

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: “AGAINST THE PUBLIC”: TEACHER STRIKES AND THE DECLINE OF LIBERALISM, 1968-1981

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In the 1930s, the Democratic Party became the party of working people largely through its support of legislation encouraging the formation of labor unions. As the nation moved leftward, a liberal consensus emerged that placed support—in the name of both economic growth and greater social equality—for labor unions at its center. Support for this labor-liberalism declined considerably during the 1970s, paving the way for the neoliberal conservatism that has emerged in the last quarter century of American politics. This dissertation explains this shift by looking at the intersection between culture and the public sector labor movement in the postwar era. As unionized teachers became increasingly visible in American political culture in the 1960s, lengthy strikes by teachers in major metropolitan areas in the 1970s caused many Americans to question their assumptions about the role of the state and the importance of labor unions. Because of teachers’ long-time cultural importance as providers of economic opportunity as well as inculcators of moral values, their labor stoppages (which were often violations of the law) caused many white working- and middle-class Americans to blame the excesses of the liberal state for moral decline and to re-think their views about what had made America so prosperous in the years following World War II. Further, the state’s failure to solve

the thorny problem of teachers shutting down the school system also caused many of these future “Reagan Democrats” to question the efficacy of the liberal state. With labor-liberalism discredited, free-market conservatives began, by the end of the decade, to argue persuasively for a shift to a more austere state, less government regulation of business, and for the privatization of social goods like education. This dissertation charts these larger developments by putting close examinations of teacher strikes in Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and St. Louis in dialogue with the national trajectory of neoliberal conservatism.

Against the Public: Teacher Strikes and the Decline of Liberalism, 1968-

1981

by

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: “A New Era of Labor Relations”: Liberal Labor Policy and the Seeds of Discontent, 1968-71.....	55
Pittsburgh Teachers and Public Employee Act 195 .....	58
Act 195 in Action: Philadelphia and Pittsburgh .....	74
Ugly and Bitter: The Newark Strikes of 1970-71.....	88
Conclusion.....	103
Chapter 2: Letters to the Essex County Penitentiary: David Selden and the Fracturing of America .....	109
The Newark Strike and Selden: Empty Vessels .....	111
The Selden Letters and the Public Image of Labor Unions.....	120
Teacher Strikes and the Decline of Law and Order.....	132
Alienated Individuals, Re-Appropriating Narratives.....	139
Conclusion.....	148
Chapter 3: “Who is Going to Run the Schools?” Philadelphia, St. Louis, and the Urban Crises of 1972-73.....	151
Philadelphia: Sounding the alarm.....	155
Criminalizing the Strike .....	187
St. Louis: Illegal from the Start .....	199
Chapter 4: Striking Against the Public: The Pittsburgh Teachers Strike of 1975-76 and the Mounting Crisis of Labor-Liberalism .....	215
The context for the strike.....	218
The Strike .....	229
The Strike Aftermath.....	254
Chapter 5: “The Public Be Damned”: Conservative Activism and the Eclipse of Labor-Liberalism .....	264
The Labor Reform Act of 1977 .....	267
The National Right to Work Committee and the Fight against “Compulsory Unionism” ..	273
The Labor Reform Bill: Debate and Defeat .....	289
Conclusion.....	314

Chapter 6: The “Fed-up Taxpayer”: St. Louis, Philadelphia, and the Neoliberal Turn.....	318
The St. Louis strike.....	320
From “Public” to “Taxpayer” .....	326
Two strikes: Philadelphia in the autumns of 1980 and 1981.....	337
Letting the Public School System Die.....	351
Conclusion.....	375
Conclusion: Class as a Category of Social Solidarity in Postmodern (and Neoliberal) America	377
Bibliography .....	393

## Introduction

In February and March of 2011, thousands of protestors gathered at the Wisconsin state capitol to oppose a bill intended to strip public sector workers of most collective bargaining rights. The bill was justified by leaders in the Republican-held legislature as a way to save money in the context of a fiscal emergency; its critics derided the bill as a cynical attempt by Republicans to roll back union rights. As the debate intensified, much of the political discussion revolved around the amount of money spent on public services like education and, in particular, whether public sector workers—especially teachers—bore responsibility for Wisconsin’s budget shortfalls.<sup>1</sup>

The intensity of this debate underscores the central place public education has played in American politics in the post-World War II years. As a fundamental facet of everyday life as well as the single-most most expensive expenditure of local governments, the manner in which the state provides education to its citizens has been a major political battleground. Further, as the Wisconsin episode in early 2011 shows us, those debates can often range far from the mechanics of simply how much to spend on teaching children to read and write toward highly-charged discussions about how much the state should intervene in the lives of its citizens, the appropriateness of union representation, and the equality of the tax structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Among many examples of this discussion in the news, see Ezra Klein, “Are Wisconsin’s State and Local Workers Overpaid?” *Washington Post*, Feb. 19, 2011. The debate even reached into the realm of popular culture. See, for instance, Jon Stewart’s satirical response to the Fox News Channel’s assertion of teachers’ responsibility for state deficits on *The Daily Show* broadcast from Mar. 3, 2011.

Though the kinds of criticisms levied on the public sector unions in Wisconsin in early 2011 are nothing new—one can find criticism of unions from employers of all kinds as far back as the earliest American efforts at organization in the nineteenth century—the position has not always had such political resonance. For a period after World War II, the dominant political ideology viewed the labor movement as a vital counterforce to corporate power and even to the state itself. Further, many postwar liberals viewed teachers—as providers of opportunity and instructors in “American” moral values—not as “special interests” but as a unique part of the public interest. Laws in those states firmly in the camp of the liberal New Deal coalition supported the right of teachers and other public sector workers to form unions and bargain collectively as an example of “enlightened” labor relations as well as a means to ensure that public school students enjoyed quality education.

In the 1970s, however, as the political center of the United States turned from the liberal consensus of the postwar years to the neoliberal conservatism that would be made by the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, teacher unionization became highly controversial. In the late 1960s and 1970s, pioneering efforts by urban teacher unions to gain higher wages and more control over working conditions coincided with urban racial conflict, high inflation, and tax revenues that could not keep up with the demands of the Great Society state. Teacher strikes abounded—numbering in the hundreds in several years in the 1970s—and numerous actions closed schools for several months on end. In these strikes, tempers flared on the part of both supporters and opponents of the strikes, but more importantly, as they dragged on, local—and in many cases, national—commentators debated not only the immediate labor conflict, but also the role of labor

unions in a democratic society, the ability of the state to rationalize labor relations, and the distinctly American system of three-tiered—state, local, and federal—political economy. The result of this ideological battle would be an increased skepticism toward both the ability of the state to “solve” social and economic conflict and the importance of labor unions in ensuring an equitable society.

In these instances of heated debate, cultural practices served as the crucial material mobilized by commentators on both sides. The idea, for example, that teachers provided economic opportunity through education in addition to inculcating “American” values served both defenders of the striking teachers as well as their opponents. Teachers argued that because of their importance, they should be remunerated fairly and given more control over educational policy, while opponents argued, also because of teachers’ importance, that formation of unions in the profession was dangerous to the “American” values of individuality and entrepreneurial creativity. Union supporters argued that proper instruction by good teachers represented the only hope to ease the tensions brought on by fears of American decline in the 1970s, while opponents argued that teacher unions had helped cause the decline in American values in the first place by striking illegally. Further, as teachers became publically prominent as the face of unions and struck in numerous cities across the United States, many observers reconsidered the cultural explanations for American prosperity in the postwar period. While many Americans had agreed that the restriction of free market forces and a robust labor movement were integral to the affluence of postwar America, during the 1970s, critics of teacher strikes began to rewrite the nation’s historical narrative. Various critics—conservative ideologues, liberal intellectuals, white middle-class community activists,

and even unionized blue-collar workers—questioned whether labor unions had ever been responsible for US prosperity and asserted that teacher unions led to a degeneration of American character, sapping the individual freedom and creativity which supposedly had been so crucial in the exceptional abundance of the nation’s postwar years. These arguments spilled over into larger efforts to discredit both the labor movement and liberalism more broadly. Teacher strikes, indeed, reworked conceptions of “Americanness” and, in doing so, became laboratories for the reconstruction of political ideology in the 1970s.

Using the methodology of cultural history, this dissertation analyzes the shifting of political ideology that occurred during the crises brought on by teacher strikes in the late 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, my perspective presupposes a relationship between mass cultural productions—television news, newspaper commentary, and popular periodicals—and individuals who wrote letters to the editor or served as community activists during the crises. Both national and local commentators and individuals used cultural constructions of American values to formulate ideological arguments, and the interaction between the two helped to foster the shift in the larger political ideas of the decade—from the postwar liberalism that assumed that labor unions were vital and the state could solve social and economic problems, to free market individualism, which emphasized privatization and fiscal austerity.

An example will best illustrate this dynamic at work. On November 30, 1975, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers voted to go on strike, demanding a contract that provided wages to keep up with double-digit inflation. The negotiations for the next contract had begun just as the Ford administration debated what to do about New York

City's dire fiscal situation, which had several times nearly resulted in the nation's largest city defaulting on its debt. Pittsburgh politicians, from the mayor to members of the school board, argued against a substantial increase in teacher salaries, as many national commentators—many conservatives and even some liberals—had blamed public sector salaries for the crisis in the Big Apple, and so a large degree of fear existed in Pittsburgh that the Steel City would become “another New York City.”

The strike continued for fifty-seven days, far exceeding the predictions of even the most fearful at the beginning of the strike. Though much public support existed for the teachers union at the beginning of the strike, strong evidence indicates that the public very much turned against the teachers by the strike's conclusion. Further, coming on the heels of New York City's fiscal crisis and carrying over into the nation's bicentennial year, the lengthy strike became an entry point for public discussion about labor unions, the liberal state, the decline of respect for law and order, and the very definition of “the public.”

Two commentaries, coming toward the end of the strike, make the point. In a letter to the *Daily Independent*, a small newspaper based in a suburb about twenty miles outside of the city, J.W. Smith argued that “when large unions including public employees such as our firemen, police and teachers refuse to obey injunctions of our judges and even so called decent elements of our society engage in disorder to gain their ends, this nation is indeed in a sorry state.”<sup>2</sup> And, a *Pittsburgh Press* editorial of January 27, the day after the strike ended, argued that “with the public-employee unions

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<sup>2</sup> “People's Forum,” *The Valley Independent*, Jan. 10, 1976.

powerfully armed, and often heedless of anybody else's interests, the public needs more adequate defenses. Clearly, the weapons now available to the public don't have much more force than a popgun."<sup>3</sup>

The first letter shows both the breadth and the depth of the crisis evoked by the teacher strike. To Smith, it indicated the dangerous path down which public sector unions had led the nation. Further, he lived well outside of Pittsburgh. The importance of the strike clearly went beyond those parents with students stuck at home—it served as a window into larger anxieties about disorder and decline in the tumultuous 1970s. Finally, in the very same letter, Smith characterized the letters to the editor section of the *Daily Independent* as “a town meeting place where individuals intent on serving the common good can express their views.” Here, the letter speaks to a larger phenomenon related to cultural and political change in the decade. Many letter writers like Smith clearly trusted the newspaper to help them to make sense of a jarring event like the teachers strike and moreover, as a “citizen activist” (a concept employed in a different context by the political scientists Edward Carmines and James Stimson), Smith, in dialogue with the newspaper editorial staff, served as a leader whose view readers might use to forge their own political opinions.<sup>4</sup>

What is especially instructive about the *Press* editorial, for its part, is first, that the liberal state, which had supported labor unions' right to organize, and in Pennsylvania, even the right to strike by public sector workers, seemed to be partially to blame for the threat; and second, that the “public” was clearly defined in opposition to the teachers'

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<sup>3</sup> “Strike Lessons,” *PP*, Jan. 29, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 106-114.

union. This consensus, moreover, was forged in the interaction between political commentators—like the unnamed editor of the *Press*—and the activists like Smith who wrote to the local newspaper to express the outrage—fueled in the first place by media coverage of the strike.

In this project, I am primarily interested in mapping the process through which the reformulation of culture altered the dominant political ideology in the United States as it shifted from labor-liberalism to neoliberal conservatism in what Bruce Schulman has called the “long 1970s”—roughly 1968-1984. Michael Denning’s cornerstone work on the 1930s has shown that proletarian writers, artists and musicians successfully “labored” American culture during that decade. Further, Denning argues, while McCarthyism made cultural representations of workers more conservative after World War II, working people did not leave the mainstream of popular culture in the first decades after the war. It was not until the 1970s, as Jefferson Cowie has argued, that the blue-collar worker largely disappeared from the national stage of mass culture. Though Cowie is right in showing the dissipation of the more traditional public face of labor, cultural representations of *unions* did not die so easily. In fact, professional unions like those of teachers, policemen, and athletes took center stage as the blue-collar worker faded from the scene. And if the highly-charged cultural and political debates of the 1990s and the 2000s over the effect of unionized teachers on a supposedly dysfunctional public education system or of the appropriateness of unionized millionaire basketball players are any indication, unions have by no means disappeared from popular culture. This project, then, shows how the shifting cultural representations of unions in the 1970s—placing professional public servants like teachers at their center—altered many middle- and

working-class Americans' ideas about the nature of political economy and the general desirability of government intervention.<sup>5</sup>

Mapping a sea change in ideology is a bit like measuring the movement of a glacier—no mere event can serve as a definitive turning point. Nonetheless, compelling evidence—from opinion pieces to letters to editors to testimony at community meetings and public hearings—indicates that many white blue-collar and white-collar workers in the urban fringe and suburbs in the industrial Northeast who had clearly supported the inclusion of the labor movement in the postwar liberal order had changed their views by the end of the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The cultural constructs mobilized and rearranged in new ways during teacher strikes helped to stimulate that change.

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Schulman. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001). Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York City: Verso, 1997). Jefferson Cowie, "Vigorously Left, Right, and Center: The Crosscurrents in Working-Class America in the 1970s," Beth Bailey and David Farber (eds.) *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> I am attentive to the difficulties in defining "middle-class" and "working-class" in this study. As Matthew Lassiter's eloquent work on school desegregation has shown, middle-class suburbanites and working-class city dwellers did not fit neatly into the inchoate political coalition of disaffected liberals in the 1970s. Indeed, as Lassiter points out, working-class whites often harbored more overt racial resentment since busing solutions often directly involved strategies that impinged on working-class schools within the city limits, while middle-class suburban whites nominally favored desegregation but adhered to a "color-blind" ideology in which white spatial privilege resulted from "free-market" forces. See Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). With regard to views of teacher strikes, depending on the city, these distinctions exist, but there is a great deal more slippage between the two categories. Certainly suburban middle-class whites were not inconvenienced by school strikes on a daily basis as some working-class city dwellers may have been, but when it came to anxieties that American values were under assault, in many cases suburban commentators were among the most vocal. Further, as David Halle's sociology of working people in New Jersey has shown, by the 1970s, the relative affluence of traditional blue-collar workers meant that many had a sort of double consciousness. On the shop-floor, most workers defined themselves as "working men" in contrast to white collar workers and the wealthy who did not have to perform repetitive physical labor. In a mixed residential setting in which race and income level defined who lived in a given neighborhood, however, workers unequivocally defined themselves as "middle-class." See *America's Working Man: Work, Home, and Politics among Blue-Collar Property Owners* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Though there may indeed have been a good deal of resentment toward teachers because of their white-collar status, many of the white urban and suburban working people in this study viewed their own interests primarily as middle-class property owners.

Thus this dissertation's scholarly intervention is located squarely at the intersection of political histories that have attempted to chronicle the conservative "turn" in the postwar United States and studies of the post-World War II-era focusing more closely on the labor movement. While scholars have shown the conservative "ascendancy" during that time to be the fruition of decades of intellectual exchange and the painstaking construction of political networks on the right, the story of why middle- and working-class Americans would accede to a political-economic ideology that granted new powers to corporations, limited community services, made capital flight easier, and espoused open hostility to workplace protection and job security is still not easy to comprehend. For their part, most studies of labor unions in the post-war era focus on the declension narrative of labor's lost relevance as a force for social justice. Building on this work, *Against the Public* asks why so many white working- and middle-class Americans in the so-called "Frost Belt" who had previously been stalwarts of the New Deal coalition turned against the labor movement and against liberalism.

Furthermore, during these crisis years, debates about teacher unions—and, in a larger sense, the labor movement—give us not only a window into how and why political ideas changed, but also a look into how cultural regimes changed in postwar America. In addition, these debates highlight a crucial shift in the way political ideas changed at the cusp of a postmodern era in which the interplay between mass media and the individual became increasingly significant in understanding larger ideological change. It seems likely, in fact, that one can trace today's political culture in which many voters are more loyal to cable news ideologues like Rachel Maddow, Bill Maher, or Bill O'Reilly than to any single politician to this very period when liberal constituencies fractured and the key

node of political alliance became the individual's relationship to streams of mass culture rather than to political parties.

A veritable sub-genre of the burgeoning history of the New Right has been devoted to explaining the appeal of conservative, free market ideology to working- and middle-class Americans who seemingly stood to gain little from it. What this historiography has done very well, thus far, is outline the key ideological strands in the conservative movement to which these workers would later accede. In fact, we now know that the “Reagan Revolution” did not come out of nowhere. Conservative intellectuals and politicians began organizing against what Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser have called “the New Deal order” as early as the Roosevelt years, and conservative political and intellectual networks took root after World War II. Recent scholarship has shown that in the 1950s and 60s, such disparate strands as William F. Buckley's *National Review*, Russell Kirk's traditionalism, anti-communist evangelicalism in Southern California, General Electric's Lemuel Ricketts Boulware's anti-unionism, Friedrich von Hayek's economic libertarianism, Whittaker Chambers' defense of the West, Wal-Mart's brand of Sun Belt free-market populism, and Ayn Rand's atheistic veneration of the individual variously worked both together and sometimes in tension with one another to “mainstream” conservative ideas.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). On Buckley and Kirk, see, predominately, Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). On evangelicals, Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). On Boulware and Hayek, see Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009). On Chambers, see Michael Kimmage's excellent dual biography *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). On Wal-Mart, see Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian*

A key juncture in conservatism's rise to national prominence, according to the journalist Rick Perlstein, occurred in the failed Presidential campaign of Arizona senator Barry Goldwater in 1964. Goldwater's famous political treatise—*The Conscience of a Conservative*—was written primarily by the brother-in-law of the Conservative *pater familias* William F. Buckley. It galvanized conservative student activists like Young Americans for Freedom against the advances of the New Deal at the same time that radical student groups such as Students for a Democratic Society had begun to criticize it from the left. Further, while Goldwater would be spectacularly defeated in 1964, the campaign nonetheless helped conservative, anti-New Deal Republicans form networks for future political activism, and Reagan's speech at the Republican National Convention represented the beginning of his political stardom.<sup>8</sup>

Scholarship on the 1970s has shown that free market ideology reached the political mainstream through an increased determination on the part of corporate capital to publicly assert the virtues of the free market. Kim Moody, for example, has argued that corporate interests quite consciously organized “as a class” in the decade after profits began declining in the late 1960s. For Moody, the Business Roundtable—a group

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*Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). And, on Rand, Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Burns points out that, in fact, though Rand may have inspired many Americans—particularly in colleges and universities—to organize against what she saw as the “collectivism” of the New Deal, Buckley and his allies at the *National Review* despised the “Godlessness” of Objectivism. Chambers wrote a biting review of *Atlas Shrugged* while Buckley penned a scathing obituary after Rand's death in 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). Elizabeth Tandy Shermer has further shown how Goldwater's early political career relied on tapping into anti-union sentiment in the sunbelt. See “Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry Goldwater's Early Senate Career and the De-Legitimation of Organized Labor,” *Journal of American History* 95 (December 2008), 678-709. Reagan's 1964 speech provided an early example of the brilliant way he would frame regulation of the market as anti-democratic: “This is the issue of this election: Whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.”

formed in 1972 to promote the interests of the United States' largest corporations—was the main catalyst. The Roundtable was especially interested in convincing both the public and politicians that government regulation and labor unions were at fault for the nation's economic woes. Not only, argues Moody, did the Business Roundtable conduct a massive Congressional lobbying effort directly to halt national labor reform in 1978; it also helped awaken previously “somnolent groups” like the National Association of Manufacturers and the US Chamber of Commerce into waging their own public campaigns against liberal regulations.<sup>9</sup>

Moody's *An Injury to All*, written over twenty years ago now, anticipated the work of several historians who have taken up the task of mapping the trajectory of “business consciousness” in the 1970s. Indeed, historians are now beginning to build on the labor journalist's work that shows how crucial were the 1970s in leading to the ideological-political shift symbolized by the so-called “Reagan Revolution.” Two such efforts can be found in the work of Bethany Moreton and Alice O'Connor in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer's recent edited volume *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*.

Broadening her documentation of the development of pro-business curricula at colleges and universities in Arkansas in *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*, Moreton shows, in “Make Payroll: Not War: Business Culture as Youth Culture,” how free market advocate groups like the US Chamber of Commerce undertook massive local-level public relations campaigns to rehabilitate the poor image

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<sup>9</sup> Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso Press, 1988), 127-146.

of businesses in the 1970s. Further, she shows how Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), attracting large donations from such groups as the Business Roundtable, Coors, Dow Chemical, and Wal-Mart, helped to create by the end of the decade college campuses that “compared to the atmosphere of the previous decade...had become friendly places for businesses.”<sup>10</sup>

Alice O’Connor shows how conservative intellectuals brought free-market individualism into the mainstream by organizing against the liberal values of philanthropic research organizations such as the Ford Foundation. She argues that an elite group of conservative activists—a joint effort on the part of neoconservative intellectuals like Irving Kristol and Nathan Glazer and pro-business organizations such as the John M. Olin Foundation—worked to “redirect philanthropic wealth to more ‘pro-American’—and ‘pro-capitalist’ causes.” O’Connor further suggests that this new intellectual apparatus allowed intellectuals on the right—especially Kristol—to disseminate, through connections with conservative think-tanks like the Hoover Institution and the American Enterprise Institute, a new rhetoric that cast both corporations and the white working class as “victims” of liberal forces “bent on denying their rights.”<sup>11</sup>

Although this exciting work has effectively mapped the various contours of efforts on the right to promote free market individualism, it necessarily relies on *a priori* assumptions about the nature of the diffusion of this ideology. But how do we make

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<sup>10</sup> Bethany Moreton, “Make Payroll, Not War: Business Culture as Youth Culture,” in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 52-70.

