

**NEEDED: MORE TEACHER STRIKES**

by

David Selden

What American schools need most is more teacher strikes. Instead of putting work stoppages by teachers in the same category as matricide and spitting on the flag, school board members and superintendents should be delighted when they have a group of educators who care enough about the schools and their own professional status to lay their jobs on the line in order to bring about improvements.

By every standard of measurement -- drop out rate, reading retardation, overcrowding, teacher academic training -- our schools have failed to keep pace with the demands placed upon them. Yet year after year, most of our school systems go along on a business-as-usual basis.

And teachers, who have had firsthand knowledge of the neglect of our educational enterprise, have gone along too, protesting weakly, grumbling to each other in teacher rest rooms -- and all the while "making do" with what they have been given to work with.

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What is so terrible about a strike by teachers? The traditional answer is, "Think of the children!" Yet it is often more harmful to the children for teachers not to strike than it would be to close down the schools for awhile. When New York City teachers were criticized for striking in April, 1962, Charles Cogen, then the union president, declared, "It is better for a child to lose a few days or weeks of schooling now than go through life handicapped by years of inferior education."

As a result of the one-day shut-down \$13 millions was added to the school budget. Most of the new money was used to expand direct services to children.

During the course of a year schools are closed for a dozen holidays of varying significance, and they are shut down for two weeks at Christmas time, a week at Easter, and two to three months in the summer. No one thinks of these "work stoppages" as harming the children. But let teachers close the schools for even one day, for the purpose of making the schools better, and the pillars of society tremble.

Perhaps some of this public opposition to strikes by teachers comes from the public's proprietary interest in the schools. No employer likes a strike. But this doesn't tell the whole story either. Strikes by bus drivers for instance,

are not regarded as affronts to the dignity and status of the government. Bus drivers are expected to take drastic action when negotiations break down, but the pedagogues are expected to keep right on working.

Should our children be taught by spineless economic illiterates lacking enough professional commitment to insist on decent school buildings, classes of teachable size, proper instructional materials, and salary schedules which can enable school systems to recruit teachers from the top of the graduating class instead of the bottom?

Where the right -- and the willingness-- to strike exists, most disputes will be settled without an actual walkout. Both sides then have an incentive to negotiate in good faith.

There are four alternatives to the strike, and all are much worse than a possible work stoppage. Disputes can be "settled" by (1) continuing the status quo; (2) carrying on a cold war between teachers and school authorities; (3) political action, and (4) arbitration. The first of these alternatives, the "don't complain" philosophy, is unthinkable if we really want good education. The second, the long festering contest of little meannesses between teachers and school authorities, erodes morale and seldom results in any real solution to the problems confronting the schools. The other two alternatives require more detailed discussion.

Teachers certainly have a right to appeal a school board's action to the voters. But political action is often far different in practice than in theory. Frequently the choice of opposing candidates offers little hope for improvement. Furthermore, politics is a two-way street; it is often hard to discover who has the more control, the politician who depends on teachers for votes, or the teachers who depend on the politician for favorable action.

When teachers have the right to strike, very real political decisions must be made by the authorities. Issues are dramatized, and the way the board resolves them becomes a factor in the next election.

The final alternative, a pet panacea of the no-strike supporters, is a devastating influence on negotiations. Neither side will bargain if it knows that the dispute is going to wind up in the hands of an arbitrator. It is not good tactics to yield any points in advance. The arbitrator functions within the limits set by the two parties to the dispute, and he is apt to issue Solomonic judgements which are mere compromises. Arbitration turns negotiations into a debating contest, and the end result is seldom the kind of meeting of the minds resulting when each side has something to gain from good faith negotiations, and something to lose from unreasonable stubbornness.

M. Frank Brown, one of the nation's leading school administrators, told a recent meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, "Administrators are demurrers who are afraid to expose themselves to dangerous and heady ideas." Not only administrators, but teachers, too, suffer this disability.

It is time teachers were released from their conformist bondage. Anyone who really worries about education ought to kick, prod, cajole, wheedle and exhort teachers to far greater militancy. When teachers are willing to stop work rather than continue under substandard conditions, they will have gone a long way toward attaining the professional status to which they have given lip service for so many years.