> been affected by the change in teacher attitude. Teachers who have not yet achieved collective bargaining rights now look forward to the time when they will be recognized, and those who already enjoy the benefits of collective bargaining are finding new ways to make collective bargaining more meaningful.

#### A New Professionalism

In the new centers of AFT power - New York City, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Boston, Hartford and a rapidly growing number of smaller districts - teachers have shown little interest in the outmoded concept of professionalism long promoted by the non-union associations. They now want to share in policy making in the schools and they want to be adequately compensated for their work as teachers. Through the technique of collective bargaining they are defining a new meaning for professionalism - one which has far more relevance to reality than the old professionalism mystique ever had.

Teachers are not like most doctors, lawyers, dentists, veterinarians or other fee-taking, self-employed "professionals". Teachers work in groups for single employers. Their salaries, fringe benefits and working conditions are set on a group basis. Many of the professional judgments of a teacher must be collective decisions. Even the extent of the zone of individual professional

judgment reserved to a teacher must be defined by the group. It is apparent, then, that collective bargaining fits in with true teacher professionalism as naturally as a handclasp.

In the campaign to establish collective bargaining rights for New York City, the professionalism issue got short shrift. When the NEA spokesmen raised the issue, the rejoinder of the UFT was, "There is nothing so unprofessional as working for less than professional salaries under less than professional working standards."

First things first!

#### The Anatomy of Professionalism

But what is a professional salary? What are professional working conditions?

In negotiations with school boards under the new collective bargaining relationships, AFT locals rarely, if ever, have justified their demands on the grounds that they simply are good for the teachers. The AFT has taken the position that "what is good for teachers is good for the children".

In salary matters the union has pointed out that a shortage of highly qualified teachers works a hardship on pupils - and for that matter, since the shortage invariably is more acute in the less desirable teaching positions, and since these positions are apt to be in the slum and ghetto areas, the board of education shortchanges the very children who need the best in education when it

fails to make teaching attractive enough to eliminate the shortage.

Thus, a professional salary is one which is high enough to attract enough highly qualified teachers to fill all teaching positions. Since fringe benefits - pensions, leaves, welfare benefits, etc. - are a part of the material compensation a teacher receives, the same rule applies to these demands too.

Working conditions are also a consideration when a teacher makes his choice of teaching position, but even more important, working conditions for the teacher are usually learning conditions for the pupil. Thus, professional working conditions are those which enable a well-qualified teacher to do his best job of teaching.

The justification for the union demand for smaller classes rests on the fact that a smaller class enables the teacher to teach and the children to learn. It does not rest on the ancillary possibility that a smaller class may be easier to handle, although it is a fact that teachable classes make teaching in a school system more attractive, thus improving its position in the teacher recruitment marketplace.

The 20-period classroom week is coming to be a union demand in some districts. Again, the important thing is not that teachers should have more time off, even though a refreshed and



energetic teacher can do a better job than one who is harried and tired. A 20-period classroom week gives a teacher school time to do all those things which go with a really professional performance - individual consultation with students, conferring with parents, lesson preparation, etc. - things which cannot be done in the present one or two unassigned periods a day.

Professional salaries and fringe benefits, teachable classes, time to teach, freedom from enervating and annoying non-professional duties, adequate guidance, remedial, and other supportative services: these are the framework of the new anatomy of professionalism.

#### Professionalism and Militancy

The old-line associations, of course, long gave lip service to <sup>some of</sup> ~~all~~ the good things which the AFT is now winning for teachers. They doggedly tried, through public relations, petition, and prayer to achieve many of the same goals which teacher unionism espouses. The missing ingredient which has been supplied by the union is militancy.

The AFT has recognized that teachers are in a fight, a fight for their professional lives, a fight for a better school system, and a fight to make sure that the schools make their proper contribution to social progress. When you are in a fight it sometimes becomes necessary to use the extreme weapon at your

command. That weapon is to stop work: strike.

The traditional associations have been restrained by the undue influence of the superintendents, principals, and other management representatives who are included in their memberships. Even where a local association excludes administrators and sets out on a militant course it is apt to get delay or rejection when it appeals to the state association or the NEA for support. This is what happened in Utah, Kentucky, and Oklahoma, and it was not until the superintendents and principals in those states gave the green light that militant action of a sort was taken. Management never likes things to get out of its control.

Yet the union professional teachers have not been "strike happy". Even in New York City there have been only two one day stoppages and one longer strike in more than six years of collective bargaining. There have been none at all in Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Hartford, and most other AFT-represented school districts.

#### Pilgrim's Progress

The AFT is rapidly developing a new model of the professional teacher organization. Thus far teacher unions have been on the high road - but there are obstacles and pitfalls to be avoided. The most dangerous of these might be labelled "Negativism".

The AFT heritage of protest and counterattack against the on-slaughts of superintendents, school boards, and associations has tended to put it in a defensive posture. Two-thirds, at least, of the collective bargaining contract clauses other than those conferring added salaries and fringe benefits are designed to stop management from doing something.

Union teachers will have to learn to accentuate the positive. Although fewer than 2% of New York City teachers are directly involved in the More Effective Schools Program, the ~~M~~ES plan has attracted coast-to-coast interest because it offers a solution to a widespread problem. A truly professional union of teachers must do more and more of this sort of positive thinking and development.

A regular feature of AFT bargaining should be a demand for a jointly administered union-board fund for educational research and development. Perhaps a portion of union dues should be set aside for this purpose, too.

The AFT must not get lost in Negativism if it is to fulfill its destiny. There are unions which have earned an unenviable reputation because of their resistance to change and their refusal to lead their memberships in socially constructive action. Fortunately, there are also many constructive unions in the AFL-CIO, and it is with these progressive organizations that the future of the AFT lies.

The future of the AFT looks bright. As we grow in strength we gain more influence within the labor movement. Joining with like-minded organizations, our strength is doubled and redoubled. The rest depends on us.

The union teacher is helping to build a new and better school system. We are proud of what we are doing - but humble when we contemplate what still needs to be done. Nevertheless, we will continue to push ahead. We may never fully achieve our ideals, but we will have the satisfaction that we did our share to help make this a better world.