<sup>11</sup> Alice O’Connor, “Financing the Counterrevolution,” in *ibid.*, 148-168.

sense of the reception of efforts by intellectuals such as Kristol to find common cause between corporations and white workers? SIFE most certainly brought a right-wing corporate agenda to colleges and universities, but how do we know that this agenda altered the cultural and political horizons of middle- and working-class college students? In other words, these scholars have not yet answered the question of how these ideas were disseminated and why many working people responded to them in the 1970s. Further, they have not shown the role middle- and working-class Americans played in themselves spreading such ideas—that the emergence of these ideas may be “bottom-up” phenomena almost as much as “top-down.”

Scholars have outlined trends that might be responsible for the success of these conservative ideas. In broad terms, historians’ solutions to this problematic fall into two main categories. First, some historians have emphasized the “backlash” against the rights revolutions—civil rights, feminism, gay liberation, antiwar protest, etc.—of the 1960s. A second group of historians have attempted to show that, in some ways, what appeared to be a backlash was in fact the logical expression of the very contradictions of New Deal liberalism as working- and middle-class whites had long benefited from the largess of federal, state, and local governments while believing that these advantages stemmed from their success in the free market.

The backlash view in essence is one largely grounded in the assumption that white middle- and working-class Americans—the “silent majority” popularized in President Richard Nixon’s speech in November 1969—began in the 1960s to base their political decisions on social and cultural issues instead of economic issues. In turn, according to this explanation, these Americans—either without realizing it or perhaps

consciously viewing it as a trade-off for the defense of “American” values—supported politicians who fostered an economic agenda to their detriment. Most famously, this view has been promulgated by leftist historian and journalist Thomas Frank. In *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* Frank argues that conservative politicians have been able to appeal to middle-class Americans by making issues of social controversies such as abortion and by painting liberal Democrats as effete intellectuals. Further, he excoriates the bulk of Democratic politicians since the 1960s for their failure to “speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and more arrogant by the day.”<sup>12</sup>

Though Frank is especially interested in exploring the conservatism of Americans in the Bible belt, his assumptions about the way many Americans have been duped into voting against their own interests is illustrative of a larger trend in the historiography. For example, Michael Kazin’s work characterizing populism as a long-standing yet fungible mode of American political discourse argues that right-wing politicians such as George Wallace (and to a lesser extent Richard Nixon) co-opted the anger of white working-class ethnics upset by urban chaos and the seemingly excessive demands of civil rights activists. Joshua Freeman, in an influential article on the 1970 “Hard-Hat Riot” in New York City, argues that Nixon was able to capitalize politically on the resentment working-class construction workers felt toward feminists and anti-war protesters. Matthew Lassiter contends that a key part of the success in the unraveling of the New Deal order in the 1970s can be found in the ability by evangelical political organizations

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Frank, *What’s The Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), 245.

such as the Moral Majority to exploit Americans' fears of the proliferation of pornography and abortion. Indeed, the major achievement of the religious right in the decade, according to Lassiter, was that its leaders successfully pushed cultural explanations above economic ones "in setting the terms of public debate and determining the direction of public policies."<sup>13</sup>

To point to these three historical interpretations is not intended to undermine their value; indeed, each is a piece to be admired for its important treatment of cultural issues. Nevertheless, as historians, we often separate cultural and economic interests for heuristic purposes, yet through much of the recent past, many Americans did not in fact make such a political calculus. For many of the future Reagan Democrats in the 1970s, what they viewed as their economic interests relied heavily on a cultural narrative that explained the material success of postwar America.

The second set of interpretations argues that what appears to be a backlash against social and cultural protest represents in fact the defense by white working- and middle-class Americans of a set of interests that cannot really be separated into structure and superstructure. This work focuses on the inextricability of race—an ideological construct—and the material dynamic of class position. Thomas Sugrue's groundbreaking work on racial politics in postwar Detroit shows that competition between whites and blacks for jobs after World War II favored white workers while impoverishing African-American migrants to Detroit. Thus inherent privileges accrued to white

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 221-268; Freeman, Josh. "Construction Workers, Manliness and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations," *Journal of Social History* 26 (Summer 1993), 724-744. Matthew Lassiter, "Inventing Family Values," in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 16.

workers, who began organizing at the grassroots to protect their privileges—mostly in segregated homeownership—against blacks as early as the 1950s.<sup>14</sup>

Robert Self has made a similar, more sophisticated, argument for Oakland after World War II. In *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, he traces the parallel rise of white homeowner activism and the black power movement from the 1940s to the 1970s. He shows how, in particular, the spatial organization of capital along racial lines set two class/race (the two concepts are entwined in Self's view) conscious groups in diametrical opposition.<sup>15</sup> Finally, David Freund has shown the limitations inherent in the very roots of New Deal housing policy in arguing that the Federal Housing Administration and the Homeowners Loan Corporation worked to change the way whites viewed race. By “populariz[ing] the idea that government interventions were *not* providing considerable benefits to whites,” Freund writes, white homeowners began to view race not in biological terms but in their capability to succeed in what they viewed as a free market. This would, in turn, later cause white suburban Americans to vehemently oppose what they viewed as artificial interventions on the part of the state to integrate housing.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, what the above three scholars have demonstrated is that the ideological assumptions of New Deal policy, by structuring local opposition to certain aspects of liberal policy well before the 1970s, created in part the circumstances under which the

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 9-19.

future Reagan Democrats would defect to the Republican Party. Furthermore, this group has successfully challenged the assumption that the defection of the white working-class in the 1980s represented nothing more, to steal from Marx, than their seduction by the theatrics of a modern-day Louis Napoleon. Indeed, in this view, white workers and/or suburbanites quite forcefully advocated for their own very real interests; perhaps most importantly, if we accept the position that racial difference represents an ideology and that real or perceived material benefits accrue from that ideology, then it becomes impossible to separate ideological interests from economic interests. Thus to understand white workers' waning support for New Deal liberalism, we must understand these two types of interests as intertwined.

This scholarship has clearly shown that the imbrication of racial ideology within economic interests meant that white middle-class Americans' cultural beliefs and material interests were interrelated. In this vein, I argue that we must also understand the way these Americans understood the labor movement, as this understanding was as important as the material benefits to be gained from union membership. At the same time, many liberals also disliked the disruption caused by strikes, especially when those strikes shut down such an important aspect of everyday life like the public school system. In short, support for the New Deal order rested in large part on support for the notion that the economic prowess of the United States was tied to the power of labor unions, but unions' primary source of negotiating power—strikes—should be avoided. It is with this assumption that this dissertation begins. While acknowledging the proliferation of many iterations of a pro-free-market individualism dedicated to curbing the state's ability to regulate corporations or to redistribute wealth, I show that this ideology only took root

with so many white working- and middle-class Americans after postwar liberalism—entwined as it was with the labor movement—became delegitimized.

Thus, *Against the Public* begins with a reaffirmation of the significance of the changes brought on by the New Deal, an assumption questioned by Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore in their provocative essay “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History.” In the piece, Cowie and Salvatore argue that “all of the liberal breakthroughs of the thirties and forties with regard to labor, race, and religion remained so deeply conflicted in their original formation—grounded as they inevitably were in the contours of the American past—that their public, post-1968 rupture appears, on reflection, to be quite understandable, perhaps even axiomatic.” This argument suggests that the New Deal, while shifting electoral patterns, did not create a lasting change in American political culture. Cowie and Salvatore further explain this by pointing to a persistent ideology of individualism that constrained the potential for the New Deal state.<sup>17</sup>

This is a thought-provoking position, as it asks us to consider some of the longer trends—such as the role of anti-black racism and the conservatism of religious institutions—and the inability of the New Deal to transcend them. This argument seriously understates the magnitude of the changes brought on by the New Deal. The landmark legislation (section 7[a] of the National Industrial Recovery Act [NIRA] and the National Labor Relations Act [NLRA]) that not only sanctioned the right of workers to collective bargaining but set a place for the state to *encourage* it and inspired many of

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<sup>17</sup> Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008), 3-32.

the organizing drives of the 1930s represented a far-reaching departure from the way the federal government had before dealt with labor unions. Before the Roosevelt administration, the federal government had either specifically sided against workers (as in the 1894 Pullman strike) or had only supported union efforts during periods of emergency to prevent radicalism (as the Wilson administration did during World War I).<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, as James Gross has argued, the NLRA's sponsor—Senator Robert Wagner of New York—believed that collective bargaining was “actually more than a method of negotiating wages, hours, and working conditions but a system of checks and balances based on countervailing power.” More than necessary for economic democracy, Wagner argued that “the development of a partnership between industry and labor in the solution of national problems is the indispensable complement of political democracy.”<sup>19</sup> Further, as Mike Davis reminds us, with the New Deal pushing the Democrats to embrace the labor movement, the election of 1936 shifted the very grounds of the political landscape. The election “marked, for the first time, the supersession of the traditional ethno-religious patterning of the Northern electorate by a clear polarization of workers and capitalists between the Democratic and Republican parties.”<sup>20</sup>

In tandem, these occurrences meant that for the first time in American history, the large majority of wage laborers were in the fold of one party even if it was decidedly not

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Joseph McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> James Gross, *Broken Promise: The Subversion of U.S. Labor Relations Policy, 1947-1994* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986), 65.

a labor party, and that party had a policy apparatus to support the economic aspirations of those people. Paternalist as the new order may have been, deep changes in the American political culture occurred during the era of the New Deal coalition. Indeed, in spite of the restrictions of the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), the Democratic Party continued in its firm commitment to collective bargaining rights for workers in the 1950s and 60s. Combined with the Keynesian consensus that the state should play a role in ensuring appropriate demand for consumer products, the dominant political ideology for some forty years thus centered on a belief that for the economy to function properly, wealth needed to be redistributed, and that labor unions were integral in that process.

As a heuristic device, then, I call this belief labor-liberalism. While understanding that this is an arena of some scholarly debate, I nonetheless believe it is important to use the term, especially since the movement that has largely controlled the mainstream of the American polity in the years since the decline of the New Deal coalition consistently refers to itself as “conservative.” By no means, as Kevin Mattson reminds us, can we understand postwar liberalism as a monolithic “consensus.”<sup>21</sup> We can, however, outline the broad contours of a mainstream labor-liberalism that, starting with the New Deal, included the belief that the labor movement was a crucial force in the preservation of American democracy and the success of the American economy. As Meg Jacobs has pointed out, one of the primary motivations behind New Deal legislation such as the NIRA and the NLRA that supported the right of workers to organize in labor unions resulted from the belief of liberals in the Roosevelt administration that the

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<sup>21</sup> Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (London: Routledge Press, 2004), 14.

increase in purchasing power among workers was fundamental to ending the Great Depression. Jacobs has further shown that conservatives, using the same concerns over purchasing power, were able to combat labor unions in the years immediately after World War II by tying efforts by workers to get better wages to the inflated prices of goods and services after demobilization. These efforts bore fruit in the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act (1947). Though the new law limited, practically speaking, the radicalism of labor unions and restricted them from certain tools to more effectively organize and wage strikes, it should be remembered that this act was passed by a Republican Congress over Democratic President Harry Truman's veto. Further, most aspects of the law dealt not with the rightness of unions *per se* but were more immediately concerned with radicalism and strikes—concerns brought to the fore by the post-World War II strike wave of 1946-47 and the emerging Cold War rivalry with the USSR. And, it should be remembered that in 1948, Democrats regained control of both houses of Congress and the Presidency, which we might very well interpret as at least a partial repudiation of Taft-Hartley. Finally, though there were not enough votes to repeal the law during the second Truman administration, the repeal of Taft-Hartley continued to be a campaign issue for Democratic politicians—in 1965, only a Senate filibuster stymied an evisceration of the most onerous provision of Taft-Hartley—well into the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting that many Americans believed that labor unions were a necessary part of a Keynesian interventionist state.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chapters 4-6.

Two intellectuals—historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and economist John Kenneth Galbraith—perhaps best exemplify, however, the liberal postwar vision of labor unions. Schlesinger, for instance, viewed the cornerstone of American democracy as the ability of different interests to keep each other from controlling the state. Thus the public interest, according to Schlesinger in 1945, could only be served by negating the influence of certain powerful groups: “The business community has ordinarily been in the most powerful of these groups, and liberalism in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community.” Galbraith went on, several years later, to point out that labor unions should serve as a “countervailing power” to “push back” against the interests of corporations.<sup>23</sup>

Though this view may have had its detractors, the participation of both Galbraith and Schlesinger as political appointees in the Kennedy Administration shows how close this position was to the political mainstream by the 1960s. President Kennedy would further show his commitment to the notion that union interests served as counterweights to business interests by nominating United Steelworkers of America General Counsel Arthur Goldberg first as Secretary of Labor and then, in 1962, to the Supreme Court. In addition, Kennedy would give sanction to the importance of unions as a counterweight to government power. In 1962, he issued Executive Order 10988, giving his explicit support to workers employed by the federal government—workers not covered by the NLRA—to enjoy union representation and collective bargaining rights. Both following the President’s lead and acknowledging the opening salvos in what would be both a

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<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger, from *The Age of Jackson* (1945); Galbraith from *American Capitalism* (1952), both quoted in Mattson, *When America Was Great* (pp. 98; 101-102).

highly visible and highly successful effort by public sector unions to organize government employees, seven states had by 1966 passed their own laws authorizing collective bargaining statutes. In 1967, New York's collective bargaining law—named for the University of Pennsylvania labor relations expert who largely authored it—was fairly typical. While outlawing strikes, the law sanctioned the unionization of public sector employees and provided an apparatus for labor mediation.

Perhaps the best example of the liberal ideal on the state level, however, is evidenced by the 1968 Hickman Commission to reform public employee labor relations in Pennsylvania. Headed by a former executive from the Aluminum Corporation of America, the commission was called by a Republican governor in response to a strike by Pittsburgh teachers in early 1968. The commission, while giving local courts the power to enjoin public sector strikes if they violated the “health, safety, or public welfare” of the community, nonetheless offered public sector unions the right to strike as a “safety valve” to *prevent* strikes by public employees. When the Pennsylvania legislature passed a new law—virtually identical to the Hickman Commission recommendations—it was responding not just to lobbying from public sector unions in the state but also to the ideal that labor unions were integral partners in the rational management of goods and services.

Indeed, until the 1970s, the “public” generally agreed that labor unions were necessary to the success of American democracy and the nation's economic prowess. Opinion polls, while certainly not a perfect indicator of the public view of labor unions, nonetheless indicate what appears to be widespread support for the national political participation place of the labor movement in the 1950s and 60s. When asked by a Gallup poll in 1953, “In general do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?” 75% of

those asked approved while only 18% disapproved. The McClellan Committee racketeering hearings in 1957 led to a brief drop to 64% approval by September of 1957, but by early 1961, 70% of Americans approved of labor unions, and in 1965, 71% approved, while only 19% disapproved.<sup>24</sup>

But these numbers shifted markedly in the 1970s. By 1973, only 59% answered affirmatively to the same question, while 26% disapproved. By May 1979, support had fallen to 55%, and by August 1981, a whopping 35% of Americans—without being asked about any union specifically—disapproved of labor unions. Further, these numbers declined at the very same time that Democrats were defeated at the polls, suggesting the relationship between the place of organized labor and support by liberals for government intervention. If, as historian Gil Troy has observed, the Presidential election of 1980 represented a “referendum on the 1970s,” Republican candidate Ronald Reagan’s Inaugural Address in January 1981 showed exactly what had been at stake: “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”<sup>25</sup> And as Reagan would show so dramatically in the famous showdown in August, 1981 with striking air traffic controllers, government support for collective bargaining had been part of “the problem.”

*Against the Public*, then, begins with the premise that the existence of a robust labor movement, in the eyes of both many postwar liberal policymakers and many

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<sup>24</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, “Labor Unions in the Public Mind,” in Lipset (ed.) *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1986), 301.

<sup>25</sup> Gil Troy. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration*, <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/major.html>>, accessed Mar. 7, 2010.

working Americans, was just as central to the New Deal state as were federal guarantees of mortgages and Keynesian spending. This belief, however, came under fire in the 1970s. Though conservatives worked hard to discredit private sector unions—blaming, for instance, “featherbedding” steel workers for the deindustrialization of that industry—it was in the realm of the public sector that the most spectacular labor conflicts occurred during the 1970s. Further, characterizations of those efforts as “violating the public interest” by both conservatives and liberals, provided much more traction to politicians and intellectuals alike interested in discrediting the labor movement. On the campaign trail in late 1975, for instance, Ronald Reagan clearly differentiated private from public sector and blamed the latter for New York City’s near collapse: “There is no question that the victims in New York are the three million taxpaying citizens, working in the private sector who must put up all the money that pays for everything else.”<sup>26</sup> In 1975, Reagan may have been one of the first politicians close to attaining a major party nomination to frame public sector workers as unnecessary freeloaders, but he referenced a discourse that—owing largely to teacher strikes—had already become prominent in Frost Belt cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Confronted with—and to some extent responsible for the very prominence of these discourses—many middle- and working-class white Americans began to perceive their own political interests—both economic and ideological—differently. Instead of most middle- and working-class Americans viewing unions as necessary forces to ensure both affluence and a democratic distribution of

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<sup>26</sup> NBC Nightly News, November 30, 1975.

resources, they instead increasingly viewed unions as threats to these goals, and hence, to the “public interest.”

This shift grew out of a longer history of the contested concept of the “public” in American history and its relationship to labor unions. Labor policy during the Progressive era, for instance, hinged on the notion of the “public” interest. As Shelton Stromquist has argued, the Progressive movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was largely defined by a focus on solving the “labor problem” by developing institutions that could ameliorate class conflict in the name of the public, or to use Stromquist’s term, “the people.” Todd Laugen has shown how union leaders in Colorado and Kansas during the 1910s and 20s attempted to argue that union rights reflected the “public interest” more than did the rights of consumers to have unfettered access to goods and services. Jacobs’s *Pocketbook Politics* has explained the labor movement’s success during the New Deal era in large part as a result of its ability to portray itself as “the engine that would drive redistribution for the entire consuming public.”<sup>27</sup>

The idea of the “public” was one, then, that changed over the course of the twentieth-century. And, from the New Deal era into the early 1970s, most Americans viewed the interests of the “public” as in line with the interests of labor unions. This would change during the 1970s, as conservatives began to successfully argue that the interests of labor unions diverged from those of the “public,” and that the public interest

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<sup>27</sup> Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing “The People”*: *The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 1-11. R. Todd Laugen, “Struggles for the Public Interest: Organized Labor and State Mediation in Postwar America,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4 (January 2005) 69-82; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*. Quote is from p. 7.

was best-served by a government less committed to active intervention in the economy. Thus, the future Reagan Democrats grew to believe that their own interests (including the economic) were served by a turn away from postwar liberalism.

So, then, what happened between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s? Though historians have previously shown how an increasingly “class conscious” corporate leadership combined with a burgeoning neo-conservative intellectual movement to discredit the labor movement both among the public and in policy circles, one key transition that has been thus far neglected in the historiography is that the public face of the labor movement changed. Public sector workers staged massive drives for representation in the 1960s and the 1970s and waged a series of highly publicized labor stoppages. Teachers, police, sanitation workers, social workers, and firefighters organized, spurred on in some instances by federal and state government sanction to bargain collectively. After a series of spectacular victories in the 1960s, these unions became increasingly militant in the 1970s, especially as the economy began to sputter, and they struggled to hold on to their gains when municipal and state budgets dried up.

Over the long arc of the 1960s and 70s organizing drives, teacher unions had become the most visible and the most controversial. Though professional organizations in education date to the mid-nineteenth century, the first serious attempts to organize teachers in unions were under the guise of the Chicago Teachers Federation in the 1890s. In 1916, in response to an anti-union school board in Chicago, union locals from that city

joined to form the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to rival the other major national organization—the National Education Association (NEA).<sup>28</sup>

During the 1910s and 20s, public sector unions enjoyed even less legitimacy than those in the private sector. Though it was not illegal to form organizations, it was illegal virtually everywhere for public sector workers to strike, which severely hampered most collective bargaining efforts. The 1919 Boston police strike, in which then Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge famously rebuked the strikers that “there is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time” and then fired them, replacing them with strikebreakers, drew national attention and catapulted Coolidge into national politics. The strikers were associated with the postwar Red Scare, and drew so much animosity that public sector strikes were repudiated by AFL President Samuel Gompers.<sup>29</sup>

In such an atmosphere, the NEA turned away from collective bargaining altogether in the 1920s, instead focusing on lobbying for pro-education legislation, and the AFT—formally affiliated with the AFL—became more conservative and made few inroads in collective bargaining. Further, the Association of Federal, State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), formed in 1934, included a no-strike pledge in their charter. The Wagner Act, which, it should be remembered, sanctioned the right of workers to strike, only applied to private sector workers, and President Roosevelt came

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<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 80-100.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 109-121.

out strongly against the right of public workers to strike.<sup>30</sup> Many teachers, especially in New York City, were galvanized to join unions in the 1930s by the sagging government budgets during the Great Depression, and teachers across the US, who had not seen the wage gains that their counterparts had in the private sector, took part in the massive postwar strike wave of 1946-47. Teachers won wage gains in an NEA-led strike in Norwalk, Connecticut and an AFT-led strike in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1946, as well as in San Francisco, Jersey City, Chicago, and Buffalo over the next year. Just as private sector workers faced a backlash in the form of the federal Taft-Hartley Act, teacher strikes led to a series of state laws—the most draconian of which was New York’s Condon-Wadlin Act (1947) which prescribed stiff penalties for strikes by government employees—designed to unequivocally punish public sector strikes.<sup>31</sup>

Further, teachers who had been sympathetic to communism (or even suspected of communist ties) in Pennsylvania and New York were hauled into Congress and investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Thus, there were few contracts between teacher unions and school boards in the years immediately after the war. Teacher salaries continued to lag as urban schools were inundated with the children of migrants accompanying their parents into northern cities like New York, Newark, St. Louis, and Chicago, and, coupled with the post-McCarthy thaw in the second half of the 1950s, a more amenable climate for

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<sup>30</sup> See Roosevelt’s address to the Federation of Federal Employees in August 1937: “Since their own services have to do with the functioning of government, a strike of public employees manifests nothing less than an intent on their part to prevent or obstruct the operations of government until their demands are satisfied. Such action, looking toward the paralysis of the government by those who have concern to support it, is unthinkable and intolerable.”

