

UNITED Federation of Teachers
LOCAL 2 · AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL-CIO

Affiliated with New York State AFL-CIO, New York City Central Labor Council,
Empire State Federation of Teachers



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WHAT TEACHERS WANT

By David Selden, Director of Organization

Throughout the nation we are experiencing an educational revolution. Greater and greater demands are being made on the schools, and our school systems are undergoing changes in methods, objectives, and organization. A key element of this change is the movement of teachers toward greater professional status.

Teachers are dissatisfied with their status - not only their status in the educational structure but their status in society. They thought they were entering a true profession - but they have found it a peculiar sort of profession, indeed. The salaries of teachers are not professional. Teachers have little or no control over the conditions under which they practice their profession. Their status - in the classroom, in the superintendent's office, and in the community - is considerably less than "professional."

The contrast between the aspirations of teachers and the hard realities of present-day classroom life has aroused a tidal wave of teacher resentment against the educational establishment, and it has generated widespread teacher pressure for reform.

The associations, with rare exceptions, have been unable to provide an outlet for this resentment against the educational establishment. How could they? The persons who hold positions of power and influence within the associations are part of the establishment. They have a vested interest in maintaining the present power structure in education. The AFT, however, is not a part of the establishment. Thus the AFT is in a position to serve as a vehicle for teacher action on a way which the associations can not.

It is this fundamental difference between the union and the association which accounts for the union's commitment to collective bargaining, and the association's advocacy of "professional negotiations" - and there really is a difference between the two concepts, despite the lurking suspicion that the term "professional negotiations" is merely an euphemism for collective bargaining.

As a matter of fact, "professional negotiations" did originate as an exercise in semantics. In the spring of 1961, under the pressure of the drive of New York City teachers for collective bargaining rights, 12 New York City teachers and administrators were excused from their classes for a day to meet with NEA representatives in Washington. From this meeting came the first mention of the term "professional negotiations."

For awhile the definition of the term was something of a mystery. Over the past three years, however, the busy staffers in NEA headquarters have built up a literature in the field. The real, essential differences between professional negotiations and collective bargaining are:

(1) Under "pro-negs," everybody, including the superintendent, is included in the negotiating agent, and would vote in any election to choose a negotiating agent. Under "CB," only non-supervisory staff members would be represented by the negotiating agent and would vote in the election to choose the CB agent.

(2) Under pro-negs, the superintendent has a "dual role" (see pages 13 and 14 of the NEA publication, "Guidelines for Professional Negotiation"). Under CB, the superintendent is the acknowledged representative of the Board of Education.

In all other respects it seems that the associations have adopted the procedures of collective bargaining. Both processes would end with a written agreement; both would deal with policy matters as well as bread-and-butter issues; both envisage negotiations and the use of consultants supplied by affiliated organizations.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent similarity of CB and pro-negs, the differences are all-important. Essentially, they add up to this: the associations, through professional negotiations, seek to contain the power of teachers within the framework of the establishment. The Federation, through collective bargaining, seeks to increase the power of teachers within the structure of our school systems, independent of the controls of the establishment.

Looked at another way, professional negotiations is an attempt to spin a fine new theory to channel teacher unrest along the old authority pathways of our school systems. Collective bargaining is a time-tested method of conducting employer-employee relationships which seeks to establish teachers and management representatives as equals at the bargaining table, negotiating out of mutual respect for each other.

Should negotiations be "tripartite" as projected under professional negotiations? Do the teachers, the superintendent and the Board sit down as equals? Could they really be tripartite? What superintendent would permit the professional negotiations agent, even though he may be a voting member, to set the negotiating demands for his salary? What principal? What assistant principal? What superintendent would have any ambiguous feelings about which side of the bargaining table to sit down at when bargaining begins? And when teachers and the Board of Education fail to reach agreement, will the superintendent support the teachers?

This last brings us to another point: what happens when the negotiators fail to reach agreement? Here's what the NEA says (pamphlet; Professional Negotiation, Key to Better Teaching Conditions): "Professional Negotiation provides several courses of action to mediate impasses. These include fact-finding or advisory committees, mediation panels, and/or other educational channels for the resolution of disagreement. If issues cannot be settled because of arbitrary or unethical practices, the extensive resources and strength of the state and national professional associations can be brought to bear upon the problem."

Now, this kind of language might be found in any promotional leaflet issued by any union. Certainly the AFT subscribes to these sentiments. But mediation seems to be all right only when the NEA uses it. When New York City teachers welcomed a mediation panel to resolve their dispute with the Board of Education in September, 1963, the local NEA affiliate was loudly critical!

But I want to call attention to what the NEA professional negotiations pamphlet does not say. Nowhere is there any mention of that other so-euphonious term, "sanctions." We must turn to other publications for this, but when we do we find that "sanctions" means some form of work stoppage, including, if necessary, a total withdrawal of profession services; in other words: a strike.

When it comes to weapons, the NEA seems to prefer the boa-constrictor approach, or perhaps the scissors grip, gradually putting a squeeze on a Board of Education until it cries "uncle."

The AFT is a little more down to earth. AFT locals do not renounce any of the weapons the associations brandish. But we do call a strike a strike, even though it would be used only as a last resort. Our affiliation with organized labor gives us added strength when push comes to shove. Furthermore, when AFT locals call upon their state and national affiliates for help, they do not find that the superintendent has been there first.

I have spent a great deal of time discussing forms of teacher relationships with their superintendents and board of education. It is the improvement of this relationship which teachers want more than anything else.

Teachers want higher salaries. Of course. Teachers want smaller classes so that they can do a more satisfying job of teaching. Teachers want health and pension benefits just like any other employees. They want a dignified grievance procedure with a chance of appeal to someone outside the establishment. They want higher standards for entry into the profession. But more than anything else they want professional status - not the status quo.

Through the AFT and collective bargaining teachers are making progress toward their goal. Great strides have been made since the historic collective bargaining breakthrough in New York City in 1961. Even teachers outside the Federation have benefitted as the associations have been forced to recognize the insurgency of the new breed of teachers.

What teachers want - they can get - and the AFT will help them.

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