

TEACHERS, UNIONS, AND SOCIETY

Why the AFT Maintains its AFL-CIO Affiliation

by

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Why does the American Federation of Teachers cling so tenaciously to its AFL-CIO affiliation?

The question is most often asked by the "mergists" - people like Myron Lieberman and others who are not unfriendly to the AFT, would like to see the AFT and the NEA's Department of Classroom Teachers merged into a unified organization, and see the labor affiliation as a major stumbling block. They think that there is no need for teachers to maintain a formal affiliation with the labor movement because good schools should be the concern of everyone, and if the unions want to work for better education, they will do so whether the teachers are in or out of the AFL-CIO. They point to the National Union of Teachers in Great Britain and some of the provincial teacher associations in Canada as examples of teacher organizations which broke away from formal labor affiliation but still maintain a cooperative relationship with the movement.

The attitude of the mergists is a good deal different from the anti-labor line used by many NEA and state association affiliates in local collective bargaining representation elections. Referring to an AFT local as "AFL-CIO local 819", or "UAW local 770", or depicting teachers, in a cartoon, as a puppet controlled by a "labor boss", or taking the position that it is perfectly all right to buy books printed by scabs, or warning against control by "union bosses" - these petulant smears, all of which have been used recently by associ-

ations, reveal a fundamental anti-labor bias and an assumption that most teachers share this attitude.

Those who follow the anti-labor line can hardly be advocates for maintaining a friendly, cooperative - but unaffiliated - relationship with the AFL-CIO. What is worse, however, is that the effect of fostering anti-labor propaganda is to harden any existing prejudice along this line and to create new anti-union attitudes where none now exist. If this line were followed by the bulk of the teachers, we might soon find ourselves in the same isolated social position as the American Medical Association. However, the fact that the AFT has won a surprising number of representation elections in spite of the propaganda drum-fire against unionism indicates that teachers are not the reactionaries the associations assume.

The question of why the AFT insists on affiliation with the AFL-CIO does deserve an answer, however. The first and most obvious reason, of course, is that of practicality. In any dispute with city and school officials, or with state officials, teachers rarely have the force to go it alone against the power structure. In every major city, and in many state legislatures, the labor movement is a potent power bloc, and it is virtually the only friendly force available to teachers. You may not like everything that these "labor blocs" do, but they are there and they must be dealt with.

When teachers are a part of organized labor they have an influence on its policy and action, reducing the possibility of adverse action as well as providing an opportunity to induce favorable action and support. This cannot be done when teachers are on the outside looking in, reacting to decisions after they have been made.

For instance, much is made of the fact that the labor movements in Indiana, Oklahoma, Ohio, and a half dozen other states have, at one time or another, opposed "taxes for the schools". In almost every case the taxes involved were sales taxes, considered regressive by most experts. It is small wonder that the unions, whose members are almost all in the middle and lower-income brackets, oppose these measures. Those who promote such taxes not only fail to consult with labor leaders; they push ahead in the face of almost certain opposition. Yet organized labor has an unsurpassed record of support for progressive school taxes. Wouldn't it make more sense to take these facts of life into account and seek agreement before launching the campaign? And wouldn't it be more responsible, politically as well as from a social welfare standpoint, to try to devise a more acceptable program.

In other words, the AFT can always go to local, state, and national labor leaders and get a sympathetic hearing because it is "all in the family", and by working with other labor leaders day in and day out, AFT leaders can draw up programs which are most apt to be supported.

There is no other organized group which will give the kind of support which labor gives. This is not only because the labor movement, with its local central labor bodies and its state federations representing all unions in the locality or state, is deliberately set up to give practical help in lobbying at all governmental levels. It is also because none of the other groups which have this kind of strength will champion the teachers' cause.

Real estate boards, chambers of commerce, citizens' budget associations, and similar groups which have political strength almost always conceive of themselves as performing a tax watchdog role. Thus they are not often enthusiastic about raising teachers' salaries, or even reducing class size or ex-

tending school services. Even the PTA's are not much help in a salary campaign, and very often they look on a salary raise as taking away funds from "direct services to children."

A high percentage of AFT present and immediately potential membership is in localities where there is labor support; severing these ties would be simply out of the question. As a matter of fact, in almost every case it was the failure of unaffiliated organizations which led to the labor affiliation in the first place.

There is more to this issue of labor affiliation, however, than just the element of practicality outlined above. AFL-CIO affiliation makes sense from an idealistic and theoretical point of view, too.

In a recent issue of Phi Delta Kappan, George S. Counts, under the guise of writing a critical review of his famous 1932 essay, "Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order," again raised the somewhat battered flag of social reform, around which he urged teachers to rally. Dr. Counts maintained that teachers must be concerned with social reform if they want to educate for the future rather than merely interpret the past. Furthermore, teachers may be the only group in the nation who can bring about a new social order.