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 122-184.

teacher organization emerged. Led by socialist organizers like David Selden and Albert Shanker, the AFT New York local—the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—staged a successful one-day strike in 1960. Although the strike was illegal, it was not feasible (or desirable given that the New York City mayor at the time was Robert Wagner, Jr.) to replace thousands of teachers, and the union won a significant collective bargaining election for city teachers the next year. Buoyed by organizing funds from the United Auto Workers-backed Industrial Union Department of the newly merged AFL-CIO, AFT organizers helped to organize successful locals in many other major US cities in the 1960s. The success of the AFT, in turn, drove the other major professional organization—the NEA—to more fully embrace collective bargaining, and, albeit more reluctantly, the strike as a weapon to attain bargaining rights. By the late 1960s, teachers had gained collective bargaining contracts—in urban areas, most of them affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers (AFL-CIO)—in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Chicago, among many other cities. By the end of the 1970s, as Marjorie Murphy has pointed out, “72 percent of all public school teachers were members of some form of union that represented them at the bargaining table. Before 1961, unions in less than a dozen school districts could claim they represented only a small fraction of schoolteachers.” Further, beyond winning representation elections, by withholding their labor, in the 1960s and 70s, teachers across the country had won substantial salary increases, tenure rights, and rules limiting the unpaid duties that had

been before simply tacked on to their work day virtually at the whim of school principals.<sup>32</sup>

Although still opposing strikes, state legislators passed new laws that sanctioned the right of public sector workers to organize. The first major state was Wisconsin in 1959, and then, after President Kennedy's executive order outlining rights for federal workers to form unions, a series of other states passed similar laws, most notably New York in 1967. The Taylor Act not only allowed public sector workers the right to organize, but set in place arbitration procedures designed to obviate strikes. Pennsylvania passed the most far-reaching of these laws in 1970, allowing workers not only the right to unionize but also the right to strike after all other efforts to settle a public sector labor dispute had been exhausted.

1968 represented a crucial turn in the public place of teacher unions. In that year, a clash between the local school board of the Ocean-Hill Brownsville section of Brooklyn and the UFT led to a lengthy and contentious strike by New York teachers. The New York City school system, experimenting with more community control for poverty-ridden schools, had ceded control over personnel decisions to the mostly African-American Ocean-Hill Brownsville district. There, the African-American "unit administrator" late in the 1967-68 school year terminated several white teachers, arguing that they could not effectively teach the black students in the district. The UFT mobilized under then President Shanker to protect the teachers. The union struck three times, and the controversy raged until the end of November of the next school year. The striking

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<sup>32</sup> David Selden, *The Teacher Rebellion* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1985), 47-86; Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 192-211. Quotation is from p. 209.

teachers believed they were protecting the “due process” they had gained through union protection, while African-American activists argued that eliminating the white teachers had been a way to, in historian Jerald Podair’s terms, “[take] aim at the institutional barriers they viewed as impeding the realization of full ‘equality.’” The result was a national media firestorm, which brought the issue of the teacher strike into the forefront of public consciousness.<sup>33</sup>

When the economy began to stagnate in the early 1970s at the same time that inflation ate into the earning power of many Americans, school boards attempted to limit salary increases for many teachers and to extend unpaid duties to give their constituencies (tax-paying parents) more services for less money. Teacher unions across the United States led what must have seemed to many Americans a virtually never-ending series of strikes to keep up. In early 1973, schools in Chicago, St. Louis, and Philadelphia Chicago were all simultaneously shut down (in St. Louis for a month, in Philadelphia for two months). In 1975, teachers struck in New York City to protest the austerity program resulting from the state’s intervention to prevent the city from going bankrupt. In Boston, teacher unions protested that city’s desegregation plan. In Pittsburgh, schools were shut down from December 1975 to January 1976. In fall 1979, lengthy school strikes occurred in New Orleans, Cleveland, St. Louis (again), and for the first time, in Oklahoma City. In the fall of both 1980 and 1981, teachers struck in Philadelphia, the

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<sup>33</sup> Jerald Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), passim. Quote is from p. 210; on the media firestorm, see, among many examples, the October 23 ABC Nightly News Report on the crisis, which called New York City the “big city with big problems.”

latter a bitter fifty-day strike in which public discourse merged with that of the nearly simultaneous air traffic controllers' strike famously broken by President Reagan.

Aside from the very proliferation of teacher strikes, strikes by public sector employees—and in particular teachers—also worked to alter the public image of labor unions because they more directly impacted the everyday lives of Americans than most traditional blue-collar workers. A strike by factory workers more directly harmed their employers—by curtailing their profit-generating ability—than the public, who could continue to purchase goods from the competitor of a struck company. Teacher strikes, however, severely disrupted the everyday lives of Americans. Families, many of whom did not include a stay-at-home parent, had to grapple with the problem of finding childcare and feared that their children's educations suffered in the short term.

Further, and more importantly, because teachers were responsible for providing opportunity through education over the long course of a child's life as well as responsible for passing on the cultural values of the nation, public discourse over strikes equally revolved around the decaying state of American culture. Interlocutors on both sides of the debate posed narratives about what had made America prosperous—on one side, this was a narrative based on equal access to opportunity, generous funding for public services, and government regulation of market forces; on the other side (the side that became much stronger over the course of the decade), it was a narrative based on entrepreneurial creativity, individualism, low taxes, and the “free market.” In short, these were two competing views on the very definition of the state's responsibility to the “public.”

Further, teacher strikes were of fundamental interest because of the central place education played in so many social conflicts in the postwar world. Landmark civil rights clashes focused—perhaps most significantly—on the public education system. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the “massive resistance” it provoked from Southern whites hinged on who had access to education and on what terms. Clashes like those at Arkansas’s Central High School in 1957 or the bloody battle at the University of Mississippi in 1962 represented literal fights by the federal government to forcibly ensure that all of its citizens could access education. The 1960s protest movements—from the Berkeley Free Speech movement in 1964 to the decade’s anti-Vietnam protests to the fights in the late 1960s by Chicanos and African-Americans to get universities to institute ethnic studies programs also revolved around the role education played in the trajectory of the nation. Critics of the countercultural generation often wondered why their teachers had failed to inspire the appropriate respect for authority and hard work. When teachers went on strike, then, these associations almost reflexively became a part of the public conversation, thus heightening an already tense sense of crisis.

In addition, teacher strikes upset hierarchies of race and gender in ways that many other labor stoppages might not. Going back to the nineteenth century, teaching had traditionally been a female occupation, and though more men had become elementary and secondary teachers by the postwar era, it was still an occupation in which the majority of workers were women. Thus, although most of the union leadership was male, teacher strikes were controversial in part because they “feminized” control over public finances. Coupled with the crisis of the American family brought on by second-wave feminism and the decline of the male breadwinner in the 1970s documented by historian

Natasha Zaretsky, the idea that a union comprised mostly of women could dictate educational and fiscal policy galvanized a substantial opposition.<sup>34</sup>

Teacher strikes—particularly those in urban areas like the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district—also exposed racial animosities and spotlighted the spatial privileges enjoyed by many urban and suburban whites. In some cases, like that in two Newark strikes in 1970 and 1971, this took a form similar (albeit much more virulent) to that of Ocean-Hill Brownsville, as local whites supported a predominantly white union against black power activists committed to keeping the schools open at all costs. In other cases, as in a strike in Philadelphia in 1972-1973, a contingent of working-class whites quite explicitly voiced their opposition to higher teacher salaries to support education in “ghetto” schools.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, teacher strikes meant so much because teachers were direct representatives of the state. Certainly, all public sector workers represent the state in some sense, but in terms of a direct relationship to the government, perhaps no other worker represented the state more than a teacher. A family sent its children to school every day of the week, so when a school system was shut down, the failure of the state to provide services was immediately tangible—more so than even a strike by police officers or sanitation workers. Moreover, as Paul Johnston has shown, public sector workers’ labor disputes inherently revolved around public policy. In the case of teachers, this meant education policy—how much the state should spend on educating students as well

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<sup>34</sup> Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1978-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> I treat the Philadelphia strike in much more detail in Chapter 3. The quotation, however, is from a survey distributed by the Stephen Decatur Home and School Association in November 1972. See “Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Collection,” Temple University Library, *Urban Archives*, Box 173.

as how and what to teach them.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, teacher strikes called into question—more directly than the failed Nixon Presidency, the war on Vietnam, or even the high price of gasoline—whether or not the liberal state could effectively function.

Finally, teacher strikes were also of such significance because of the peculiar role of the American education system. For most of American history, states enjoyed almost unfettered control over their own school systems, as the federal government contributed virtually nothing. State constitutions provided for public education, but the administration of schools took place on the local level. It was not until the Progressive era that state governments became more involved in setting state-wide goals and providing grants-in-aid to local districts. Still, in the 1929-30 school year, state governments provided less than 20% of school funding, and local governments funded the rest. These percentages would shift in the 1930s as cash-strapped local governments turned to states for help, and would shift even more in the postwar war era as states became more interested in solving issues of social equity through spending on education. States were providing almost 40% of school funding from the 1940s-1960s, and by the 1978-79 school year, states provided, for the first time, more education funding than local governments.<sup>37</sup> Further, following the USSR's successful launch of Sputnik in 1957, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (1958), which made the federal government a player in education spending, a role that would increase further with

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Frase Williams, *The Public School and Finances: A Guide to the Issues in Financing Public Education in the United States* (New York City: Pilgrim Press, 1980), 12-13.

compensatory spending for poor school districts with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965.

Total education spending on all levels increased dramatically in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. When adjusted for inflation, total spending increased 49% in the 1950s, 73% in the 1960s, and 20% in the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> When we look at the aggregate of these trends—increased total spending in addition to greater diffusion of costs among American citizens through drastically increased spending on the state and federal level—we can see why education policy became so highly politicized. For many Americans who felt squeezed in the 1970s by the poor economy and a tax burden made more onerous by inflation, the amount spent on education became an obvious target.

For this reason, public discussion over teacher strikes—in such different media as television news, print reportage, editorials and letters to the editor, and school board meetings—served as a crucible in which labor unions, liberalism, and Americanism were debated and, the following chapters examine how. In so doing, this project also makes an important intervention in the way historians consider the dissemination of political ideas and the ways in which dominant ideologies change.

What I argue, then, is that by the early 1980s, a common discourse about labor unions had been forged through debates—in which both sides used cultural assumptions about American-ness as a framework—of teacher strikes. Ironically, many postwar liberals, though offering support for labor unions as bargaining agents, nonetheless fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the labor movement—especially the notion

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Wong, *Funding Public Schools: Politics and Policies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 7.

that strikes had always been necessary for labor unions to improve working conditions and wages. This might not have been a new development—liberal advocates of collective bargaining during the Progressive era made many of the same assumptions, for example. In the post-New Deal context in which many liberals viewed unions as vital to restricting the abuses of large corporations and even government power, however, the view that labor unions were desirable but strikes were not led to unintended consequences. That these waves of teacher strikes occurred just as free market conservatives forged a coordinated intellectual effort to promote anti-New Deal individualism meant that public criticism came from both liberals (for striking rather than solving labor problems through peaceful negotiation) and from conservatives (for the existence of collective bargaining in the first place). Nonetheless, since liberals had argued since the New Deal for the importance of labor unions, it was easy for conservatives to conflate labor-liberalism with the turmoil that disrupted the lives of many future Reagan Democrats.

This study also represents an important intervention in American labor historiography. Though labor historians have only begun to explore the history of the labor movement in the late 1960s and 70s, several important narratives have thus far been advanced, and this study builds on those accounts by shifting the focus to white-collar public sector workers.

Most studies of the labor unions in the postwar era have used the decline of private-sector, blue collar workers to highlight the demise of the labor movement itself. Kim Moody, for instance, argues that industrial unions, having embraced what he calls “business unionism” in the 1950s, lost the democratic promise the CIO unions of the

1930s and 40s had possessed. These large industrial unions—like the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) and the United Auto Workers (UAW)—shifted toward a strategy of aggressively protecting the interests of their members, but in doing so failed to sustain a larger working-class politics. Throwing in their lot with the Democratic Party instead of building a labor party essentially left these large unions with very little political agency in the 1970s when attacked from the right by corporate interests. Their only choice was to support the Democrats, who thus had slight motivation to work for labor interests, and lacking broader support from other workers allowed unions to be ground down piecemeal through concession bargaining.<sup>39</sup>

Eminent labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein hews fairly close to this view, although he places more of the blame on Cold War politics for the turn of industrial unions toward business unionism. Lichtenstein sees a brief moment during and immediately after World War II in which labor unions worked to forge a progressive politics. With Robert Korstad, he argues that World War II offered an opportunity for white workers and black workers to link unionism with racial democracy, setting the stage for a broad-based industrial democracy. Further, in his work on UAW President Walter Reuther, Lichtenstein argues that the immediate postwar period offered leftist labor unions the opportunity to take more control over the shop floor. By making a salary increase without an increase in automobile prices a condition of contract negotiations in 1946, Reuther attempted to wrest a greater degree of control over the production process from General Motors. This moment of opportunity, however, was

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<sup>39</sup> Moody, *An Injury to All*, 11-16, 41-69.

thwarted, in Lichtenstein's view, by the conservative backlash against unions represented by the restrictive Taft-Hartley Act, which limited secondary boycotts, severely hampered radical activism within the labor movement and allowed individual states to pass so-called right-to-work laws. With their options limited and radicalism virtually impossible, Lichtenstein argues, unions such as the UAW accommodated managerial prerogative, instead opting for the stability of cost-of-living allowances and pattern bargaining.<sup>40</sup>

Lawrence Richards offers a cultural perspective that more or less supports Lichtenstein's framework. In the postwar United States, argues Richards, conservatives organized a postwar "offensive" designed to "convince Americans that unions were no longer the underdogs they had been during the 1930s...and that they no longer represented the underprivileged."<sup>41</sup> This effort, however, did not bear fruit until the late 1960s and early 70s, when, as Richards argues through three case studies, many workers had been convinced that unions were unnecessary and voted against union certification.

I do not wish to dispute any of the above three arguments. It seems undeniable that American blue-collar, private-sector unions became more conservative after World War II and the restrictive nature of Taft-Hartley, and whether the Cold War became the engine that drove the conservatism or simply one part of a feedback loop, does not concern me here. Further, I would not dispute Richards' contention that attempts by conservatives to paint unions as unnecessary had some effect on blue-collar workers.

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<sup>40</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75 (December 1988), 786-811; Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (New York: Basic Books, 220-247) and *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 114-122.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 39.

Nonetheless, these works point to a serious gap in the historiography—the role of non-blue collar workers in the public sector.

Very little, in fact, has been written by labor historians about public sector unions in the postwar period. Joshua Freeman treats municipal unions in his excellent study, *Working Class New York*, arguing that postwar New York City featured a militant public sector workforce and an example of social democracy unparalleled in the United States. Philip Rubio's recent book on the growth of postal employee unionism skillfully provides an account of the trajectory of public employee unionism among federal workers. Marjorie Murphy's highly useful work on teachers unions chronicles the rise and consolidation of teachers unions in the twentieth century, arguing that teachers unions remained "narrow economic organizations because historically that is all our conservative society has allowed."<sup>42</sup>

With the exception of Joseph McCartin's recent work, however, scholars have done very little to assess the broader political impact of public sector unions in the United States. McCartin has shown how attempts by post-civil rights mayors such as Democrat Maynard Jackson in Atlanta to maintain budget austerity in the 1970s served as a test-tube for the "worker replacement strategy" Reagan would so famously use in 1981 to break the PATCO strike. He has further shown how public employee unions in the 1970s

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<sup>42</sup> Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press); Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 6. Philip Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

fought (yet, significantly, failed) to gain sweeping labor legislation similar to the Wagner Act.<sup>43</sup>

McCartin's work focuses on the centrality of public employees in the context of the larger struggle by the labor movement to further social democracy in the 1970s, an attempt thwarted on the whole by the rise of free-market conservatism. My research adds to our understanding of working-class history by showing how the public representations of labor unions, mediated by news outlets, influenced the white middle- and working-class—whether or not they affiliated with labor unions—to participate in the nation's turn away from labor-liberalism. In that sense, I am less interested in the actual organization efforts themselves than I am in the way these efforts altered larger ideas about the place of labor unions and liberalism more generally.

In contrast to much labor history, then, I am less concerned with the particular aspects of given labor conflicts than I am with the way these conflicts were represented and mediated through cultural representations. Therefore, I would like to outline, theoretically and methodologically, how I do this. I examine, primarily, informational commodities like television news, newspapers, and monthly magazines. News—either in printed or video form—was not merely a spigot of information but also, especially by the 1970s, a commercial endeavor for publishers and television networks alike. Newspapers of course had been sold in the United States since the colonial era and continued to rely on revenue from advertisers and subscribers to turn a profit. While in the early days of

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph McCartin, " 'Fire the Hell Out of Them: Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in in the 1970s,'" *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2 (Fall 2005), 67-92, and " 'A Wagner Act for Public Employees': Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970-1976," *Journal of American History* 95 (June 2008), 123-148.

television news programming, news had served to legitimate the “public interest” requirement of FCC licensing, by the 1970s, they were, for the big three networks of NBC, CBS, and ABC, enormous money-makers in their own right. Monthly magazines also, while providing news, were primarily concerned with turning a profit. *Readers’ Digest*, for example, which in the 1970s was the second highest circulating magazine in the United States (second only to *TV Guide*), was able to sell so many copies partially because, in addition to providing news stories, it also offered entertainment in the guise of humorous anecdotes and excerpts from adventure novels.

Certainly news outlets relied to some extent on a degree of factual accuracy. It seems obvious that most consumers expect the newspaper or nightly news to report the most important happenings of the day. Nonetheless, media representations tended in the 1970s, as they do now, to not only account for the most sensational happenings of any given day, but also to highlight the ideological worldview of those doing the reporting. William Puette, for instance, has shown that, as college-educated liberals, journalists and reporters in the 1970s refracted labor actions through several different “lenses.” For instance, the media, according to Puette, charged unions with protecting and encouraging “unproductive, fat, lazy and insubordinate workers” and workers with electing corruption-prone leaders because of their own lack of education. They also characterized unions as no longer necessary in a modern economy and union leaders as guilty of institutionalizing conflict in order to perpetuate their own existence.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> William Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 154-155.

Thus if the news represents as much a cultural/ideological production as a fictive television show, then the question is to what degree do cultural productions like the news influence individual and group political culture? One way of thinking about this relationship is that presented by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer with regard to what they termed the “culture industry.” Posited most forcefully in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer characterize the culture industry as “mass deception.” Indeed, they draw a distinction between cultural products produced for the marketplace and works of art produced solely for the aesthete. The former are tools of “manipulation” that promulgate “obedience to the social hierarchy” whereas the latter are the only hope to lay bare the contradictions of capitalism. Consumption of mass cultural production is strictly passive, for Adorno and Horkheimer, having removed the “praxis” of listening that characterizes genuine works of art.<sup>45</sup>

In a powerful challenge to the idea of a “totalizing” mass culture, cultural critic John Fiske argues that mass culture is not simply consumed but represents merely a portion of an “active process” of producing popular culture. Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau’s work on the “practice of everyday life,” Fiske views the material produced by the culture industry as simply the raw material of popular culture. Thus for a text (a book, film, song, etc.) to be made into popular culture, it must be open to different interpretations to “consumers” of the text; it must contain both “forces of domination and opportunities to speak against them.” Using Stuart Hall’s notion of

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<sup>45</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 94-95, 103-104. Adorno of course makes this case repeatedly in other works, but perhaps his most forceful case is the dichotomy between swing jazz and modernist avant-garde composition.

popular culture as a struggle between “the people and the power bloc,” Fiske argues that “the people” inscribe their own individual meanings on a cultural production by selecting from its ambiguities.<sup>46</sup>

In practical terms, Fiske uses not only the cultural product itself but also the “intertextual” milieu in which the product is situated to fully understand it. Thus to employ an example offered by Fiske, a Madonna music video must be understood in the context of Madonna’s other songs, music videos, concert performances, and music reviews. Within this intertextual milieu, a video in which a scantily clad Madonna looks seductively at the camera is open, in the eyes of its consumers, to several “readings,” which the Madonna fan then “writes” as his/her own meaning. Perhaps the viewer sees Madonna’s sexual objectification as a reinforcement of patriarchy; perhaps she sees Madonna as using her own sexuality as empowerment. In any case, Fiske argues that we must consider the different readings of mass cultural products, and read viewer responses to understand how “the people” construct popular culture.<sup>47</sup>

To extrapolate from Fiske’s view, then, when a newspaper cartoon that seemingly excoriated the teachers in 1975-76 (as several in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* did) by representing the teachers union as a woman wearing high-heels emasculating the school board (represented as a young male student), consumers might “write” very different meanings of the image. Quite obviously, those opposed to the strike might share the view that the teacher’s union—a majority of whom were female—threatened gender norms. Other readers, however, who were sympathetic to feminism and/or union power

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<sup>46</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 20-29.

