

no separate peace

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School's In Session...



It was the strength of teachers united that also won for them an amnesty clause to protect striking teachers from reprisals from the school board.

The agreement also calls for a joint union-management committee to carry out a feasibility study regarding early retirement.

It is evident the workers did not suffer a total defeat. There were a number of positive aspects of this year's school strike, if reinforced could very well bring forth better results in the future.

Workers' Solidarity

But What About The Teachers?

There was a time when the word "school" instantly triggered thoughts about the big three: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Today school also brings to mind new concepts — levy, bussing and strike.

School strikes, not bussing (as one might have expected after Boston), delayed the beginning of the 1978-79 school year in fifteen states. School strikes are beginning to follow a definite pattern, exhibiting characteristics hereto only associated with blue collar strikes.

Labor disputes (union vs. management) can very well be likened to a football game. The captains — union officials & management negotiators — go to the bargaining table for the toss of the coin.

Important here is not who receives the football first, but who receives the "coin." If management wins the toss by not meeting contractual demands of the workers, the union kicks off the game with a vote to strike.

First downs are awarded to the team who can successfully gain various issues (better health and dental plans, working conditions, etc.) during the negotiations.

As the game enters the second half, penalties pile up against the strikers. Arrests, injunctions, and pressure from the usually misinformed community demoralize the workers and weaken the strike effort. The only way workers can make a touchdown is to gain the desired wage increase. Management scores if it refuses such a wage increase.

In football the final score indicates the winner. The pattern established in recent school strikes indicates there are very few winners. Teachers, students, parents all suffer heavy losses.

Issues in the Seattle Strike

Let's examine more closely the issues and results of the recent teachers strike in Seattle.

The Seattle Teachers Association (STA), representing teachers' aides and substitutes, nurses and office personnel, was primarily concerned with bargaining for a wage increase. The STA originally wanted a 14.8% pay increase, consisting of a 5% across-the-board and a 9.8% cost-of-living adjustment, plus paid health and dental insurance.

Another issue pushed by management, that is, the school board involved a proposed evaluation system, whereby fellow teachers would judge each other's performance. Many teachers felt this would cause division among the rank and file, leading to increased competition among teachers for further raises as well as job security.

Job security, an issue of frequent concern during labor disputes was not negotiated though a substantial number of teachers wanted this to be a contract demand. In 1975 the double levy that was lost resulted in layoffs for various members of the teachers' work force. When moneys became available to hire more teachers the school board administration did not establish a policy to recall those teachers laid off. Instead they hired new teachers in an arbitrary way. Teachers wanted an investigation to determine why the new positions were not reserved for the laid-off workers. But this issue never became a formal demand.

The Outcome

The strike ended with the opening of school, Sept. 29, not because the negotiators agreed on a new contract, but because a judge issued a court injunction against the striking teachers. Students' concerns, lack of community support, and pressures from the school board influences the decision by teachers to return to work.

Defeat came with the end of the strike, their most effective bargaining power. The wounded teachers ratified a contract giving them only a 6.1% retroactive salary increase, far below the original contract demand.

Referring to the increase in a related article of "The International Examiner," a journal of Seattle's International District, Zenaida Guerzon, a Tagalog teacher stated, "If you do not receive a salary increase beyond the inflation rate, then you are actually losing money."

Teachers did gain some important ground on the issue of evaluations. The new agreement includes a staff-evaluation procedure that will retain the "satisfactory-unsatisfactory" rating instead of the new rating system proposed by the school board — "outstanding, average and unsatisfactory."

Equally important these evaluations will be done by principals only. Further, any violations of this procedure will be handled through arbitration.

Winning this issue is very significant politically. Teachers are workers. Their labor goes toward building the future of this country by enhancing the learning process of children who will grow to become tomorrow's leaders.

The atmosphere in which teachers work should be removed of unnecessary tensions so they can go about the business of teaching. They shouldn't have to worry about competition or harassment from fellow workers who can exert pressure through a poor evaluation.

The evaluation system that was won allows for a necessary quality control check while it eliminates the oppressive, competitive elements put forth by the school board.

This issue is also significant because winning it shows once again the need for workers to be organized and united against management.

The '78 school strike exhibited trade unionism at its best in regards to local 609, Operating Engineers. This union which consists of custodians, gardeners, food-service workers and security officers voted to join the strike. They determined not to cross each other's picket lines, unless both contracts were settled. Even the majority of craft-union workers, i.e., plumbers, electricians, printers, etc., refused to cross the teachers' picket lines.

In the future there must be more concentrated sustained efforts like this if workers are to retain and gain more rights from management.

Need For More Unity

This strike also revealed a crying need for a liaison to be established, among teachers, students, parents, and the larger community. Information about such strikes needs to be better understood so issues are not always reduced to simply money.

In a Seattle newspaper article concerning the recent school strike, school board president Dr. Moberly, stated, "Our big contention is we've got to continue to talk about our budget. It's a political issue of where our money's coming from and the public has a right to know." One must ask the question, how come the public's right to know didn't cover the actual bargaining of the contract? Fact is, a "gag rule" was enforced during the strike limiting what reporters could inform the public about. This kept important knowledge from reaching those who have the right to know.

The common bonds that exist among teachers and the community can best be summed up in the realization that teachers are workers, are parents, are students and are a vital organ of the community. So you see we are all in the same boat. Next time let's rock it together for the good of all concerned.

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