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**MAKING TEACHING A TRUE PROFESSION**

By

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A great movement for reform in the organization of the teaching profession has set in, with the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, heading the reform forces and the NEA and its affiliated groups defending the status quo. For the first time since teaching emerged as a distinct profession some hundred years ago, teachers have seriously embarked on a searching investigation of the nature of their profession and its possible forms of organizational structure.

That there is need for reform, few teachers doubt. Despite many worthwhile accomplishments of the associations over their 100 years of existence, teachers are still dissatisfied with their status in the educational power structure and in society itself. The chief problems which teachers face stem from two main weaknesses of the associations:

- 1) undue influence by administrator members, and
- 2) lack of effectiveness in dealing with the social power structure.

It is these two defects which the American Federation of Teachers is seeking to correct.

The National Education Association and its empire of state and local associations is a sort of huge organizational corporation operated primarily by the staff, which in turn works hand in glove with school administrators in order to maintain its power over teachers. Dr. James Bryant Conant has identified this syndicate as "The Educational Establishment." The role of teach-

ers in this structure is primarily that of dues payer. The ability of teachers to affect policy is largely mitigated by fear of administrative reprisal and the power of the all-powerful NEA staff to originate and push through to adoption the policies it deems most expedient.

In contrast to the associations, the AFT is a "movement." Its membership, except in one or two isolated, small locals, is completely voluntary -- often maintained in the face of the opposition of principals and superintendents. Few administrators and supervisors belong to the AFT, although all but superintendents are permitted to retain AFT membership. Its policies are set through use of a democratic apparatus and structure. Thus the AFT has no internal conflict between teachers and supervisors, and it can devote itself whole-heartedly to one of its main objectives: enhancing the status of teachers within the educational structure. Its staff is small -- less than 60 in the national, state, and local organizations combines -- and in most instances is strictly responsible to elected officers and executive boards.

Before going on to delve deeper into the aspects of the struggle to achieve true professional status for teachers, a digression should be made to talk about "practical" matters. Since AFT membership is voluntary, there can be no question that its members find it a practical organization. The record of the AFT in improving teacher salaries, winning grievances, handling teacher defense cases, and improving school conditions is unassailable. Teacher unionism works, regardless of any theoretical considerations, otherwise its membership would not continue to grow.

In 1960, AFT membership was approximately 60,000 nationwide. By December, 1964, the membership had nearly doubled. If membership continues to grow at the present rate, some 300,000 teachers will be union members by the end of the 1966-67 school year.

As AFT membership grows, the organization is filling in some of its more obvious weak spots. Useful and reliable research has begun to emanate from national headquarters (local unions have always done a great deal of extremely valuable but unpublished research). A branch office has been established in Washington, D.C. in order to carry on lobbying activities which were somewhat hampered by the local of the central headquarters in Chicago. State federations have been helped to set up better functioning organizations. Use has been made of college teachers and other intellectually oriented people to "beef up" AFT conferences and committees. President Charles Cogen, the dynamic New York City leader who was elected AFT president in 1964, has sharpened the union's militant image.

Now let us turn back to the theoretical bases on which the American Federation of Teachers rests. Members of a profession have equal status within the profession, power to establish standards for entry into the profession, set performance standards, and have a major influence on compensation given for work performed. At present, very few teachers can truly be termed "professional" because of the lack of one or more of these hallmarks of professionalism.

The key to professionalism, the AFT believes, is collective bargaining: the control of professional standards, compensation, qualifications, and working conditions by teachers acting as a group in negotiating with local boards of education and in lobbying with state legislatures and the Federal government.

The NEA, under the impact of increasing AFT success, has been forced to shift its ground on the bargaining issue. Despite the overwhelming membership of the associations for the past fifty years, very little bargaining was carried on between groups of teachers and their superintendents and boards of education. For the most part the associations accepted the status structure of the school systems without challenge. Decisions on salaries, class sizes, teaching loads, fringe benefits and other working conditions were made by the boards of education and the superintendents and accepted by the non-union teacher organizations.

AFT locals, until recent years, while often effective as protest groups, were seldom strong enough to bargain effectively. In the past decade, however, the AFT has pioneered in adapting collective bargaining to the teaching field. When New York City union teachers trounced the NEA-sponsored association in a representation election in December of 1961, and then went on to negotiate an extensive written agreement with the board of education, the NEA recognized that this new idea was very likely to spread to other cities and perhaps even to smaller school districts.

As an answer to the union is collective bargaining program the NEA has tried to develop a substitute which it calls "professional negotiations".

"Pro-Negs", the NEA's ersatz collective bargaining, goes a long way toward collective bargaining. However, because of its obligation to its administrator members, the NEA had to find a place for them in the negotiating process without putting them outside the teaching profession and on the side of management. The NEA "solution" is to make the superintendent an

advisor to both the union and the board of education. Such a dual role is rather difficult to make believable. Those superintendents who are able to carry it off are certainly deserving of critical acclaim. The union takes the view that the superintendent, who hires, fires, rates, assigns, transfers, and plays big daddy just like any factory manager, is certainly a representative of management, regardless of his disposition, good will, judgment, and other paternal attributes.