<sup>47</sup> John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 95-113, and Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 124-126.

might view that subversion as signifying a desirable shift in the direction of the teacher union.

Employing Fiske's perspective, then, reminds us to be open to the different ways that cultural products are popularly interpreted. In understanding the role of mass culture in shaping ideology, however, it is important not to overstate the agency of the consumer. In his excellent study of the interaction between the counterculture and business culture in the 1960s, for instance, Thomas Frank warns scholars such as Fiske about the perils of becoming too enamored with the role of consumer reception in ideological production. To Frank, the excessive focus on reception "has led us to overlook and even minimize the equally fascinating doings of the creators of mass culture, a group as playful and subversive in their own way as the heroic consumers who are the focus of so much cultural studies...."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Frank powerfully shows that business culture in the 1960s represented more than a bald co-opting of the counterculture to prevent social unrest. On the contrary, advertisers used countercultural images and slogans, according to Frank, because they were genuinely interested in bringing more creativity (and thus more effective advertising) to their work.<sup>49</sup>

By viewing cultural/ideological production as dynamic, the historian can be mindful of over-emphasizing the agency of the consumer. While it is important to consider the "writing" of meaning by consumers, it is equally important to keep in mind that there did *not* exist an infinite marketplace of cultural products from which to choose. In selecting a nightly news outlet, for example, consumers could only choose from

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), x.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

essentially three networks and could only make meaning from the material that news editors chose to convey. Further, those meanings, would, for most people (as individuals in a social milieu), be circumscribed by a larger set of social-cultural values. Thus, to return to the above example of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* cartoon, it seems likely that the intent of the cartoonist, critical indeed of the teacher strike, would work to dissuade more of the newspaper's readership about the value of the teachers' tactics than it would lead readers to a subversive reading.

Thus, I see the cultural producer as the more important player in the construction of ideas about class and ideology in the 1970s, and while entertaining the possibility that individual consumers could have indeed constructed meanings that diverged from the intentions of news editors and TV producers, I would nonetheless like to emphasize the importance of the "raw material," so to speak. Here I am informed, in particular, by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the cultural field in modern society. To Bourdieu, as the dominant element in the autonomous field of cultural production, critics, writers, and producers can shape social norms through expending the "cultural capital" that comes from their position. We might add that journalists and television anchormen—both perhaps ventriloquized in some sense by news editors—also possess the significant cultural capital necessary to influence cultural norms and political ideology.<sup>50</sup> In short, cultural producers often had their own agenda, which often diverged from the interests of politicians and community leaders.

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<sup>50</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 127-131.

In this project, I use two broad groups of sources. First, I use cultural productions—television news broadcasts, newspaper stories and editorials, pieces in periodicals—to show how views of teacher strikes were publically mediated, and second, I use local community-level records and letters-to-the-editor sections of several different newspapers to show how individuals and local groups reflected and refracted these ideas. In terms of the latter, a methodological word is in order. Letters to the editor can be quite valuable in assessing the construction of narratives. Of course, the selection of letters by editors are far from pristine representations of a “public” view (not all letters are published, after all), but they nonetheless provide evidence of individual opinions about strikes, since most letters were published intact. Further, I want to use Edward Carmines and James Stimson’s concept of “citizen activists”—community leaders who drive political change on the local level—to show how those who write letters to the editor, as representatives of ordinary voters, push public opinion at the local level. Carmines and Stimson assert that communities look to a few vocal citizens to confirm political positions; I argue that published letters to the editor offer *representations* of the public view, helping to construct a narrative about a given situation (in this case, teacher strikes).<sup>51</sup> In this way, these narratives served as framing devices for the average media consumer—who might have never written a letter himself—to understand the import of the event.

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<sup>51</sup> Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 106-114. This concept was employed in a different context in Joseph Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 89-90.

This study, then, contributes to historical questions surrounding the public role of labor unions in the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s, the demise of liberalism, and the rise to political prominence of the idea that free-market conservatism represented the “public” interest. It is organized less as a comprehensive chronicle of teacher unionism or a narrative of the conservative movement than it is as what Michel Foucault, drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche, has called a “genealogy.” To Foucault, the purpose of a genealogy is to deconstruct those moral “truths” that seem to be without “history.”<sup>52</sup> Though this study encounters fairly recent developments, it has become increasingly difficult for most contemporary Americans in the last three decades to “unthink” a neoliberal cultural consensus in which one’s place in a competitive market—untrammelled by intervention from the state or from organizations like labor unions specifically designed to extract a group of workers from the logic of the market—represents one’s primary political and economic subjectivity. It has also become unthinkable that the state can do anything to seriously solve social and economic inequality, or even if it could, that it should be interested in limiting the very extreme economic power of some individuals and corporate entities. Finally, the notion that spending money on education can not only equalize unequal economic power but also help individual citizens to learn what is necessary to be productive *political* citizens has been almost entirely undermined by the assumption of market logic that private, public, and charter schools should compete with each other for the students best able to perform on standardized tests, leaving the most vulnerable to fend for themselves in subpar urban schools.

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<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.

For much of the twentieth century, these notions were on the margins—believed only by libertarians like the novelist Ayn Rand and the economist Milton Friedman. Though they did not become cultural common-sense until at least the 1980s, the 1970s represented the decade in which the previous cultural regime lost traction. This project seeks to trace that rupture through a series of particularly crucial moments.

Chapter one surveys the liberal order that emerged from World War II and argues that a robust labor movement formed a key part of liberals' notions of how best to ensure economic opportunity and social democracy. In particular, it uses the law that resulted from a 1968 commission to reform Pennsylvania public employee legislation to understand the policy assumptions of the dominant New Deal order toward public sector unions. Through my treatment of the law, I show that ample support existed as late as 1970 for the notion that these unions were vital to the distribution of public services, but that public sector strikes needed to be avoided at all costs. This chapter also shows, by pointing out how strikes in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Newark led to both racial and gender conflict, that the teacher strike emerged as a site of national political crisis.

Chapter two examines the political and cultural debate over public sector strikes in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s through a close reading of letters sent to the President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 1970. President David Selden, who had been imprisoned for violating an anti-strike injunction in Newark in 1970, received hundreds of letters from across the United States while serving his 60-day sentence. The chapter argues that Selden, figuring prominently in a series of advertisements aimed at garnering public support for anti-injunction legislation, served as an empty vessel for a host of many other national debates. Indeed, these letters help us

understand how the labor stoppages in the public sector led many Americans to fear moral, cultural, and economic degeneration, and to question previously accepted narratives about the importance of the labor movement in the economic success of postwar America.

Chapter three focuses on a wave of teacher strikes in early 1973. In January and February, teachers simultaneously went out on strike in Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis, prompting both liberal and conservative commentators to worry that the American education system, a key node in the dissemination of American culture, was falling apart. I show how, in both cases, an emerging narrative that these cities could not control their work forces made citizens in each metropolitan area question the legitimacy of the liberal state. Focusing on debates about political economy, the chapter uses the strikes in Philadelphia and St. Louis to bring the national political discussion into dialogue with local events.

Chapter four examines a bitter two-month strike by the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers in 1975-76. Just months after the darkest days of the New York fiscal crisis of 1975 (which many critics had blamed on the wages and benefits given to New York City municipal workers), the strike led many in the Pittsburgh area to fear a similar crisis. Through debate in the city's two major newspapers, a narrative emerged that pitted the interests of teachers squarely against the interests of the "public" and charged the teachers with fomenting both moral and economic decline. The way the strike was understood in the city galvanized a new Governor's Commission to revise Pennsylvania's public employee law. This time, teacher unions were on the defensive, signifying how seriously postwar labor-liberalism had been undermined.

Chapter five brings the local developments of the first four chapters squarely into national politics, showing how the weakened position of labor-liberalism allowed conservative activists to prevent labor reform in the private sector during the Carter administration. Conservatives demonstrated their new political clout, in 1978, by using negative views of public sector unions to defeat organized labor's most important reform attempt in over a decade. This defeat in turn was particularly important because it symbolized the last big effort by organized labor to turn back the tide of the growing conservative onslaught. The bill was filibustered in the Senate, thanks in part to the efforts of the National Right to Work Committee (NRWC), which publicly argued that any form of union power was in opposition to the public interest. The chapter shows how the early organizing drives of the NRWC focused on how public sector unions both oppressed those employees who did not want to join as well as the general public, in particular through legal actions challenging mandatory agency fees from teacher locals. Though this view of public sector unions had long been a part of conservative rhetoric, the effort of the NRWC to publicize this view that these union leaders cared only for their own self-aggrandizement helped conservatives to successfully make the argument by 1978 that labor unions were detrimental to the cultural and material interests of the American public.

Chapter six concludes by returning to St. Louis and Philadelphia for strikes in 1979 and in 1980-81, respectively. While St. Louis teachers won a modest contract victory following a grueling three-month strike, the Philadelphia city schools were in desperate financial shape, and Mayor William Green, betting against public support for teachers, reneged on a contract with the city's teachers in order to get concessions from

the union. The second Philadelphia strike occurred on the very heels of the famous PATCO strike in which President Reagan drew a hard anti-union line, and it provides a marked contrast to the gains made by public sector unions in the 1960s and 70s.

Following the popularization of school vouchers as an alternative to the public school system in the late 1970s, calls for vouchers as a solution to the city's fiscal situation gives us a window into the larger emergence of the neoliberal alternative in the Reagan years.

As it has in much of the rest of the world, the emergence of neoliberalism in the mainstream has changed much of American politics, culture, and society over the past thirty years. Although the kind of widespread enthusiasm for government regulation of the market and support for collective bargaining rights may seem to be squarely in the rearview mirror, this dissertation shows that the decline of labor-liberalism was by no means inevitable. To put it another way, ideas and the way they are represented matter greatly, and we should be constantly aware of the contingency of our own political moment.

## **Chapter 1: “A New Era of Labor Relations”: Liberal Labor Policy and the Seeds of Discontent, 1968-71**

In March 1969, women’s magazine *Redbook* addressed the growing phenomenon of teacher strikes. Surveying nationally prominent strikes from 1968, the story pointed to the Ocean-Hill Brownsville strike as well as a state-wide strike in Florida in the early part of the year in which over 25,000 NEA-affiliated teachers resigned *en masse* to gain salary increases. It further raised the specter of a “possible *nationwide* walkout [italics in original].” Taking the perspective of the parents of school-children, the piece asked “are teachers now more concerned about money and power than they are about children?”<sup>1</sup> The questions emerging from the article highlight the growing place teacher unions’ efforts to win collective bargaining rights, salary increases, and smaller class sizes would hold in the mounting series of crises that would grip the nation in the late 1960s and early 70s.

The conflict over teacher strikes, indeed, signified one major piece in the unraveling of what had been the dominant political culture of the nation. Though it had its critics before, the labor movement was more or less accepted as a legitimate component of the postwar economic and social order. Public sector organizing had not been sanctioned by New Deal federal labor law, but even public sector unions enjoyed legitimacy in many places, by 1968, as bargaining agents. In 1959, Wisconsin had become the first state to guarantee collective bargaining rights for public employees. In January 1962, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10988 giving federal

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Goodman, “Why Teachers are Striking,” *Redbook*, March 1969, 67.

employees the right to collective bargaining. In the six years after Kennedy's executive order, several state governments—notably New York and Michigan—followed suit, passing similar laws.

At the same time, most postwar liberals—who I define as Americans who supported, in its most basic iteration, the belief that government intervention was necessary to ameliorate social and economic conflict, and that labor unions were fundamental in this process—frowned on strikes. Quite obviously, strikes disrupted the flow of goods and services, as well as the sense of peaceful, affluent order that characterized the postwar ideal. Public sector strikes were especially galling to many liberals. The disruption of transportation, sanitation, or education led to immediate consequences for those in the community, and in turn, to politicians who failed to prevent them or at least to end them quickly. While Kennedy's executive order allowed federal workers the right to bargain collectively, it tellingly did not countenance the right to strike. New York's 1967 public employee bargaining law perhaps best underscored the liberal contradiction as not only did it sanction collective bargaining but it also provided stringent penalties for those public sector unions that did strike.

This chapter, which covers roughly the period between 1968 and 1971, chronicles two interrelated developments. First, it charts the dominant assumptions in American political culture about public sector unions by the late 1960s and early 1970s. In essence, most mainstream politicians—both Democrat and Republican—in those states that made up the political majorities of what historians have called the “New Deal Order” by the early 1970s extended the same legitimacy to public sector unions as they did to the private sector industrial unions that formed a core constituency of the postwar order.

This assumption, I argue, was not merely a nod to either the fundraising power or ability to mobilize large voting blocs on the part of public sector unions. While politicians may have governed or legislated with these concerns in mind, a public discourse nonetheless emerged from multiple points—from local opinion makers as well as community activists—that highlighted a fundamental optimism about the efficacy of the state characteristic of the dominant postwar political culture up to that point. Indeed, whether from legislators, newspaper writers, or citizen activists, most commentators believed that public sector bargaining was vitally important in the rational administration of urban and suburban services, and that the right policy could solve the problem of public sector organizing. I use the political assumptions surrounding far-reaching public employee legislation in the state of Pennsylvania in 1970 to highlight a prominent example of the reach of these assumptions. In tracing the public discussion of the legislation, I show that the liberal faith in rational policy—in spite of the turmoil of the Democratic party and a growing backlash against government intervention in civil rights—was alive and well as late as the early 1970s.

Second, the chapter argues that at the same time, because public sector militancy, especially strikes on the part of public school teachers, emerged in so many different urban and suburban areas, a discourse of national crisis erupted from the industrial Northeast and Midwest to Sunbelt states like Florida. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, most commentators—both professional and amateur—were optimistic about the ability of public policy to solve the growing number of teacher strikes. And yet, major urban strikes indicated that a crisis in public school education was afoot. In the context of the crisis brought on by the Vietnam War, the student movement, and the “urban crisis” that

afflicted major American cities—the threats to the viability of public education signified that yet another piece of the American cultural fabric was in danger of fraying.<sup>2</sup> Most observers of the growing number of teacher strikes believed that teachers deserved better pay and working conditions, and while the tactics of teacher unions might not be desirable, local school boards and state governments should find a way to do better by them. Thus while the view that teachers—and labor unions in a more general sense—were responsible for this decline was still in the minority during these years, we can nonetheless trace the origins of this discourse to these years. I use teacher strikes in Pittsburgh in 1968 and 1971, Philadelphia in 1970, and Newark in 1970 and 1971 to show the heightened local and national prominence of teacher strikes and to show how the strikes themselves had already emerged as foci of public discussions about the labor movement and the perceived ability of the state to solve social and economic problems.

### **Pittsburgh Teachers and Public Employee Act 195**

On February 29, 1968, about a week into the Florida teacher strike which captured the front pages of newspapers across the country, teachers in the city of Pittsburgh walked out to attain collective bargaining rights and pay increases. The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT), following the lead of AFT affiliates that had won bargaining contracts in New York City, Detroit, and Pennsylvania's largest city—Philadelphia—sought a bargaining election that would lead to exclusive representation for all city teachers by one

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<sup>2</sup> 1968, of course, brought turning point events in each of these arenas—the Tet Offensive, which turned so many Americans against the war; the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King in over 100 American cities and the Kerner Commission report, which blamed the racialization of poverty for the proliferation of urban riots; and the student protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

organization. The Pittsburgh Board of Public Education argued that the state public employee law—passed in 1947 and forbidding strikes by public employees—precluded them from negotiating with “an exclusive bargaining agent.” The PFT pointed out that Philadelphia teachers—under an AFT affiliate—already enjoyed a collective bargaining agreement and pressed the city to follow suit by striking for eleven days. In the middle of the strike, the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), emphasizing different tactics as an affiliate of the AFT’s main rival, staged a one-day “professional development” walkout and marched on the state capitol to push the state to pass a law requiring public employers to bargain collectively with their employees. As a result of the twin actions, Governor Raymond Schafer—a moderate, Establishment Republican in the Nelson Rockefeller mold—pledged a substantial package to raise teacher salaries across the state, and a local Pittsburgh judge pledged to supervise a representation election for city teachers with the understanding that state legislators from Pittsburgh districts would mount a campaign in the General Assembly to change Pennsylvania’s public employee law to explicitly allow an exclusive bargaining agent for teachers.<sup>3</sup>

The strike became the source of a raging local debate. Even before the PFT had threatened to strike in 1968, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*—one of the city’s two major newspapers—made clear its position on public sector strikes. On February 12 of that year, Governor Rockefeller of New York, after refusing Mayor John Lindsay’s request to send in the National Guard, instead “found” additional money in the state coffers to settle a sanitation strike in New York City. In an editorial entitled “New York’s Sorry Strike

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<sup>3</sup>L.R. Lindgren, “Shafer Doing Juggling Act,” *Pittsburgh Press*, Feb. 25, 1968; Jack Ryan, “City, State Will Press to End School Strike,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Mar. 9, 1968; “City Teachers End 11-Day Strike,” *PPG* Mar. 11, 1968.

Precedent,” the *Post-Gazette* commented that “as is all too often the case, the law was flouted with impunity, the strikers were rewarded for their illegal conduct and the public lost in principle and in money.” Placing this strike in a larger context, the editorial pointed out that Rockefeller’s “capitulation” was another in a long line of surrenders to striking public employees. The newspaper further asserted that teacher strikes seemed to be the most significant affront: “transit and other utility workers and even unionized school teachers have staged strikes and gotten away with them.”<sup>4</sup>

On February 19, 1968, the *Pittsburgh Press* looked ahead to the possibility of the PFT strike with foreboding, noting that unless it could be averted, the city faced its “first teacher strike.”<sup>5</sup> The language suggested, just as had happened in other American cities, that a teachers strike in Pittsburgh was inevitable, though far from desirable, and Pittsburgh was joining the ranks of a growing wave of tumultuous teacher-school board conflict that had shut down so many other major metropolitan areas.

Further, both of the two major dailies—the *Press* and the *Post-Gazette*—published criticisms of the strike, characterizing the potential strikers as subverting the public interest. The *Press*, for example, surmised, on February 20, that “a strike by teachers is not likely to win favor even from a public composed largely of unionized workers—as is the case in Pittsburgh.”<sup>6</sup> The editorial’s assumption, given that the PFT was affiliated with the AFL-CIO, appears questionable to say the least, especially when the editor’s main evidence was that “the public is getting sick and tired of being bullied by every union powerful enough to disrupt a public service.” In spite of the logical

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<sup>4</sup> “New York’s Sorry Strike Precedent,” *PPG*, Feb. 13, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Eskey, “City Schools Facing First Teacher Strike,” *PP*, Feb 19, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> “The Teachers’ Threat,” *PP*, Feb. 20, 1968.

inconsistency here—that a “public” consisting largely of union families was tired of unions disrupting the “public”—what is significant is the way the editorial framed the disjunction between the interest of the teachers union and that amorphous “public.”

A political cartoon in the *Post-Gazette* perhaps best shows the anti-strike position of that daily newspaper. The paper’s political cartoonist, Cy Hungerford, connected the threatened PFT strike to the larger national narrative of striking teacher unions. Referencing the state-wide walkout of teachers in Florida on February 16, Hungerford’s February 22 cartoon, entitled “Contagious?” featured his stock representation of Pittsburgh—a corpulent combination of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington suited in an eighteenth century style jacket, stockings, and tri-corn hat—examining a sign reading “Florida Schools Quarantine—Teachers’ Walkout Fever.” In his hand, the anxious man, unsubtly named “PA PITT” holds in his hand a piece of paper suggesting that the city is next: “SYMPTOMS OF FEVER AMONG PITTSBURGH TEACHERS.”<sup>7</sup>

The February 26 edition of the *Post-Gazette* shows how a single newspaper might influence its readers’ viewpoint on an event such as the 1968 strike in different ways. The front page of the newspaper reported that “officers of the strike-threatening Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers will sit down this afternoon with members of the Board of Education as a way of heading off a walk-out by 1,000 city teachers.” Immediately below this one, another prominent story conveyed the news that the Florida teachers had been off the job for six school days. The message from this placement—intentional or not—seems evident: look at what horrors might occur if the teachers strike

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<sup>7</sup> Cy Hungerford, “Contagious?” *PPG*, February 22, 1968.

in Pittsburgh. Further, embedded in a text box inside the story on the Pittsburgh strike was a suggestion that readers should look inside to see Hungerford's new cartoon entitled, "School Days."<sup>8</sup>

Inside the paper, on the editorial page, Hungerford's cartoon featured a young, attractive blond teacher presiding over a desk entitled "Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers" and wielding a club labeled "Strike Threat." The Board of Public Education, pictured as a boy who can barely see over the "teacher's" desk, sings "'Readin' an' ritin' an' rithmetic—sung to the tune of the hickory stick." On the floor lie the teacher's high-heeled shoes atop a piece of paper entitled "Thursday Walkout." The reader's eye is immediately drawn to the representation of the strike and its ability to paralyze the school system as the club, which is at the center of the cartoon, attracts the observer's attention. In turn, the gendered dimension of the cartoon is integral to the message. Teaching had been traditionally a female occupation (particularly in elementary schools) and the fact that a union gendered as female—instead of an industrial union such as the United Steelworkers of America, which was a union of men—wielded considerable power over the humiliated little boy representing the school board likely would have seemed highly subversive in 1968.