We have outgrown the panacea approach to social reform which was the orientation of the thirties. When Lyndon B. Johnson talks about the Great Society he is not talking about creating a social revolution in the sense meant by many New Dealers and even more doctrinaire groups in the Depression Era. But he is talking about social reform, nevertheless.

Neither the AFL-CIO nor the AFT has any blueprint for creating a new social order, but both are very much concerned with cleaning up the dirty

corners of American society. Such endeavors ought to be particularly important to teachers, not only from the standpoint of their own personal economic and social welfare, but also from the standpoint of being able to do an effective job of teaching.

Every teacher knows that children learn more outside of school than they do inside, although we may not often be humble enough to admit it. Children who inhabit the golden rings of suburbs around our larger cities learn that the world is a kindly and orderly place governed by rules of fair play and democracy, where a college education is taken for granted. They don't have to go to school to learn this. Children who inhabit our big city slums and ghettos and our poverty-stricken rural areas see the world as a much bleaker establishment, where the main concern is learning the practical art of survival, outwitting society, rather than participating in it; a place where the odds in favor of success may be better in playing the numbers than in indulging in hard work, thrift, and self-improvement through education.

Martin Deutsch, whose highly successful pre-school school did so much to point the way to our most acclaimed new nationwide educational program, Operation Head Start, has pointed out that the advantage of the head start is often destroyed within a few years after children leave the program because the regular schools cannot combat the adverse influence of deteriorating society.

Although I have long been an admirer and follower of George Counts, I have always felt that his injunction to "build a new social order" was too grandiose for wide acceptance by teachers. Indeed, as Lawrence Cremin points out in his great book, "The Transformation of the Schools," the sweeping nature of Counts' invitation inevitably led to bitter quarrels among progressive forces as to just what the new social order should look like. One must believe before

one can join the crusade, and it is hard to believe in something one cannot define, let alone hope to achieve.

There are specific reforms about which almost all concerned teachers can agree, however. Legislative reapportionment, school desegregation, and civil rights, improvement of social security, tax reform, urban renewal, eliminating unemployment, conservation of natural resources and wild-life, medicare, minimum wage legislation - yes, and educational renewal and expansion at all levels from pre-school through college post-graduate - each of these in itself may not bring the millenium, but each brings it a little nearer. Put them all together and they make a pretty good package.

President Johnson praised the AFL-CIO on July 14, 1965, when he signed a bill to coordinate programs for the aged.

"The AFL-CIO has done more good for more people than any other group in America in its legislative efforts," he declared.

"It doesn't just try to do something about wages and hours for its own people. No group in the country works harder in the interests of everyone.

"It helps young and old and middle-aged. It's interested in education, in housing, in the poverty program, and does as much good for millions who have never belonged to a union as for its own members.

"That is my conception of an organization working in the public interest," President Johnson continued. "I've wanted to say this for a long time because I believe the American people ought to know the remarkable contribution which organized labor makes to the promotion of sound legislation."

The AFL-CIO is the only organization of significance which places these comprehensive social reforms in top priority. The AFT is the only teacher organization pursuing this broad range of objectives. By working within the AFL-CIO structure, teachers can have far more effect on social progress than they can have in any other organized group. And the greater the number of teachers

in the labor movement, the greater their influence will be. This is no mere Pollyannic wishful thinking.

The AFL-CIO is not the monolithic structure its enemies depict it to be. At times and in varying degrees one or another part of the movement may be ineffective, apathetic, hidebound - even corrupt, reactionary, and arrogant, (like some school board members and superintendents). But these frailties are not typical of the movement as a whole, and most of the derelictions of unions or their leaders are the inevitable price of the democracy, decentralization, autonomy, and voluntarism which runs through the entire movement. The AFL-CIO is composed of 140 nationwide unions who associate together voluntarily for just the combination of practicality and idealism I have been talking about. Each national union is autonomous, and while some unions are highly centralized in their structure (like some non-union associations) most of them are just as loosely put together as the AFL-CIO itself.

There is no question whatever that a million teachers organized within the AFL-CIO would have at least as much influence on policy and action as a million auto workers (assuming teachers could produce another Walter Reuther) or any other organized group. As it is, the AFT, with its 115,000 members swings a weight greatly superior to its numerical strength. Teachers, with their zeal and great leadership potential, have advantages which many other groups are lacking.

In this discussion no mention has been made of the many services which are available through the AFL-CIO. This was not intended as a promotional piece. A sincere attempt has been made to give an honest explanation of the appeal of the AFL-CIO in terms which can be understandable to those for whom the AFL-CIO may have no appeal.

You do

~~One does~~ not have to be a social reformer to be a member of the AFT.

Teachers have joined the AFT for many reasons which have nothing to do with unionism, just as they have joined the associations for reasons which have little to do with the broader objectives of those organizations. But if one is a teacher who is interested in social reform, if you do believe that you have, as a teacher, an out-of-classroom service to perform, or if you believe your organization should have such concern, the AFT is the place where your time and energy will count for the most.