The NEA's concept really breaks down, however, when it comes to middle management -- principals, directors, assistant principals, grade supervisors and the like. They can't all be advisors in the bargaining process. The NEA wants them included in the local association and to vote in the election of a negotiating agent - but it is mute when it comes to the question of whether the salaries and working conditions of these officials should be subject to the bargaining process. The administrators want a hand in determining what teacher organizations do - but they do not wish to be bound by group decisions themselves.

The AFT takes the view that teachers - those school employees who have educational contact with children - must organize to advance their group interests, and that the interests of the teaching group are separate and distinct from, and often in conflict with, the interests of the non-teaching group. This is the basis of collective bargaining.

The other great and obvious difference between the associations and the unions is the question of affiliation with the AFL-CIO. Putting it another way, the associations choose to be isolated from the rest of organized society; the AFT believes that affiliation with other groups of organ-

ized employees gives added strength in the struggle to gain proper recognition from society for the teaching profession.

There is more than a question as to how sincere the disdain of the associations for the AFL-CIO really is. Through the years the labor movement has been by far the staunchest advocate of more and better public education. In Washington, in state capitals during legislative sessions, and in local school crises, the support of organized labor is eagerly sought by the associations. Yet at the same time, the NEA and its associated groups smear organized labor, implying that the "union bosses" want to take over the schools. How much is this two-faced policy of the associations due to simple organizational rivalry with the AFT and how much is it a product of sincere, if benighted, belief?

The smear is a recognized, if not accepted, election technique. When an association is contending with a union for the votes of teachers in a local bargaining agent election, it is easy to understand why the association would resort to the smear to attempt to win votes. The association hopes to play on the supposed anti-labor prejudices of some teachers.

There are some liberal-minded teachers, however, who assert that the "teaching profession should not ally itself with any segment of society" -- meaning organized labor. Aside from the fact that 50 million union members and their families can hardly be kissed off as a "segment" of society, this notion is based on a fundamental misconception of the aims and objectives of today's labor movement.

The NEA seems to view the labor movement as involved in some deep-seated class war in which teachers should not become involved. Actually, the AFL-CIO is founded on the idea that employees have sufficient interests in common to warrant a national association to advance their interests. Are teachers employees? Are they interested in better social security, medicare, improved tax structures, and other social reforms? Of course teachers are interested in these reforms, and it certainly is to their advantage to join up with like-minded employee groups. The fact that doctors and lawyers have unaffiliated associations has no bearing on the problem confronting the teaching profession. Doctors and lawyers are almost all self-employed, but teachers are employees of public corporations called school districts.

Incidentally, the single-minded pursuit of their selfish interests by the doctors organized in their independent association has earned them the cordial dislike of a large portion of the public; teachers, who are dependent directly on public support, can hardly afford such alienation.

Newspapermen, musicians, radio and television engineers, technicians and performers, who are all employees, have found it advantageous to affiliate with the AFL-CIO. Instead of undermining their professional standing, or compromising their position with the public, affiliation with the AFL-CIO has been a constant source of strength. In an employee-employer work setting such as teachers find themselves, the added strength which "outside" affiliation gives is almost the only way for the employees to protect themselves against control by their supervisors, and to achieve some measure of true independence.

Affiliation with organized labor is one means available to teachers in their efforts to deal with the social power structure to which the public schools are ultimately accountable. AFL-CIO unions, with rare exceptions, have given unstinting support to school tax proposals, school building and expansion programs, and the election of good school board members.

One other question relating to the ability of teachers to deal with the social power structure is the attitude of the two organizations toward use of the strike, or withholding of services. The AFT regards the strike as a weapon to be used only as a last resort, but a weapon which may be used nevertheless. The NEA and the state associations have recently developed a policy of "sanctions" - gradual withdrawal of services from a school district which fails to come to terms - as a substitute for an outright strike.

So far, sanctions have been applied only to one small school district in California. Their effectiveness remains in doubt. In this one instance a bitter and disruptive three-year struggle ensued which eventually resulted in a change of school administration. During this same period, in contrast, New York City teachers were able to win quick and very favorable settlements through use of the strike weapon. Schools in New York City were closed for one day.

The tentative "sanctions" approach stands in sharp contrast to the more forthright use of a strike deadline as a spur to negotiations.

In this essay I might have used my space to talk about the dozens and hundreds of instances where the AFT has been able to help teachers when the association has failed or refused to face the real problems confronting teachers. I could have detailed the salary increases and other benefits won through collective bargaining in New York, Detroit, Cleveland, and many other communities. Instead, I have tried to deal with broad theoretical considerations. These are the areas of disagreement between the associations and the AFT. These are the basic questions which teachers must answer in their own minds.

If you are a teacher and you believe in the union principles outlined here, I urge you to join with us in the struggle to make our schools better, and to elevate the status of teachers. We certainly don't know all the answers; we invite you to come along with us to help in the search for them.

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