William Puette's work on media representations of the labor movement in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, argues that the newspaper cartoon tends to be "essentially managerial in its sympathies." Puette speculates that this resulted from the education level of the cartoonist in the era, and as we see above, Hungerford's cartoons certainly

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<sup>8</sup> "Talks Scheduled in Try to Prevent Teachers' Strike," and "Fla. Teachers, Legislators Shun Meeting," *PPG*, Feb 26, 1968.

exhibited “managerial” sympathies with regard to the 1968 strike, as he emphasized the pernicious nature of the strikers by equating them to domineering women and diseases. Further, other work done on political cartoons indicates that newspaper readers are 20-30 times more likely to read cartoons than they are likely to read editorials. Even if this estimate has been overstated, it nonetheless seems likely that the political cartoons that represented the teachers strike reached a segment of newspaper readers that may not have paid much attention to the written editorial, thus broadening the paper’s overall anti-strike message.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly anti-strike sentiment from a newspaper editorial or a political cartoon, however, was not especially unique. Even in a city with such a rich union history as Pittsburgh, newspaper editors could make the union seem callous and uncaring, especially when the strike could be framed as “against the children.” Thus it is not surprising that, after the teachers actually struck on February 28, letters to the editor riffed on the theme of the strike’s disruptive nature, pointing out the illegal nature of the strike as well as the connection between collective bargaining and the decline of the American work ethic. Set directly below a cartoon entitled “Inexcusable Absence” in the *Press*—in which two angry-faced striking teachers picketed in front of two perplexed and sad-looking white children, Judith Konnerth asserted, referencing the fact that the 1968 strike had been illegal under the 1947 law, that “teachers decide when they will teach and when they will not. This is disobedience of the law. I am trying to teach my child to

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<sup>9</sup> William Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 99. On the likelihood of readers viewing political cartoons, Puette cites John Tebbell, *The Media in America* (1974), p. 373. Editorial cartoons published during strikes in 1971 and 1975-76 in Pittsburgh would evidence similar “managerial sympathies.”

obey laws, to work toward changing a law instead of flagrant disobedience of laws established for the good of society.”<sup>10</sup> Earl Fawcett specifically connected the teacher strike to a failure to respect “law and order”: “If disobedience to the laws of this State and this nation is to be condoned, then it would appear we are on to the road to something other than what these United States stand for.”<sup>11</sup> Doris O. Worden connected a similar fear of declension to developments elsewhere: “The time has come for America to straighten up before we become a totally hopeless nation. I, for one, am sick and tired of strikes by garbage men in New York, hotel workers strikes that sound the death knell for Penn-Sheraton [there had been a recent strike at the Pittsburgh hotel], and now the teachers in Pittsburgh.” To her, labor unions, as evidenced by the teacher strike, had become greedy and irresponsible, and Americans no longer had “the right to recommend our way of life...as utopia for the rest of the world.”<sup>12</sup> Taken together, these three letters showed that for many commentators, the stakes of the strike were much higher than lost school days or property taxes.

Another letter writer connected the teachers’ strike to a fear of bureaucracy. On March 2, R. B. Russell characterized the action as a “strike against the citizens of the City of Pittsburgh.” It was not, however, the strike that was the fundamental problem with the teachers union; to Russell, the problem was with organized labor itself: “once the teachers really submit to the rule of organized labor...the quality of the teaching will go down and down. A teacher who cannot think for himself is certainly not qualified to teach the young people of Pittsburgh.” Here Russell was tapping into a long tradition

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<sup>10</sup> “Teachers’ Protest Seminar Called Harmful to Children,” *PP*, Mar. 2, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Mar. 1, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Mar. 5, 1968.

of American mythology that emphasized individuality over collective organization and that equated opportunity with the philosophical concept of “negative liberty.” Though this American usable past of settlers and frontiersmen goes back to at least the post-Civil War Wild West shows and Buffalo Bill dime novels, the 1950s and 60s brought a resurgence in the fear that big government, large corporations, affluence, and suburbanization had sapped Americans’ ability to innovate. Radical sociologist C. Wright Mills, for instance, outlined a critique of an unchecked “power elite” at the top in conjunction with a labor movement, led by the “new men of power” that had essentially, by becoming part of the system, ceased to be a viable opposition force. From a very different perspective, *Forbes* magazine editor William Whyte offered a dismal view of a corporate America in which the “social ethic” had subsumed the “Protestant ethic” and Yankee ingenuity was being eclipsed by mass conformity.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of attacks on the union’s actions, the debate over the 1968 strike nonetheless featured a good deal of support for higher teacher salaries, reflecting a widely-held assumption that teachers, as stewards for the nation’s youth, deserved to be remunerated fairly. The *Press* editorial from February 20, for example, which had identified the strike as against the public interest, nonetheless admitted that “there are many people who are convinced—particularly after learning how much garbage collectors in New York City earn—that teachers do deserve more favorable treatment.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), *White-Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), and *The New Men of Power: America’s Labor Leaders* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948). William Whyte, *Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

<sup>14</sup> “The Teachers’ Threat,” PP, Feb. 20, 1968.

Another editorial on March 4 asserted that “there is plenty of support both among voters and among officials, for the idea of tying teachers’ salaries more in line with their professional standing.” Ironically, however, while the piece advocated that teachers not strike or demonstrate at the state capitol (here referring to the one-day demonstration by the PSEA in Harrisburg), it nevertheless admitted that teachers were “understandably” frustrated with unfulfilled promises, having been promised salary increases for years to little effect. In spite of the fact that the Governor of Pennsylvania was seeking \$25 million to raise teacher pay—a fact pointed out by the editorial—as a direct result of the planned PSEA march and the teacher strike in Pittsburgh, the editorial still argued that teachers would “have a better chance” by sending a “well-informed and articulate small group to make their case in an atmosphere more suitable for discussion.”<sup>15</sup> This sort of logic cut right to the heart of a basic contradiction in postwar liberalism—support for most unions, even agreement with their goals, but a failure to understand on a tactical level why it might be necessary for organized workers to withhold their labor.

The immediate outcome of the strike (in conjunction with the action by the PSEA) brought salary increases for teachers across the state. By the end of March, the legislature and the governor reached an agreement on a \$35 million dollar pay raise to bring minimum teacher salaries in Pennsylvania to \$6000 a year. Governor Shafer grudgingly admitted the importance of teachers when he admitted that “if the cost of

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<sup>15</sup> *PP*, March 4, 1968.

government is going to increase through increased teacher salaries, then that cost will have to be paid” through an increase in state income taxes.<sup>16</sup>

Not everyone agreed with the sentiment that it was necessary to pay teachers adequate salaries. In a cartoon on the *Post-Gazette* editorial page entitled “The New Math,” Hungerford portrayed the same blond teacher sitting at a desk and pointing to a blackboard with “School Teacher’ Pay Raise” chalked on it. Holding a ruler over the heads of two little boys named “Governor Shafer” and “State Legislature” the austere teacher admonishes them “That’s Your Problem!” If gender works primarily to signify power relationships, then the message of this cartoon is quite clear. The power structure in the state, signified as masculine, has effectively been turned upside down as the men are quite literally emasculated after having been turned into little boys. The teacher, representing not just the feminization of the profession but also the previous powerlessness of the union, now wields a disproportionate and unnatural degree of power.

In spite of the gendered representations of teachers unions in 1968, most liberal politicians believed that teachers should be paid more. Local school administrators, rather than fight tooth and nail to prevent pay raises and union representation, instead ratcheted up efforts to advocate for teacher salaries in Harrisburg. In October, 1970, for example, Pittsburgh School Superintendent Louis Kishkunas lobbied the Pennsylvania General Assembly for new money for teachers. Kishkunas argued that this was necessary because in cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, “approximately two-thirds of the local

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<sup>16</sup> “State Income Tax, Teacher Pay Hike Linked by Shafer,” *PPG*, Mar. 29, 1968.

tax dollars [are] drained off by other municipal services, which frequently fulfill regional needs,” whereas suburban school districts could “allocate as much as 70 per cent or more of their tax dollars to education.”<sup>17</sup> Here, in essence, was the liberal solution to the problem of poor urban education: equalize spending through state or federal subsidies, pay teachers well, and provide equal opportunities through education. Though the proportion of spending on public education would not be equalized between city and suburb, both the city of Pittsburgh and the state contributed substantially more money to teacher salaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s than they had before the 1968 actions of the PFT and PSEA.<sup>18</sup>

The commitment to pay raises from the state and local school boards following the 1968 Pittsburgh strike was significant; the most important outcome of the 1968 strike, however, was the establishment—as promised by Pittsburgh state legislators—of a legislative commission to change the state of Pennsylvania’s public employee bargaining law. Governor Shafer established a commission just two months later to revise the existing statute, which had not been changed since 1947. Governor Shafer was undoubtedly under pressure from Democratic legislators—especially those from the Pittsburgh area like Leroy Irvis who received political (and presumably financial) support from area labor unions—to change the law to allow collective bargaining for public sector workers. Still, his view on the issue showed that many Republicans in industrial states harbored an ideological commitment to the rights of workers to organize in unions.

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<sup>17</sup>“City Schools Seek Additional Funds,” *The News from the Pittsburgh Public Schools*, October-November 1970, p. 1. Pittsburgh, Heinz Historical Center Archives, Pittsburgh Board of Public Education Series IV, Box 182, Folder 1.

<sup>18</sup>“Teachers Move to Higher Pay Schedule,” *The News from the Pittsburgh Public Schools*, October-November 1972, p. 9. Heinz Center, PBPE, Series IV, Box 182, Folder 1.

Just as Governor Rockefeller in New York supported collective bargaining by public sector workers, Shafer referred to the Pittsburgh teacher strike as “a just appeal for more democratic process” that unfortunately “ha[d] been made in violation of the law.”<sup>19</sup> Shafer, then in calling for commission to revise the law, pointed to “a number of labor disputes by public employees with public employers where existing law has been disregarded, or in the opinion of some, has been held inadequate” in the “recent months.”<sup>20</sup> It was evident that the action on the part of Pennsylvania teachers had been one of the main catalysts for the establishment of the commission. Chaired by Leon Hickman, a retired Alcoa executive, the far-reaching nature of the commission’s findings would show that even some corporate leaders believed labor unions—even those in the public sector—should have a legitimate voice in the production of goods and services.

The commission’s recommendations were released just a few months before the Ocean-Hill Brownsville controversy that had captured the attention of the nation. After holding public hearings in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Erie and conferring with public officials from Wisconsin, Michigan, and the city of New York, the commission called for a total replacement of the 1947 law, instead recognizing “the right of all public employees to bargain collectively.” This part of the report was no different from several other state public employee laws; where it differed, however, was in conferring a “limited right to strike” on most public employees in the state, including public school teachers. By giving the right to strike to public employees, however, the commission hoped not to incite more public sector strikes but instead to prevent them, for public employees could

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<sup>19</sup> Ryan, “Irviss, Lamb Will Continue to Offer Aid,” *PPG*, Mar. 9, 1968.

<sup>20</sup> Memo from Raymond Shafer to the State Education Secretary, May 14, 1968, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania State Archives, Record Group 16, Carton 1.

only strike after all efforts to solve a potential labor dispute through bargaining had failed. Public employees would have to subject bargaining disputes to mediation, fact-finding panels, and arbitration proceedings under the state Department of Labor. Only then—presumably when a school board or county government was being unreasonable—would a strike occur. The commission report argued that a dispute would only lead to a strike when the public supported it since “strikes can only be effective so long as they have public support. In short, we look upon the limited right to strike as a safety valve that will in fact prevent strikes.” If that “safety valve” failed, however, the commission also recommended that a strike could be enjoined by local officials once a strike violated the “welfare, health, and safety of the general public.” Finally, the commission recommended severe penalties—substantial fines and even jail time for union leaders who refused to honor an injunction.<sup>21</sup>

Several aspects of the commission report stand out here. First, the commission believed that the highest interest was that of the “public.” This was an amorphous term to be sure (and one whose definition was very much up for grabs in the political turmoil of the late 1960s and 70s), but the committee assumed that there was indeed a universal “public” interest to which the rights of public sector unions should be subordinated.<sup>22</sup> Second, the commission clearly found that labor unions were not only legitimate, but also necessary for smooth labor relations in the public sector. While identifying the “public” as the most important of the three, it equally included both the “public employer” and the

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<sup>21</sup>“Hickman Commission Report and Recommendations,” presented to the Governor’s Office, June 25, 1968, PSA, RG 16, Carton 1.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance, the report’s argument that --“The right of both public employer and public employee must necessarily be subordinated to the welfare, health, and safety of the general public.”

“public employee” as the other two “stakeholders” in the triumvirate of players in the production of government services.<sup>23</sup> This logic was quite similar to the logic of postwar liberals like John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. who viewed labor unions as checks on the power of large corporations in the private sector.

Third, the proposal, in conferring the right to strike, evidenced a key assumption of the dominant political discourse in the late 1960s—namely that rational administration of government policy *could* and *would* solve economic and social turmoil. The strike provision, in fact, came after the commission had consulted with the University of Pennsylvania labor relations expert George Taylor, who had authored New York’s 1967 law that provided for mediation of public employment disputes while cracking down on strikes by public employees through stiff fines and even jail time for union leadership. In allowing for the limited right to strike, the commission saw its work as shifting existing labor policy in a direction that would make labor relations more efficient, rational, and *less* prone to disruptions.

The right-to-strike provision proved controversial among some Republican legislators in Pennsylvania Senate, and it was not until the 1970 legislative session that the General Assembly passed new public employee legislation.<sup>24</sup> When it did, however, following a threatened strike by teachers in Pittsburgh in 1969 and with a strike on the horizon from Philadelphia teachers in the fall of 1970, the legislation, entitled Public

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; In assessing the proposed law from the vantage point of 1978, the Governor’s Commission on Public Employee Relations characterized the original intention of the law as the attempt to find “a proper balance among the rights and interests of labor, management, and the general public.” Governor’s Study Commission on Public Employee Relations, *Recommendations for Legislative and Administrative Change to the Public Sector Collective Bargaining Laws of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: The Commission, 1978), 1.

<sup>24</sup> The law not only received every Democratic vote in the State House of Representatives, but also passed a state Senate holding a Republican majority.

Employee Relations Act 195, was virtually identical to the Hickman Commission proposal. It represented a far-reaching experiment in public employee labor relations, as Pennsylvania was the first industrial state in the United States to formally sanction public employee strikes.<sup>25</sup>

Public sector unions—especially teacher unions—were pleased with the law. PFT President Albert Fondy, in a letter to the editor in *The Pittsburgh Press* called the legislation “a tremendous advancement” and argued that “Pennsylvania...now becomes one of the most progressive states in the nation.”<sup>26</sup> But the law was not just touted by public sector unions. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association, the umbrella organization representing Fondy’s adversary in 1968, also “hailed” the new law.<sup>27</sup> And finally, the Republican Governor Shafer, who expressed philosophical misgivings over public sector workers’ right to strike, nonetheless signed the law—a crucial point given the Republican-held state Senate’s inability to override a veto. The rationale for Shafer’s decision lay well within the rubric of the postwar faith that labor conflict could be solved through rational policy: “Without such a law, we will have chaos in our public institutions.” The law, buttressed by responsible use on the part of both employers and employees, he asserted, would allow “differences” to be “resolved at the negotiation table, not on the street in a picket line.” Finally, Shafer stressed the larger importance of the policy, when he argued that “with this measure...we become the first major industrial state to give our...public employees...the right to bargain collectively....strengthened by

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<sup>25</sup> Hawaii had passed a law allowing public sector strikes just a month before, and Vermont already allowed public sector strikes in more restrictive circumstances.

<sup>26</sup> “Fondy Points Out Progress in New Public Employee Law,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, July 24, 1970.

<sup>27</sup> William E. Deibler, “Shafer Okays Law on Public Employees,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 23, 1970.

the additional right to a limited strike if negotiations fail [ellipses in original].”<sup>28</sup> “We today,” he concluded, “step into a new era of labor relations.”<sup>29</sup>

Commentators in the press were equally aware of the experimental nature of the new law, but even those media outlets that had opposed the right of public employees to strike expressed optimism about the ability of the law to provide an orderly system of public sector labor relations. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, which had been so critical of the strike two years before, offered that the law “recognizes the facts of our complex industrial society.” It expressed guarded optimism that the law could solve the “teacher defiance” in the state that had been the very *raison d’etre* for the legislation:

All we know is that the Legislature, with an assist from a commission of public-spirited citizens, sought to deal fairly and effectively with a sticky public issue. . . . But, of course, there is no iron-clad guarantee that the law will work. New York State’s unhappy attempts to legislate in the field of public employee-employer relationships are not reassuring. Perhaps there is no way to stem the spreading militancy of public employee organizations. But the effort has to be made if a viable society is to be preserved.<sup>30</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* more or less agreed with the *Post-Gazette*’s evaluation of the law. It asserted, fairly unscientifically given the nearly 100-vote margin with which the bill passed in the State House of Representatives, that the “right of public employees to bargain collectively, and to strike, is regarded as objectionable if not dangerous by many citizens.” Nonetheless, the new law was more effective than that it

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<sup>28</sup> Vincent Carocci, “Shafer Approves Public Employees’ Strike-Right Law,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 23, 1970.

<sup>29</sup> Deibler, “Shafer Okays. . . .” *PPG*, July 23, 1970.

<sup>30</sup> “New Public Employee Law,” *PPG*, July 22, 1970.

supplanted, as the law featured “enforceability, plus fair treatment of the employee and the employer and protection of the public.”<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most sanguine editorial, however, came from the Harrisburg daily *The Patriot*. Though the city had not experienced any teacher strikes, the paper nonetheless pointed out that “astute observers believe [it] may become the most significant law to emerge on Capitol Hill in a generation.” The editorial argued (presciently so on all counts) that the law would bring a significant surge of new labor organizing, an increase in responsibilities on the part of the state labor relations board, and a “vitally significant” role on the part of the local court systems—in Pennsylvania these were organized by counties—to define the scope of the law. Though much still needed to be done, *The Patriot* editorial staff expressed that with proper implementation, it was possible that “we have witnessed the birth of a wondrous new thing in our time.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Act 195 in Action: Philadelphia and Pittsburgh**

The success of the law would be determined by the strikes that followed, and the local “publics” elsewhere would gaze upon the Pennsylvania law in confronting their own teacher strikes. Indeed, in the early 1970s, discussion of the Pennsylvania law—and its assumptions about the role of the state—would be injected into the public discussion of teacher strikes both within and outside the state.

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<sup>31</sup> “Limited Power to Strike,” *PI*, July 22, 1970.

<sup>32</sup> “Right to Strike: It Carries Responsibilities, Too,” *The Patriot*, July 25, 1970.

In September, 1970, just a month before the new public employee law was to go into effect, teachers in Philadelphia braced to go out on strike. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) contract did not expire at a propitious time for the teachers as the city had been hard hit by budget deficits the previous February. The President of the Philadelphia Board of Education at the time called the situation—in which the city faced a \$50 million budget shortfall—“dreadful,” while John Corr, a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, argued that “Philadelphia is on the threshold of becoming the first big city in America to close its public schools...It is not hyperbole to say the public schools system is on the verge of collapse.”<sup>33</sup> Explanations at the time had ascribed some responsibility to the “teacher militancy” emanating from the 1960s. In a separate piece, however, Corr offered that the “most important factor in school operating costs is teacher salaries, which have risen drastically in the past few years.”<sup>34</sup>

Much of the commentary on the budget shortfall, however, focused on the need for the state government to contribute more money to the Philadelphia school system. An *Inquirer* editorial on February 9 asserted that the formula for state aid was “rigged.” Philadelphia, the piece argued, received only about “one-third of its school funds from the state while other school districts in Pennsylvania are getting as high as 80 percent of their budgets paid for by the state.” The editorial’s solution was to get the city council, school board, and mayor’s office to work together to “get a fair shake from Harrisburg.”<sup>35</sup> The most prominent explanation for the city’s budget problems, then, revolved around

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<sup>33</sup> “School System’s Plight: Desperate,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 6, 1970; John P. Corr, “Phila. Schools Near Collapse, Face First Big-City Shutdown,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 8, 1970. The latter article captured the headline of the front page.

<sup>34</sup> John P. Corr, “School Costs Rise With Few Benefits,” *PI*, February 8, 1970.

<sup>35</sup> “Still Passing By on the Other Side,” *PI*, February 9, 1970.

the political economy of the state of Pennsylvania, but teacher salaries were very much on Philadelphians' minds when the PFT struck the school system that September and October.

The teachers, mindful of the city's budget problems, did not strike that September until pushed into it. The school board and the PFT had reached an impasse in negotiations by the early part of the month, and the Board closed the schools on September 10, prompting the teachers to formally strike. There were two basic points of contention. The first was over a wage increase that left the two parties around \$25 million apart for the life of the two-year contract. The second revolved around the Board's effort to lengthen the instructional time high school teachers spent with students from 4 ½ hours to 5 ½ hours a day.<sup>36</sup> The schools reopened four days later as the Board and the teachers union agreed to negotiate for an additional thirty days.<sup>37</sup> That deadline, however, passed, and the teachers went back on strike for an additional three school days, going back to work after reaching an agreement with the school board to a fairly substantial wage increase in conjunction with a longer instructional day.<sup>38</sup>

The timing of the strike brought discussions of Public Employee Act 195 immediately to the surface. Although the new law was not to go into effect until October, politicians, political commentators, and community activists alike called on both sides to accept the "spirit" of the new law in order to avert the consequences of the breakdown in the negotiations. In a letter to both Frank Sullivan, President of the PFT, and Richardson Dilworth, President of the Board of Education, Mayor James Tate

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<sup>36</sup> John T. Gillespie, "Board Orders School Closed as Pact Ends," *The Evening Bulletin*, September 8, 1970.

<sup>37</sup> John T. Gillespie, "City Pupils Return Tomorrow Under 30-Day Agreement," *EB*, September 14, 1970.

<sup>38</sup> John P. Corr, "Board, Union Reach Settlement; All Teachers Return to Classes," *PI*, Oct. 21, 1970.

“strongly urge[d]” both sides to “institute the impasse procedures contained in the New Public Employee Relations Act without delay.” Tate, indeed, was optimistic that if both sides accepted the “intent” of the law, they would avoid a strike, as Act 195 represented the “joint product of collective bargaining experts for both labor and management that designed into law the best techniques and procedures known to facilitate agreement.”<sup>39</sup>

On August 28, 1970, an editorial from local CBS affiliate WCAU-TV, following the lead of the school board, asked Governor Shafer to “call both sides to Harrisburg...and convince the Teachers Federation to accept the intent of the law even though it is not yet legally binding.”<sup>40</sup> On September 5, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* on its editorial page called the potential strike a matter of “utmost seriousness.” It called on Governor Schafer to intervene and get the teachers to agree to the 75-day “cooling off” period provided for by the new public employee law.<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Gail Aronson, Secretary of the Loesche Public School Home and School Association (in Philadelphia, the HSA was the equivalent of the PTA), called on the teacher union to “accept mediation, arbitration, fact-finding, or even a complete change of the members of your negotiating team.”<sup>42</sup> Though the language in this letter was not completely optimistic about the effectiveness of the law, it nonetheless reproduced the recourses available to the “public” to curtail labor

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from James. H.J. Tate to Frank Sullivan,” *Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Collection*, Philadelphia, Temple University Library, Urban Archives, Box 163.

<sup>40</sup> “The Governor and Philadelphia’s School Crisis,” Aug. 28, 1970, WCAU-TV editorial, PFTC, UA, Box 163.

<sup>41</sup> “Schools Won’t Keep,” Sep. 5, 1970. *EB*.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Gail R. Aronson to Frank Sullivan, Oct. 7, 1970, PFTC, UA, Box 163. The Home and School Council was a city-wide organization with affiliated bodies in every Philadelphia school. Similar to the PTA elsewhere, the affiliates were extremely active in mobilizing letter-writing drives during the strike of 1970 and especially in the strikes of 1972-73.

disputes and shows how the debate over the law was not one that only reached newspaper editors and mayors but also trickled down to citizen activists like Aronson.

Though no one actually desired a shut-down of the school system, it should be noted that a sizable degree of support existed for the notion that the teachers had a legitimate reason for striking. An editorial in the *Evening Bulletin* on the day before the September school closing criticized the union effort, arguing that in “almost every respect it is wrong.” Nonetheless, the editor admitted that “the public, whatever its apathy in years gone by, is not unsympathetic to the teachers’ need for economic equity. Considering educational requirements and their importance to society, they should not have to moonlight on second jobs to achieve a decent standard of living.”<sup>43</sup> Just who was meant by the “public” was not quite clear, but the significance of such a statement lay in the fact that the paper acknowledged the “public legitimacy” of teacher salary increases in 1970.

An analysis by columnist Rose DeWolf in the same paper a few days later placed the negotiations in the context of American labor politics. The effort by the board to extend the workday, she argued, cut against the accepted logic of labor relations. “It is a long-established fact of life that when you ask a group of workers—any workers, anywhere—to work longer than they were originally hired to do, you had better be prepared to buy them out at a pretty penny or at least compromise on a deal that includes

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<sup>43</sup> “A Strike and a Wrong One,” *EB*, Sep. 9, 1970.

hiring more workers.” She went on to assert that the “openly anti-union board is merely using this issue to flex its muscles and turn public opinion against teachers.”<sup>44</sup>

In a letter to the editor of the *Evening Bulletin*, one “concerned parent” awaited a “settlement...which would be fair to both parties, the teachers and the parents and their children.”<sup>45</sup> In a letter to the city’s other major newspaper, *The Inquirer*, Ralph Smith contrasted the largesse of the city in spending dearly to get the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration with its inability to pay decent teachers’ salaries: “More than a billion dollars may be spent....It is hard to believe the Federal Government will pay for all this, which means the Philadelphians will again be hit hard. And we can’t even get 24 million dollars together to send our children to school!”<sup>46</sup> The McCloskey HSA, in a letter to Frank Sullivan, stressed that “we, as parents, do not wish to take sides in the issues involved with the present school crisis.” The HSA from Thomas Junior High followed the same logic. Though the letter was critical of the strike itself, arguing that the school system was “more than a production company, more than a service company,” it nonetheless offered that the association would “not take sides in your present disagreement.” The Home and School Council President, Virginia DiGiulio, simply affirmed that “we are sure that the dedication and deep moral fiber of the teachers of this city and the Board of Education of this city shall insure that our children, the leaders of tomorrow, will not be the innocent sufferers in this dispute.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rose DeWolf, “Longer School Day is the Key Issue,” *EB*, Sep. 11, 1970.

<sup>45</sup> “Time for Learning,” *EB*, Sep. 14, 1970.

<sup>46</sup> “Billion for ’76, But for Schools...” *PI*, Oct. 19, 1970.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from (Mrs.) Robert Kreamer to Frank Sullivan, Sep 12, 1970; letter from Virginia DiGiulio to Frank Sullivan, Oct. 8, 1970 PFT<sub>2</sub> UA, Box 163. These letters each came from schools in predominantly

While many interlocutors during the Philadelphia strike of 1970 believed the strikers' cause was just, others evidenced a growing sense that the tactics used by the union to negotiate signaled a larger "crisis." Political commentators and community activists both pointed to a drastic decline in respect for "law and order" and worried about the fate of a nation in which even school teachers could "defy" the law. Broadly speaking, while many Philadelphians did not blame the teachers, a discourse nonetheless emerged in the two brief 1970 strikes that sounded serious concerns about the effect of teacher strikes on both the city and the nation. In part, the detriment of the strike resulted from the teachers' importance to the educational system, as reflected in two letters to the *Evening Bulletin* on September 14. A 16 year-old high school student implored the teachers not to strike because "the teachers can't expect that the volunteer teachers can teach as well as them. The volunteer teachers don't have the material, the knowledge, the respect, and the experience of a school teacher." From an administrator's perspective, Morris J. Selis asked "is teaching a profession requiring four years of college work, with emphasis on educational philosophy, educational methods, etc., or isn't it? As a former (retired) Philadelphia school principal, I cannot agree that any parent can teach. This would set education back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>48</sup>

In a pattern that would be replicated in other teacher strikes in the 1970s, as the strike dragged out, it began to have deeper implications. Though the second strike was short, coming on the heels of the first and preceded by the anxiety of a daily countdown to the second exacerbated the tension that many Philadelphians felt. Thus, as the day

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white neighborhoods, the latter from the working-class neighborhood of South Philadelphia and the former from a more affluent middle-class neighborhood.

<sup>48</sup> "Time for Learning," *EB*, Sep. 14, 1970.

drew closer to the October strike, many interlocutors worried just what the nation was coming to if teachers were just members of another public sector union willing to break the law to further their own interests.

On September 12, a camera shop owner, Alexander Layman, sent a letter to PFT President Frank Sullivan. He identified himself as a “tax-paying Philadelphia business man,” asserting that he did “not think that your organization as well as the Board of Education should conduct negotiations in the same manner as the teamsters or automotive workers.” He went on to ask the union to “use your good common sense to get the kids back to school and then arbitrate while they are learning.” This letter signifies much of the early public dialogue about the teacher strike, as Layman’s criticism does not necessarily revolve around an aversion to labor negotiations *per se*. His solution, reflecting the logic of the new Public Employee Act, was to end the strike and continue arbitrating. Further, his criticism of negotiation through striking was not solely directed at the teachers. Indeed, the Board of Education seems just as much to blame for bringing the teacher’s negotiations to the level at which an actual work stoppage could occur.<sup>49</sup>

Mr. and Mrs. Irv Forman, “parents of children in the Philadelphia School System” and residents of the white working-class neighborhood of Northeastern Philadelphia also asked the teachers to deviate from the methods of unions in the private sector. Although the Formans “sympathize[d] with your situation, we feel that you are wrong if you will not work during mediation. You seem to have forgotten that you are teaching children not machines.” The stakes of the strike, however, were even greater than a few days of

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<sup>49</sup> Letter from Alexander Layman to Frank Sullivan, Sep. 12, 1970, \_PFT, UA, Box 163.

lost classroom time. Indeed, the Formans argued that by striking “you will only drive the middle class citizen out of the city to the suburbs where you don’t have to worry about school strikes.”<sup>50</sup>

Cedric Gifford, Jr.’s October 23 letter to Frank Sullivan showed how some Philadelphians changed their view of the union during the second strike. Gifford began his letter by citing a letter from 1969 he had written to the union to voice their support for teacher control (versus local control) in a dispute at West Philadelphia High School. Gifford was kind enough to include a copy of that letter, which expressed his “approval and support of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers.” But his recent letter caused him to “reevaluate my former posture of support.” He excoriated the union’s strike tactics, as it had failed to differentiate “between a child in the classroom and a material product on the assembly line.” Beyond the loss of education, however, Gifford was most concerned with the union for “flaunting not only professional but legal obligations in a manner prejudicial to the public welfare.” For Gifford, then, the interests of the teacher union, at least after the 1970 strike, stood very much in contraposition to the interests of the amorphous “public.”<sup>51</sup>

The President of the Fitzpatrick HSA, a school also located in Northeastern Philadelphia, wrote to Sullivan to consider the example the teachers were setting. Invoking the rhetoric of “law-and-order” politicians like George Wallace, Richard Nixon,

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<sup>50</sup> Letter from Mr. and Mrs. Irv Forman, Oct. 12, 1970, PFT, UA, Box 163. It seems almost certain that this letter was written by Mrs. Irv Forman. Many women who wrote to the teachers union at this time subsumed their identity—even if they held a public position like Home and School Council President—under their husband’s name. Male letter writers used their name alone, so it seems quite likely that had Mr. Irv Forman written this letter he would not have thought to include his wife’s name.

<sup>51</sup> Letter from Cedric Gifford, Jr. to Frank Sullivan, Oct. 12, 1970, PFT, UA, Box 163.

and Philadelphia's own police chief Frank Rizzo, Dorothy Ravich outlined the stakes of the strike, which had to do with more than just teacher salaries and budget deficits: "In these difficult days of campus disorders and violent demonstrations, we want the children in our school to see an example of adults settling their differences in an orderly manner within the laws of our society."<sup>52</sup> Though high school teachers had little direct relationship to student radicalism, Ravich's letter shows that many believed the two phenomena were related. The education system, so important in defining society's moral values, seemed to be not only falling apart once youths reached adulthood and college, but teacher strikes meant that many parents believed that they could no longer even count on primary and secondary school any longer. Further, though Ravich's letter is, by itself, a lone piece of evidence, I would argue that this likely indicates a window into a broader phenomenon. As President of the Home and School Association, it seems likely that Ravich shared this characterization of the strike at one or more HSA meetings or even wrote the letter to represent the interests of the other members of that local association. Though extensive records of this HSA do not exist, it is quite possible that these community meetings served as spheres in which these views of the teacher strike circulated.

If community activists like Ravich sounded the alarm bell of declining law and order, local newspapers pushed even further after the teachers violated a court injunction during the second strike. On the first day of that strike, the *Inquirer* called the action "illegal and irresponsible" and argued that the teachers struck in an attempt "to place the

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<sup>52</sup> Letter from Dorothy Ravich to Frank Sullivan, Sep. 29, 1970, PFT, UA, Box 163.

teaching profession above and beyond the law.” The editorial then placed the strike in the context of the new public employee law, set to go into effect two days later, doubting whether the “teachers and their leaders who have refused to obey the no-strike law presently in force will show any more respect for the new statute when it takes effect.” The actions of the teachers symbolized a growing decline in respect for the law, and left the future of the city (and, implicitly, the nation) in doubt, as the teachers’ disrespect “may go a long way toward explaining the academic and disciplinary failure of our public school system.”<sup>53</sup>

The *Evening Bulletin* was a bit more optimistic about the new law. Its editor lauded the Governor and the local county court judges who worked—by exerting pressure on both sides to agree to mediation—to get both the teachers and the school board to abide by the intent of the new law even though it did not technically apply to the strike. Nonetheless, the editorial argued that strikes in other cities had “left in [their] wake a bitter residue of acrimony.” It wondered if, going forward, the division between teachers and “the community” could ever be resolved.<sup>54</sup> This question was more apt than the piece’s writer could even imagine, as the extremely bitter strike of 1973 (see Chapter 3) would show.

Just a few months after the resolution of the Philadelphia strike, another brief strike in Pittsburgh in 1971 would again ignite a local debate about the effectiveness of Public Employee Act 195. Though lasting only five days, this strike would still bring to

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<sup>53</sup> “Illegal and Irresponsible,” *PI*, Oct. 19, 1970. It should be noted that a similar editorial was published two days later by the *Inquirer* that once again asked whether the teachers “will have any more respect for the new law than they had for the old.”

<sup>54</sup> “Back to Education,” *EB*, Oct. 21, 1970.

the table the question of whether or not rational state policy could prevent divisive public sector strikes.

The 1971 strike revolved around fringe benefits; working conditions such as class size and special education programs; and most importantly, salary increases. Though the school board and the PFT disagreed about the number of strikers, at least 60% and perhaps as many as 90% of the city's 3200 teachers stayed off the job during the week of January 4-8, 1971.<sup>55</sup> Though teachers had the right to strike under the newly minted public employee law, the goal of the law clearly was to prevent strikes, and strikers could be enjoined to return to work if they "create[d] a clear and present danger or threat to the health, safety or welfare of the public."<sup>56</sup> On the second day of the strike, School Superintendent Kishkunas asked the state Labor Relations Board to establish a fact-finding panel, and PFT President Albert Fondy, catching wind that a fact-finding panel would likely recommend that the teachers return to work while negotiations took place, headed this off by saying that the teachers would not return to work without a new contract. The school board, on the fourth day of the strike, began seeking an injunction to compel the teachers to return to work, but the Board and PFT reached a contract agreement over the weekend and the injunction proceedings were moot. As per the agreement, teachers received salary increases which ranged from \$1800 over two years for beginning teachers to \$3500 for the most experienced. The school board also agreed to hire 86 new teachers to reduce class sizes.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Vince Gagetta, "City Schools Resume Normal Schedule after PFT Strike," *PPG*, Jan 18, 1971.

<sup>56</sup> *State Profiles: Current Status of Public Sector Labor Relations*, United States Department of Labor, Nov 1971, 79.

<sup>57</sup> Gagetta, "City Schools," *PPG*, Jan. 18, 1971.

It is difficult to assess any changes in public opinion during the 1971 strike for two reasons. First, the strike was book-ended by a two-week long Pressmen's Union strike that shut down both the *Post-Gazette* and the *Press* for the entire duration of the teacher strike. Thus by the time the newspapers began printing again, dialogue between newspaper editor and citizen activist was much less relevant, and so very little exists in the published record. Second, the strike was shorter than either the 1968 strike or the 1975-76 strike, and in contrast to both, did not reach the point where striking teachers were breaking any laws.

Nevertheless, there are two conclusions that can be mined from the historical record. First, local opinion-makers understood that this strike cast doubt on whether or not Public Employee Act 195 would prevent public sector labor strife, and second, occurring in conjunction with the newspaper strike, some commentators in the media began to sound their own alarm of American declension. On January 18, 1971, in the first issue off the presses after the end of the newspaper strike, the editorial featured on the opinion page of the *Pittsburgh Press* concerned the "aftermath" of the teacher strike. The editor argued that the strike's real winners were the teachers, who gained large pay increases, while the parents received only the "assurance of a two-year peace from the PFT," which was really no win at all, since the PFT "has been raising strike threats with disturbing frequency in the past three years" and, the writer implied, appeared likely to do so again as soon as the current contract ended.<sup>58</sup> For the editor, however, the real problem was that the teachers union had failed to abide by the stipulations of the law.

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<sup>58</sup> The next contract, incidentally, would be signed without a strike.

The editorial asserted that the PFT would “have none of” the intermediate steps—fact-finding, mediation, etc.—that could prevent strikes; in fact, the author argued—in one of three bold-faced sentences in the piece—that the PFT “left no doubt that it wanted to show its muscle in the most forceful way it could.” It then criticized the school board for not being tough enough with the union and wondered if the new law would ever “become a useful tool for preventing teachers’ strikes in the future.”<sup>59</sup>

For the *Post-Gazette*, this question was of the utmost urgency. Specifically connecting the teachers strike to the Pressman’s Union strike, the featured editorial on January 18 argued that “it is a tragic commentary upon our social structure that a willful few can exercise monopoly power to inflict grave injury upon the public.” And, according to the *Post-Gazette*, in spite of the new legislation to prevent public sector strikes, the teachers had “flouted” the law anyway. The editorial concluded that “irresponsibility is becoming the hallmark of too many people entrusted with the public welfare.”<sup>60</sup>

What is instructive here is that the experience of the strike in 1971 helped to enlarge the scaffolding of various cultural constructs on which commentators could draw for the extremely bitter strike of 1975-76 (see Chapter Four), in which the explanation of the strike formulated through the media increasingly focused on the helplessness of the “public” at the hands of a rapacious union. During the 1968 strike, many newspaper editors, politicians, teacher activists and even (non-teacher) letter-to-the-editor writers had agreed that teachers were important and deserved to be paid well. Most agreed that

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<sup>59</sup> “School-Strike Aftermath,” *PP*, Jan. 18, 1971.

<sup>60</sup> “We Are Glad to Be Back!” *PPG*, Jan. 18, 1971.

teachers, like other workers, had the right to union membership. Because of their importance, however, labor actions by teachers could stir up a great deal of criticism, especially when they were seen as illegal. The Pittsburgh strike of 1971, brief as it was, began to cast serious doubt about the ability of the law to halt public sector labor conflict.

### **Ugly and Bitter: The Newark Strikes of 1970-71**

If Act 195 engaged national media attention as other local and state governments in other states faced their own teacher strikes,<sup>61</sup> much of the national discourse of crisis to emerge from teacher strikes in the late 60s and early 70s came from divisive strikes elsewhere. As I mentioned above, two highly bitter strikes in New York City and Florida in 1968 brought the actions of teachers into the tapestry of anxieties about American breakdown of morals, disrespect for law and order, and general social turmoil. But no strike went so far as to highlight just how controversial teacher strikes could be until the 1970 and 1971 strikes of the Newark Teachers Union against the city of the same name. Revolving around a stark racial conflict, street violence, and mass arrests of teachers, the Newark strike brought the discursive site of the teacher strike firmly into the arena of mainstream American culture.

On February 1, 1970, the NTU voted to go on strike after the expiration of its previous contract with the Newark Board of Education. The Board had been offering a \$1300 across-the-board increase to teachers, while the teachers were asking for a package

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, January 5 and January 6, 1971 NBC Nightly News reports by David Brinkley that placed that strike in the context of the Pennsylvania Public Employee Act. *Television News Archive*, Vanderbilt University.

in which starting salaries rose by \$2000 more than that. The teacher union also made a priority of the implementation of the More Effective Schools (MES) Program, a pilot program created by the AFT to reduce class sizes and bring academic specialists to troubled inner-city schools. The union attempted to close all of the city's schools by striking, an effort in which it did not completely succeed at first, getting the Board to close less than half of the schools on the first day. In what would become a standard strategy by local leaders in cash-strapped cities facing teacher strikes in the 1970s, Mayor Hugh Addonizio called for state aid to provide increases in education spending rather than asking for increases in the property tax. On the second day of the strike, for instance, Addonizio insisted that “without state aid, there cannot be a sound solution [to the strike], for Newark homeowners simply cannot bear the kinds of costs being discussed in these negotiations.”<sup>62</sup>

The school board obtained an injunction even before the strike began since New Jersey's Public Employee Relations Commission Act (1968) outlawed strikes by public employees. The striking teachers, however, disobeyed the injunction and demonstrated outside of schools the Board attempted to keep open. Three days into the strike, famed labor mediator Theodore Kheel came to the city in the hopes of helping to end the impasse, while a local Essex County judge ordered the arrests of three strike leaders—NTU president Carole Graves, vice-president Frank Fiorito, and executive committee member Donald Nicholas—for contempt of court. The latter move was of the utmost significance because striking public sector union leaders were virtually never arrested

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<sup>62</sup> Robert J. Braun, “Talks Start as Teachers Press Strike,” *The Star-Ledger*, Feb. 3, 1970.

during a strike since they were necessary to negotiations. Two days later, the judge ordered the arrest of four more members of the union's executive leadership.<sup>63</sup>

As if this level of controversy were not enough, the racial politics of the city combined to ignite a powder-keg. Since World War II, the African-American population had increased drastically in the city, while the white population—comprised largely of ethnic Jews and Italians—had declined significantly. Newark had been the site of one of the most divisive inner-city riots of the 1960s; in 1967, the mostly white police force brutally suppressed African-American rioters fed up with urban poverty. In the late 1960s and 70s, black power activists, led by Newark's most famous resident, the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka—formerly LeRoi Jones and still referred to as such by the local and national media in the 1970-71—were in the midst of a bruising battle to wrest political power from a mostly white city leadership.<sup>64</sup> Though the NTU President was an African-American woman, most of the union's leadership was white as were most of the striking teachers. In response to a strike that he viewed as against the interests of the community, Baraka attempted to organize parents, students, and a minority of black teachers opposed to the union to keep the schools open. Working through the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), Baraka and his allies helped to keep a large number open by sending community volunteers to the schools most in need of adult supervision. Though he was extremely critical of the Newark schools, he nonetheless argued in February 1970 that there was “a lot we might have done without closing down the entire

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<sup>63</sup> Braun, “Kheel Entering Newark Strike; 3 Teacher Leaders Surrender Today,” *Star-Ledger*, Feb. 5, 1970.

<sup>64</sup> Komozi Woodard, *Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Woodard in particular points out that while African-Americans made up just 17% of the city's population in 1950, by 1970, the city was 54% black (p. 75).

school system. The combined pressure of this community and the teachers union might have been enough to make the board give in and try to improve these schools.” In spite of a national narrative that painted Baraka’s opposition against white teachers *per se*, Baraka steered clear of characterizing the conflict as strictly a racial one. To him, the main point of the conflict centered on the “suburban” attitudes of the teachers and their lack of responsiveness to the “urban” problems of the Newark schoolchildren.<sup>65</sup>

With no end to the strike in sight, city policemen arrested 43 strikers outside city hall on February 14 for defying the court injunction. Four days later, sheriff’s officers arrested another 36 teacher demonstrators, including the current AFT President David Selden, who had come to Newark to support the strikers. By February 22, as almost 200 teachers had been arrested, one report on the strike asserted that “exchanges between parents and teachers almost reached the point of hysteria” as the conflict seemed to “resurrect the specter of ‘another 1967.’”<sup>66</sup> Each side moved to the middle on salaries and ratified a new contract on February 26, after receiving helpful intervention from Mayor Addonizio and a mediator appointed by the PERC mediation board. Though the teachers did not immediately gain raises higher than those originally offered by the school board, the Board did increase the speed with which teachers could reach higher salary “steps.” The Board also agreed to create one experimental MES school by the following school year. Importantly, the Board further agreed to binding arbitration if any disputes emerged over the language of the contract.<sup>67</sup> This last provision was a crucial

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<sup>65</sup> Braun, “LeRoi Jones: His ‘Aides’ Help Keep Schools Open,” *S-L*, February 8, 1970.

<sup>66</sup> Braun, “Teacher Strike: Frustration...Fear...Distrust,” *S-L*, Feb. 22, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> Braun, “New Contract Ratified; Teachers Returning Today,” *S-L*, Feb. 26, 1970.

one, since another strike would occur in 1971, primarily involving this provision, which would make the 1970 strike appear congenial by comparison.

The 1970 contract expired on January 31 of the next year, and the same issues from the 1970 strike rolled over into the bargaining for the next contract, only this time the political landscape had changed dramatically. By then, Baraka and his allies had helped to elect Kenneth Gibson as the city's first black mayor in November 1970. Gibson was no black nationalist, but it was clear that he had only won the election with the backing of Baraka's organization, and in turn, he appointed Jesse Jacob, a staunch civil rights activist, as the President of the Newark Board of Education. Jacob would view the upcoming contract talks as an effort to re-take control of the schools from the teachers union.

The union asked for a \$10 million salary increase, the institution of a teacher welfare fund, and full exemption from non-teaching duties like lunch and playground supervision. The school board, under Jacob's leadership, wanted a much smaller salary increase and, most importantly, wanted to undo the binding arbitration provision in the previous contract. The union leadership, fearing another strike action so soon after the 1970 strike, waited until the last minute to call a strike vote on February 1. The court injunction against the NTU from 1970 was still in effect, so the board pursued immediate action from the Essex County Superior Court on the second day of the strike. Nonetheless, as late as February 4, the *Newark Star-Ledger* reported that the two sides had reached a "tentative agreement" on the money issues and quoted both NTU President

Carole Graves and school board President Jesse Jacob as saying they expected a quick ending to the strike.<sup>68</sup>

The extra teaching duties, and especially the arbitration clause, became major sticking points as neither side was willing to budge. Unlike salaries, where compromise at a mid-point was easier, the two largely non-economic issues left little room for middle ground. Each side viewed the surrender of any part of their position as surrendering a portion of hard-fought control over the education system. Just a couple of days after the optimism of February 4, the two sides became deadlocked and once again the NTU leadership was arrested for contempt of court. As it had the previous year, the Newark strike gained heightened national prominence in mid-February when AFT President David Selden (who had served a 42-day jail sentence for violating the injunction in 1970) and Vice-President Albert Shanker (who still carried a good bit of baggage for his role in supporting union rights at the expense of local control in the Ocean-Hill Brownsville controversy in 1968) came to town to show solidarity with the teachers.<sup>69</sup>

On February 24, Superior Court Judge Samuel Allcorn imposed a fine of \$50,000 plus \$7,500 for each day that the NTU remained on strike. The next day, Judge Allcorn sentenced President Graves and Vice-Presidents Nicholas and Fiorito to six-month prison terms for their violation of the injunction, calling their actions “strikes at the root of the democratic system” as he gave them the maximum sentence if they refused to order the teachers back to work. The three refused; Graves, in speaking to the union membership outlined her reasons as follows: “I stand before you, a black woman, strongly committed

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<sup>68</sup> Braun, “Teacher Talks: Indirect Openers,” *S-L*, Feb. 4, 1971.

<sup>69</sup> Robert M. Herbert and Robert J. Braun, “NTU Strike Shows Sign of a Break,” *S-L*, Feb. 18, 1971.

to a cause which will bring about unity among black and white workers...a cause that will lift the yoke of oppression from around the necks of the poor, both black and white.”<sup>70</sup> Graves and the other two union leaders would eventually serve about a month-and-half in jail; Graves spent much of the last month on a hunger strike.

Local city leadership was also split in two—almost exclusively along racial lines—over the strike. School board President Jacob very publicly feuded with white City Council President Louis Turco, an Italian-American who supported the strikers, a majority of whom were either Italian-American or Jewish. At a Board of Education meeting on March 1, Jacob publicly accused Turco of “talking out of both sides of his mouth” while Turco accused Jacob of union busting. In a speech to PTA groups the next night, Turco then called for Jacob, who was “more interested in a fantastic struggle for power” than the Newark school children, to resign as school board president.<sup>71</sup> The extreme nature of the political posturing contributed to a local and national narrative that the local government itself was fundamentally dysfunctional.

On March 25, as 200 black Newark school students staged a sit-in at the motel where representatives from the union and the Board met, the strike officially reached its 36<sup>th</sup> day, becoming the longest teacher strike in a major US city.<sup>72</sup> A week later, in a

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<sup>70</sup> Braun, “NTU Chiefs Silent on Moves,” *S-L*, Feb. 26, 1971; Braun, “Union Leaders Refuse to Order Teachers Back,” *S-L*, Mar. 1, 1971.

<sup>71</sup> Roger Witherspoon, “Jacob Criticizes Turco for Supporting Teachers,” *S-L*, Mar. 2, 1971; “Turco Demands Resignations of Jacob, Saunders,” *S-L*, Mar. 3, 1971.

<sup>72</sup> Braun, “NTU Offer Gives Impetus to Talks,” *S-L*, Mar. 25, 1971. According to Braun, the strike was also the second-longest strike anywhere in the country, second only to a twelve-week strike in East St. Louis in 1970.

desperate act, the school board then suspended 347 teachers without pay for striking. On April 1, the Board stopped paying the health-insurance premiums of striking teachers.<sup>73</sup>

By April 6, the school board leaders believed they had reached an agreement, as it appeared that five of nine board members would accede to a mediator's decision that had already been accepted by the union. Ominously, however, the school board could not vote on the proposal because of a conflict among the 1000 people crammed into City Hall to watch the proceedings. One reporter characterized the meeting as "Shea Stadium just before the first inning, with the crowds shouting, screaming, and saluting with fists in the air." School board members were escorted to their seats by city policeman while whites and blacks shouted "racial slurs" at each other as different members of the public attempted to speak before the Board. One black commentator asserted that board members should vote against the contract because "we would not like the 347 teachers to return to school." The meeting was adjourned when fistfights broke out between white and black Newarkers.<sup>74</sup>

When a vote was held the next night, the Board, voting exclusively along racial lines, voted the contract down 5-4, as the lone black member to informally agree changed his vote at the last minute. President Jacob cast the deciding vote, referencing Martin Luther King's March on Washington Speech of 1963: "if this is to be the year of attrition, let it be....Free at last. Free at last. I vote no."<sup>75</sup> Thus, the strike dragged on for another week, as Amiri Baraka called for the resignation of the police commissioner, charging

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Q. Finley, "Newark Board Suspends 347 Teachers," *S-L*, Mar. 31, 1971; Randy Young, "Striking Teachers Lose Medical Benefits," *S-L*, Apr. 2, 1971.

<sup>74</sup> Lawrence H. Hall, "Blacks, Whites Polarized at Board Meeting," *S-L*, Apr. 7, 1971.

<sup>75</sup> "Finley, "Board Members Reflect on Their Crucial Balloting," *S-L*, Apr. 8, 1971.

him with police brutality in protecting striking teachers, and 500 white parents and their children marched on the Board of Education offices urging them to stop listening to Baraka.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, both sides agreed to Mayor Gibson's "appeal to reason" compromise proposal on April 18, ending the strike of over eleven weeks. In return for agreeing to some non-professional activities, the union maintained binding arbitration. Relief, rather than elation, was the reaction of both sides, as neither was quick to assert that they had won the strike. Graves, just out of prison, perhaps best summed up the meaning of the strike when she told a group of teachers that "surely no other teachers' strike has been as ugly and as bitter as what we have gone through in the last two years, and this one in particular."<sup>77</sup>

Though much of the local discourse of the strike in Newark devolved into a conflict centering—at least discursively—about race rather than unions, some discussion did emerge that centered on the conflict as a labor conflict. Several interlocutors stressed the liberal faith that the state could help to solve the impasse. An editorial in the *Newark Star-Ledger* on February 24, 1971, for example, argued that New Jersey's Public Employee Relations Commission (established in the state's no-strike public employee bargaining law in 1968) could help institute "genuine collective bargaining" in the place

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Q. Finley and James Amanna, "Parents, Teens Protest at City Hall," *S-L*, Apr. 11, 1971.

<sup>77</sup> Finley and Nancy Jaffer, "Board, Teachers OK Pact" and Jaffer, "End of Strike Greeted with Relief and Regret," *S-L*, Apr. 19, 1971.

of the “woebegone version” that left both sides squabbling in the first three weeks of the strike.<sup>78</sup> Two weeks later, the same editorial page put the stakes in more stark terms:

Unless there is genuine collective bargaining, devoid of personal recrimination and mutual distrust, it will be virtually impossible to settle this dispute on a basis that will leave no lasting breaches and scars. Historically, the teachers and the school board should be firm allies in assuring quality education. It is a collaboration that has been disturbingly missing from the educational forum in Newark and other large cities in recent years.<sup>79</sup>

It is notable that, just as had major news outlets in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh strikes, the editor did not condemn the teachers or the board for their goals, but rather condemned both sides for failing to use bargaining to solve their problems. Indeed, according to this logic, the union had a legitimate right to bargain, and the state could have and should have helped to solve the problem.

An editorial from Franklin Gregory, during the first week of the 1971 strike, even argued that the state could go further in helping to resolve the conflict. New Jersey’s existing policy on public sector strikes, argued the piece’s author, was ineffective because it had not gone far enough to spell out the appropriate procedures during a teacher strike. He held up the Pennsylvania Public Employee law as a potentially effective remedy. Stopping short of advocating the right to strike, Gregory pointed to the law’s requirement of mediation and fact-finding as well as the law’s injunction process to stop a strike. He argued that while “one may not agree with this approach” the law “spelled out the rules” and “broke new ground.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> “A Shameful Exhibition,” *S-L*, Feb. 24, 1971.

<sup>79</sup> “Hopeless Impasse,” *ibid.*, Mar. 8, 1971.

<sup>80</sup> Franklin Gregory, “PERC Has a Hard Time Doing its Job,” *S-L*, Feb. 7, 1971.

Nevertheless, the local discourse on the strike differed radically from that of the strikes in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia described above in that the key point of conflict centered on a white community which supported the union's effort to wrest more spending for salaries from the board and a black community who opposed the teachers in the name of local control. By the end of the second strike in 1971, local opposition leader Amiri Baraka framed the strike as one between "the Black community and the white suburban teachers' union, over who will control the school system." His thinking—and the thinking of much of CFUN that helped to keep schools open during the strike—had shifted from the beginning of the 1970 strike, when he had seen the possibility of union and community working together to improve the schools: "Ideally, if who taught your children lived in the same space as you did, and shared not only that space but the same values, then as long as there was a healthy interchange between parent and teacher and student, and the political needs of the community in question, then all would be well. But the majority of NewArk's teachers share neither space nor values with the black community of NewArk, plus the fact that they are 75 percent white."<sup>81</sup> Even labor advocates like civil rights and union activist Bayard Rustin, who spoke in support of the teachers during the strike's second month, put the stakes of the strike in

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<sup>81</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, "White Suburban Teachers vs. Black Newark," in Committee for Unified NewArk newsletter. Newsletter has the handwritten date of 7-17-71, but this is possibly the date at which it was received or sent to the AFT headquarters. Because it references the strike settlement, however, the newsletter was published and distributed between the end of April and mid-July 1971. *American Federation of Teachers Collection*, "Office of the President Records," Box 16, *Reuther Library*, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. An unidentified African-American woman at the April 8 Newark school board meeting was shown on that night's ABC News broadcast as using the same language as Baraka, thus highlighting that this was not solely his opinion. Specifically, she asked the Board to reject the contract, telling them that "you should be concerned with black children, not people who live in the suburbs who are supposedly teaching my children." "Newark, New Jersey: Teacher Strikes," *ABC Evening News*, ABC (New York City: ABC, Apr. 8, 1971), *Television News Archive*, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

racial terms, lambasting the black members of the school board for “acting out the tragedy of former slaves acting like slave masters.”<sup>82</sup>

When we look at the national news coverage of the event, however, it contributed to the growing sense of crisis around teacher strikes in two very important ways. First, the Newark strike showed just how contentious a strike could become, and second, it showed that in a general sense, a teacher strike—especially one that lasted as long as that of Newark did—was never just about salaries but in very raw terms a contest for the interpretation of cultural values such as race, gender, and the role of the family.

As historian Natasha Zaretsky has shown, the 1970s were a time in which fear of national decline and cultural listlessness were tied to threats to the American family.<sup>83</sup> A feature in the January, 1971 issue of *Redbook* showed that teacher strikes represented another arena in which turmoil threatened conventional gender roles and the ideology of the American family. The piece featured Betty Rufalo, a white mother of two who had been one of the some 200 teachers who had been arrested in the 1970 strike. Rather than appeal her sentence as had most of the teachers, Rufalo had chosen to serve a 32-day sentence in the Essex County Penitentiary to make a political statement. The author of the article, Dorothy Gallagher, argued that Rufalo’s imprisonment showed the slippage between the productive citizen and the criminal, as by the early 1970s social relationships had been turned upside down:

There was a time when we knew without thinking about it who our criminals were. They were murderers, rapists, thieves, and we were certain that their acts, whether or not they were rooted

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<sup>82</sup> Braun, “School Strike Settlement Hangs on a Few Points,” *S-L*, Mar. 22, 1971.

<sup>83</sup> Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2007).

in the soil of our society, could not be tolerated. It is not easy to have that kind of certainty about many people who are called criminals today: the draft resister who refuses to fight in what he considers an unjust cause, the civil rights advocate who challenges a segregationist law...Have they too committed crimes against the people?

It is also significant that Gallagher described how the tempest of the strike had violated notions of female propriety. The piece begins by defining Rufalo as a “wife, mother, elementary school teacher,” and then launches into Rufalo’s account of her prison ordeal, which begins with her stripping “all of my clothing except my panties and bra.” It is telling that Gallagher defines Rufalo first as a wife and mother and only third as a teacher, which makes the violation of her brought on by imprisonment that much more galling to the reader. The feature also quoted Rufalo as “fighting...to have some tenderness” for her children on the outside, as most of the women in prison had lost their ability to care for their children: “‘The other girls,’ [Rufalo] says, ‘got letters that their children were in the hospital and they didn’t shed a tear; they’re in worse hell than everyone else and knew they had to take care of themselves first.’” Thus teacher strikes like that in Newark in 1970 were about much more than salaries and class sizes, challenging the very ability of mothers to raise their children and threatening the stability of American values.<sup>84</sup>

The story that the national television audience would see also showed how a teacher strike like that of Newark in 1971 could tear a community apart. This was largely due to the nature of national television news: while the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia

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<sup>84</sup> Dorothy Gallagher, “The Teacher Who Chose to Go to Jail,” *Redbook*, Jan. 1971, 58-59, 160-164.

strikes had garnered brief mentions on the evening news, it was not until the 1971 Newark strike resulted in violent confrontations with highly charged rhetoric that national news outlets featured the story. On the February 11, 1971, *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite called the strike “bitter” before introducing Robert Schakne’s report from Newark. Schakne first highlighted the intense racial rhetoric, showing Turco explicitly blaming “black nationalists” for trying to break the union and reporting on the “firebombing” of the NTU headquarters. Schakne then, in a barely-veiled editorial comment, criticized Mayor Gibson, offering that “some say he listens too much to LeRoi Jones.”<sup>85</sup> Lost in this report, which lasted almost a full five minutes, was a discussion of why exactly teachers were striking and why the school board would not agree to a contract. The major lesson, then, that viewers were likely to have taken from the report was the spectacle of the racial struggle that resulted from the strike.

On April 1, NBC News anchor John Chancellor placed the Newark strike in the context of “teacher strikes all across the country today” (In addition to strikes in Pennsylvania and Arizona, Chancellor pointed out, a strike in San Francisco had “paralyzed the school system”). The brief report showed footage of teachers on the picket lines being arrested, and one striking teacher exclaimed, “if the [sheriff’s] deputies want to serve these warrants, bring the national guard!”<sup>86</sup> A week later, Ron Milligan’s report for ABC News showed images of idled black schoolchildren who had been given an “imposed vacation” by striking teachers. The report then cut to an image of a white striker with a bandaged head while Milligan’s voice-over charged that “thugs beat up a

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<sup>85</sup> “Newark—Teacher Strike.” *CBS Evening News*, CBS (New York City: CBS, Feb. 11, 1971), *TNA*.

<sup>86</sup> “Teachers Strikes.” *NBC Evening News*, NBC (New York City: NBC, Apr. 1, 1971), *TNA*.

group of teachers outside their headquarters last night.” It then showed cheering African-Americans at the Board of Education meeting in which the board voted down the contract and showed President Jacob referencing King’s “free at last” reference in the March on Washington speech while casting the fifth and deciding vote against the contract. On April 16, Milligan’s next report asserted that the failure to agree to a contract had “virtually torn the city in half.”<sup>87</sup> What was actually in that contract would have been anyone’s guess who had been watching either news broadcast unless they had also had access to a Newark area newspaper.

Although the strike would end just days after Milligan’s April 16 report, a Newark strike—this time the 1970 version—was again in the national spotlight at the end of 1971. All of those NTU teachers who—unlike Betty Ruffalo—had appealed their jail sentences for violating the 1970 injunction were finally due to serve them. Most had chosen, as a symbolic gesture, to serve their sentences over Christmas vacation rather than deprive their students of education days, and NBC’s Jim Collis was on hand to report on the spectacle of 128 school teachers beginning nine-day prison terms on Christmas Eve.

The reportage was sympathetic to the teachers, and in a similar way to the *Redbook* article on Ruffalo, it clearly suggested that the strike, in conjunction with the actions of local authorities, was a site for disrupting the American family. Collis’s voice, layered over images of hugging family members, stressed that “this was a mixture of bright, earnest young men and women and gentle-looking people old enough to be

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<sup>87</sup> “Newark, NJ: Teacher Strikes.” *ABC Evening News*, ABC (New York City: ABC, Apr. 8, 1971), *TNA*; “Strikes: Newark, NJ,” *ABC Evening News*, ABC (New York City: ABC, Apr. 16, 1971), *TNA*.

grandparents.” An image showed a white father holding a baby, offering that he felt “kind of crummy” about not seeing his child for the holiday. A black mother indicated that “I have a child who’s going to be very lonely without me this Christmas.” Collis’ follow-up story on December 31, as the teachers emerged from jail, showing images of reuniting families and one of those “gentle-looking grandparents” remarking on how “wonderful” was the fresh air, also highlighted the peril that still remained, as many of the teachers “still face[d] sentences from the 1971 strike.”<sup>88</sup>

This last statement, in addition to underscoring the ways that teacher strikes were disrupting the American family and American values more generally, also showed that, in its casual reference to the 1971 Newark strike, the reporter assumed the viewer’s familiarity with that tumultuous strike. While by the end of 1971, in mainstream political discourse, it was still possible to defend the right of teachers to collectively bargain and the important role of the state in sorting out disagreements between public sector workers and local administrations, the teacher strike had indeed emerged as an important battleground for the debate over these larger political and cultural assumptions that had seemed much more secure in 1968.

## **Conclusion**

In 1972, Robert Braun, a reporter for the largest newspaper in New Jersey, *The Newark Star-Ledger*, published a book entitled *Teachers and Power: The Story of the American*

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<sup>88</sup> “Schoolteachers/Jail.” *NBC Evening News*, NBC (New York City: NBC, Dec. 23, 1971), *TNA*; “Teachers’ Jail Release.” *NBC Evening News*, NBC (New York City: NBC, Dec. 31, 1971), *TNA*.

*Federation of Teachers*. If the title sounds as though it might be a sympathetic portrait of the AFT's rise to power, the book was nothing of the sort. Braun had been the beat reporter who wrote many of the *Star-Ledger's* stories about the 1970 and 1971 strikes. Braun's reportage of neither strike seemed to indicate an anti-union position. The most critical articles were analytical pieces that essentially attempted to show that the students were the real "losers" in the strike. While he criticized, for example, the union leadership for viewing a "traditional trade union contract...with more sanctity than the right of a child to come out of poverty through education" he equally criticized the Board of Education for "frightening teachers into a willingness to strike."<sup>89</sup>

Whether Braun had already had his mind made up about teacher unions by 1970 or if it changed as a result of the 1970 strike is unclear since his articles do not offer much of a clue. What is evident, however, is that by the end of the 1970 strike, his view of teacher unions—particularly the AFT and its affiliates—was decidedly hostile. The 1970 strike, in fact, forms the central evidence of the excessive power of teacher unions that he advances in the exposé.

Braun's book, however, showed none of the anti-government animus that would place attacks on teacher unions within the context of a more general attack on the public school system by free-market conservatives later in the decade.<sup>90</sup> *Teachers and Power* actually framed its major assault on the AFT within the tradition of Progressive-era muckraking journalism. Braun assumed, as did many New Deal liberal policymakers,

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<sup>89</sup> Braun, "Whoever Wins the Bitter Power Struggle over Newark Schools...the Children Lose," *S-L*, Mar. 28, 1971. See also, Braun, "Disastrous Impact on Pupils: School Strike Traumatic," *S-L*, Mar. 7, 1971.

<sup>90</sup> Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose* series, aired on PBS in 1980, is an example of this further reaching attack, which would later be picked up in the Reagan Administration. An entire episode of the ten-part series is devoted to ending "government schools" in favor of privately-run schools.

that a “public” interest existed which was exalted above all else. The problem, and the reason teacher unions were to be feared, was that America’s “institutions, the public ones, always have been the almost willing victims of vested interests. The schools are no exception.” The AFT leaders, at both the national and local levels, runs the central contention of the book, cared only about gaining more power for themselves, thus abrogating their duties as “transmitters of knowledge and all that is best in American culture.”<sup>91</sup>

It seems clear that, to Braun, there was nothing inherently negative about labor unions. He chronicled the early history of teacher unions sympathetically, tying their poor conditions in the first half of the century to the legitimacy of the union effort. He even dealt with AFT President David Selden sympathetically, grounding his militancy in his first classroom teaching assignment, a Detroit classroom that overlooked Ford’s River Rouge plant in the early days of the attempts by the UAW to unionize the auto company. Nonetheless, Selden had been corrupted once he gained access to power, and by the time of the 1970 strike, only cared about his own position as head of the union and its “goals of controlling the profession and the schools it is paid to serve.”<sup>92</sup> The strike itself Braun chalked up to an attempt by the AFT to cynically expand its power over as many locals as possible; the Newark rank-and-file, for their part, were simply dupes: “it is something of a commentary on the education of teachers that they are so easily swayed and so reluctant to investigate the truth; the knowledge of that tendency has always been a powerful

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<sup>91</sup> Braun, *Teachers and Power: The Story of the American Federation of Teachers* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1972), 11, 16.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 1 and 2; quotation from p. 77.

weapon in the A.F.T. arsenal.”<sup>93</sup> In summarizing the phenomenon of teacher strikes, then, Braun’s book highlighted the germ of a growing idea, that “the union operates the schools without any genuine responsibility to anyone, certainly not the public.” He argued that the “teachers’ union....may very well take away the last chance that the people of this nation have for a truly free and public school system.”<sup>94</sup>

Braun’s book shows that, first, while conservatives had attacked the labor movement ever since the institution of federal support for unions in the 1930s, the tactics of public sector militants in the 1960s and 70s—especially teachers—could turn many liberals, like Braun, against the labor movement because they were seen as violating the public interest. Second, the book underscores that the discrediting of the labor movement in the 1970s was an effort that came from many different directions. While politicians like Governor Shafer worried about the ramifications of allowing teachers to strike and local activists like Dorothy Ravich worried about the poor example striking teachers in Philadelphia set for the children, the media did not simply reflect these concerns. Braun’s book, informed by his reporting on the subject, also helped to move the debate ideologically in the same way that national television news coverage framing of the strikes emphasized the sensational aspects of the Newark strike over the major issues of the contract dispute.

This chapter has made evident that teacher strikes had become, by the end of 1971, highly public arenas of debate over the political role of labor unions and the state, gender and racial hierarchies, and the very narrative Americans told about economic

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Ch. 6; quotation from p. 191.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 260, 276.

success. Though optimism that rational state intervention could solve the social and economic conflicts represented by contentious teacher strikes still existed, divisive strikes in New Jersey and Pennsylvania led many politicians (both Democrat and Republican), commentators in the media, and even citizens who were very likely to be part of the Democratic coalition to nonetheless question the efficacy of the state and, to an extent, the legitimacy of labor unions. Further, the stakes in these discussions were about more than just policy; the examples above show that teacher strikes also served as arenas in which the very cultural fabric of American society seemed up for debate. In the late 1960 and the early 70s, as crisis after crisis unfolded, images of striking teachers indicated that even schools—perhaps the last bastion of the what many considered the American values of adherence to “law and order” and hard work—were not safe from the fear that the United States was culturally degenerating. If few people yet blamed teachers—or labor unions—for this development, the seeds had nonetheless been sown.



## **Chapter 2: Letters to the Essex County Penitentiary: David Selden and the Fracturing of America**

On March 12, 1970, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President David Selden began serving a 60-day prison sentence for violating an injunction forbidding teachers in Newark from striking. Selden was not the only one arrested for violating the Essex County injunction. Indeed, the local Newark Teachers Union (NTU) leadership was also imprisoned for various prison terms ranging from two to three months, and almost 200 teachers who had served on the picket lines also faced prison sentences.<sup>1</sup> Selden, however, was only the third President of a national union during the era of modern labor relations—along with Eugene Debs of the National Railway Union and Mike Quill of the Transportation Workers Union—to be imprisoned for violating an anti-strike injunction.

Rather than appeal his sentence, Selden chose to serve the prison term to make a statement about the issue of teacher strikes. The AFT used his imprisonment to highlight the injustice of laws in most states that, like New Jersey, did not allow teachers the right to strike and instead enforced legal penalties for those teachers who did. The public relations strategy focused on bringing attention to Selden's imprisonment during the jail-term followed by a series of "bread-and-water" receptions after his release in various states in the Mid-west and Northeast in which anti-injunction legislation seemed politically feasible. As part of the effort, the AFT bought full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Los Angeles Times* toward the end of

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these were then under appeal; eventually the appealed sentences would be reduced, but many still served sentences. Over 100 teachers served 10-day prison sentences over their holiday break in December 1971, for example.

Selden's term. Beyond simply informing "the public" about Selden's plight, the ads concluded by providing his cell number in the Essex County Penitentiary and imploring readers to write to Selden in prison. The letters written to Selden rolled in from across the country that April, and aside from giving the AFT President some doubtless interesting reading material while in prison, provide a valuable snapshot to historians of the political and cultural climate of the United States at the very moment when the New Deal coalition was beginning to fall apart.

While historians have begun to tell the big narrative of the decline of the New Deal coalition in the late 1960s and 1970s, the question of why so many white middle- and working-class Americans—the core of the so-called Reagan Democrats—turned against labor unions and the liberal state's ability to solve social and economic problems and, later, to use David Harvey's phrasing, "consented to" neoliberal solutions to a flagging economy still seems uncertain.<sup>2</sup> Even more particularly perplexing is *how* this happened. Where were the particular points at which these New Deal Democrats turned against the idea that labor unions and government forces could and should re-shape the market for the better? And further, if the Democratic party disintegrated as the dominant force in American politics, what were the new avenues through which individuals

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<sup>2</sup> Aside from the Gerstle and Fraser edited volume, see, for example, Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). On consent for neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially Chapter 2.

formulated their political decisions? The letters to Selden speak to the above issues and help to solve a piece of the larger puzzle. Indeed, Selden's action provoked a response from Americans concerned about many different things, most of which were much larger than his arrest in supporting the teachers striking in Newark in 1970: the unionization of white-collar workers, the decline of respect for "law and order," and the government's role in sanctioning labor rights. Moreover, during a time in which loyalty to political party was in serious decline, the re-appropriation of the newspaper advertisement itself by many who viewed it helps us to understand how individual Americans made political choices in the early 1970s.

### **The Newark Strike and Selden: Empty Vessels**

David Selden came of age in Detroit, Michigan, putting himself through college as an automobile worker just before the famous United Auto Workers sit-down strikes in 1936-37. His first teaching job, in "in a K-9 school in a slum area in the shadow of the Ford Rouge plant" galvanized him toward "an exhilarating combination" of socialism, trade unionism, and John Dewey-inspired Progressive education. Elected President of the Dearborn Federation of Teachers just before WWII, he left soon thereafter to serve in the Navy, and after the war taught in New York before becoming a full-time itinerant organizer for the AFT. After settling in New York City, he worked for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—the New York City local—and became a leader of the first system-wide teacher strike in the United States in that city in 1960. After helping the UFT win collective bargaining rights in the 1960s, he helped to extend collective

bargaining efforts in other cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Running for the AFT Presidency as the organization's progressive caucus nominee in 1968, Selden put emphasis on gaining more appropriations for schools—to implement the AFT's experimental More Effective Schools (MES) program, to drastically cut class sizes, and to raise teacher salaries. Elected AFT President in 1968, Selden had almost completed the first of what would be three two-year terms by the time he began serving his prison sentence in 1970.<sup>3</sup>

Recall the Newark strike of 1970 from the previous chapter—a confrontation between the NTU, who wanted substantial salary increases, reduced class sizes, and a substantial implementation of the AFT's MES program, and an African-American community, led by Amiri Baraka's Community for a Unified New-Ark (CFUN) to keep the schools open. Locally, the controversy hinged on the racial politics of the city, as most of the local Italian and Jewish communities supported the striking teachers, while most of the African-Americans did not. Outside of Newark, however, the responses by individuals to Selden's imprisonment are strikingly devoid of direct references to race, and most either supported or criticized the union leader directly. The national discourse around Selden, therefore, focused largely on a composite of many commentators' knowledge about teacher strikes more generally as represented by Selden, not the Newark strike in particular. In fact, with the exception of a few letter-writers from Newark, the city's name is scarcely mentioned by those who wrote to him.

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<sup>3</sup> David Selden, *The Teacher Rebellion* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1985). Quote on p. 4.

The ads placed by the AFT in April 1970 in the *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times* were identical. They began by pointing out how long Selden had been imprisoned for supporting striking Newark teachers. On April 19, 1970, for example, the ad in the *Times* featured the headline “Today, Dave Selden spends his 39<sup>th</sup> Day behind bars” above a statesmanlike photograph of Selden at a lectern behind a microphone. A second smaller headline pointed out that seven teachers faced three month prison sentences while “192 other teachers [had been] sentenced from 10- to 30-days.” The text, laid out much like a news story, appealed directly to the reader, asking “Did you know that David Selden, president of the 200,000-member American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, is serving 60 days in Essex County Penitentiary, Caldwell, New Jersey, for walking the picket line in support of striking Newark teachers?” The text continued to point to teachers in other cities and towns—from New York City to Minot, North Dakota—who had been imprisoned for violating injunctions, all without the benefit of a jury trial.<sup>4</sup>

Then the advertisement attempted to appeal to Americans’ moral sensibilities by asking the reader to

...learn from our teachers. All over the nation they face a cruel dilemma: either abstain from striking and watch as our schools deteriorate and their profession is humiliated, or fight back and face jail terms. They concluded that the cause is so urgent that they would rather go to prison than remain passive. That should warn us that we face a critical new issue in America.

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<sup>4</sup> “Today, Dave Selden spends his 39<sup>th</sup> day behind bars,” advertisement by American Federation of Teachers, Apr. 19, 1970, *New York Times*.

The last section pointed out that in most countries in Western Europe, public sector workers enjoyed the right to strike and asserted that “INJUNCTIONS DO NOT IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS!” Clearly, as activists attempting to fight for anti-injunction legislation, the AFT was trying to alter the way the readers of the ad—the amorphous “public”—thought about the legal right to strike for teachers, in addition to arguing that labor activism was a part of the American tradition. It then concluded by asking readers to “Let Dave Selden hear from you” by writing him in prison.<sup>5</sup>

Selden received hundreds of letters in March and April, 1970. Unsurprisingly, the archive includes letters of support from AFT leaders like Albert Shanker, from local union leaders across the country, and even from unionized educators in Latin America and Europe. Teacher unions in nations such as the Netherlands, Paraguay, Peru, Argentina, Panama, and Bolivia wrote letters of support for Selden and the striking Newark teachers.<sup>6</sup> Individual American teachers wrote to Selden that his example had inspired them. A teacher who identified himself as a National Education Association (NEA) member wrote to Selden that he hoped that those members of the rival organization would “have your courage when the time comes” to fight their own battle to improve local schools. Thirty teachers from a junior high school in Evanston, Illinois signed a letter expressing their “deep gratitude” to Selden in helping to “achieve an educational system that will serve as a model for future generations.” A teacher from Kansas City enclosed money for Selden to buy something to help make the jail time

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Organizations include, for instance Confederacion Argentina de Maestros y Profesores, Sindicato Nacional de Profesores de Educacion Primaria del Peru, Federacion Nacional de Maestros Urbanos de Bolivia, and Federacion de Educadores del Paraguay. See Office of the President Collection—AFT Collection, Office of the President’s Records, Walter Reuther Archive, Wayne State University, Box 12.

easier, calling him a “courageous individual to suffer like this for our cause.” Finally, other teachers actually wrote to the AFT President for help in forming their own union locals. A “third grade teacher in suburbia,” for example, asked Selden what he could do to improve the condition of the schools in Maplewood, New Jersey: “I have been teaching almost ten years and I have a master’s degree, yet I can’t do anything to improve things for students. And believe me, I see some terrible things. I have written to you because you are obviously a man of action. What can be done? Is a union the answer? If so, how do we proceed?”<sup>7</sup>

What really stands out, however, are the sheer numbers of people inspired to write to Selden who had no such direct professional interest in his prison sentence. Of these letters, there are over 100 extant in the archive. Some of these letters support Selden, while others are quite critical. What is immediately apparent, however, is that there was virtually no middle ground—the majority of the letters find the opposite position to be totally unmerited, and many use extreme language to make their point.

Many of those who wrote letters of support to Selden but who were not themselves teachers focused on the injustice of his imprisonment and what they believe it augured for the future of the nation. R.E. Moore, a father from Richmond, Virginia who read the ad in the *New York Times*, was “disgusted and heartsick over something which I had no idea could happen in my own country.” Moore had a twelve-year-old daughter who aspired to be a teacher, but after he had read about the imprisonment of teachers in

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Arnold Durfa, Apr. 21, 1970; Letter from Nichols Junior High School teachers, Mar. 25, 1970; Letter from Laura Pass, Apr. 10, 1970, letter from Tom Cogan, Apr. 19, 1970, . Another teacher, from Harbor Springs, Michigan, also asked Selden for help in creating an AFT affiliate. AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

Newark, he was going to “make [her] sit down and read this article after which her mother and I will begin trying in any way we can to correct this situation...or, I guarantee you, my daughter will not be allowed to persue [sic] a career in teaching which will be the next generation’s loss.” Paula Mather, a student at San Fernando Valley High School offered that “reading about your arrest gave me yet another reason not to be proud of America....Your requests are reasonable and justified. Court injunctions and arrests are not.” Another high school student, in Amherst, Massachusetts, was “really infuriated by the treatment of striking teachers all over our nation.”<sup>8</sup>

Others attacked the actions of the local authorities as unenlightened and placed the teachers’ struggle within a narrative of American progress that had been thwarted. For example, a college student and “future teacher of America” from Brooklyn asked rhetorically “do we follow the absurdities that this country indulges on, or do we strike against its backwardness?” A postal employee lauded Selden’s ideals. Clearly he believed Selden was on the side of progress when he wrote—sadly—that “I write you out of guilt because you are a man of principle and went to jail to prove it. I used to have ideals but now I am old and dead. You are what I thought I was.”<sup>9</sup>

Selden’s detractors believed just as fervently that the union leader’s cause was not only unwarranted but also unjust and pernicious. Many expressed these beliefs through vicious *ad hominen* attacks. James Arbuckle from Marblehead, Massachusetts sent a signed check for “\$0,000.00” made out to Selden, to whom he referred as a “Christmas turkey.” Dave Becker also wrote Selden a check for zero dollars, writing the check out to

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<sup>8</sup> Letter from R.E. Moore, Apr. 23, 1970; letter from Paula Mather, undated; letter from Julie de Sherbinin, Apr. 20, 1970, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from [name unreadable] Apr. 19, 1970; Unsigned letter, Apr. 19, 1970, *ibid*.

“Not one cent, you dope.” Identifying himself only as a member of “Agnew’s Silent Majority,” another critic of the union called Selden a “parasite,” explicitly comparing AFT leadership to the “professional poor and the welfare cadillac group.” Yet another critic called him a “rat” and hoped that Selden would “rot in jail.” Another simply called him a “traitor.” An unsigned scrawl on an index card referred to him as an “old ugly and repressive pig” after expressing that “I hate teachers and I hate you.” Al Eischen called Selden “self-righteous,” while yet another unsigned letter called him a “disgrace to the teaching profession.” Another accused him of “sniveling like a spoiled child” and impugned his masculinity by admonishing him, in serving his sentence, to “please try to act like a man, even if you can’t be one.”<sup>10</sup>

Some of Selden’s critics wrote to tell him that he deserved his prison term and even suggested that he should have been sentenced to a lengthier punishment. M. Emery, from Minneapolis, wrote to tell him that “you are just where you belong and a lot more ought to be in with you.” A history professor from Dayton, Ohio wrote tersely that “I agree with the court that sentenced you to jail. I can only hope that you spend the remainder of your time meditating on your sins and why you deserved punishment.” A woman who read the ad in the April 17 *L.A. Times*, wrote a letter to him on the same day. “I can only say that if the decision had been left up to me,” she penned, “you would be serving a much longer sentence.” A man from Chatham, New Jersey, was also inspired—this time by the *New York Times* ad of April 20—to write immediately to Selden. He offered that “you’re right where you deserve to be and the only problem I see

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<sup>10</sup> Check sent from James Arbuckle, Apr. 18, 1970; Check sent from Dave Becker, Apr. 19, 1970; unsigned, undated defacing of AFT advertisements; unsigned, undated letter; letter from Al Eischen, Apr. 20, 1970, *ibid.*

with it is that your sentence is too short and your publicity too great.” Al Lipschitz was inspired enough by the story to write to Selden from Ashoka, India (or to at least make it seem as if he was—the letter was written on the letterhead of an Ashoka hotel; unfortunately the postmarked envelope is no longer in the archive). Lipschitz told Selden that he was “glad you are enjoying your holiday. It is too bad you don’t have a longer stretch—you should have it.”<sup>11</sup>

Some critics went further, acting as vicarious judge to specify just how much longer his sentence should be. Fred Knolldoff, from an Illinois town about sixty miles from Chicago, argued that Selden’s sentence was “far too lenient.” He specified that Selden should be imprisoned for “at least six months.” Edward Withing offered his congratulations to the judge who sentenced Selden to 60 days but still believed “it should have been 600.” Arthur Young hoped that prison authorities would “lose your records and keep you in jail for at least five years.” An April 20 *Chicago Tribune* advertisement, defaced and sent to Selden, doubled Young’s proposed sentence, hoping that Selden would be kept in jail for ten years.<sup>12</sup>

Rick Perlstein’s work on the Richard Nixon administration of the late 1960s and early 1970s has shown that period to be “the rise...of a nation that had believed itself to be at consensus instead becoming one of incommensurate visions of apocalypse: two loosely defined congeries of Americans, each convinced that should the other triumph, everything decent and true and worth preserving would *end* [italics in original].” In

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from M. Emery, undated; Letter from Martin Arbagi, Apr. 17, 1970; Letter from Linda [last name illegible], Apr. 17, 1970; letter from Thomas Gregory, Apr. 19, 1970; letter from Al Lipschitz, undated, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Fred Knolldoff, Apr. 20, 1970; letter from Edward Withing, Apr. 15, 1970; letter from Arthur Young, undated; undated, unsigned defacing of *Chicago Tribune* advertisement, Apr. 20, 1970, *ibid.*

Perlstein's formulation, Nixon not only reflected this larger irreconcilability, but also served as its *provocateur par excellence*.<sup>13</sup>

If anything is clear from the letters to David Selden, it is that much of the vitriol and contentiousness that became so prominent in the political discourse in the late 1960s and 70s was not exclusively a top-down phenomenon. Certainly national figures—right and left—from George Wallace to Abby Hoffman shaped the political rhetoric of the era, and references to the “silent majority” in the letters prove that ideas flowed from political elites to ordinary Americans. But the fact that so many individuals—most of whom did not reference the closing of individual schools, inflated teacher salaries, or sky-rocketing property taxes—from so many parts of the country responded so quickly and so vehemently shows that this type of discourse also welled up from the very grassroots.

The question, however, is why did Selden's case evoke such a reaction? How could an act of non-violent civil disobedience provoke such intense and opposing responses? It seems apparent that for many of those who wrote to Selden, the AFT President's jail sentence served as an empty vessel of sorts. For many middle- and working-class Americans, the Selden ads symbolized a host of meanings larger than just a teacher strike—meanings about the labor movement, liberal policy, moral values, and explanations for economic prosperity. It is to these meanings that I turn in the next two sections.

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<sup>13</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 746-47. On Nixon's role, Perlstein asserts that "...this man Nixon was able to be so stubbornly successful in answering Americans' yearning for *quiet*; but that, even in a complex admixture, Nixon also rose by stoking and exploiting anger and resentment, rooted in the anger and resentments at the center of his character."

### **The Selden Letters and the Public Image of Labor Unions**

When David Perry saw the AFT's April 15 ad in *The New York Times*, he drafted a letter to Selden that very day. He typed it on letterhead from Automatic Information Dispatching Systems, Inc.—a computing company based in West Orange, NJ. It is impossible to tell whether Perry owned or merely worked for the company, but in writing the letter on company paper, he was—intentionally or not—staking a claim as a white-collar professional. Writing from a suburb of New York City, we might expect that Perry wrote to Selden to emphasize the disruptions teacher strikes caused to school students or the hikes in property taxes that could result from high teacher salaries. Instead, he began by referencing a recent mass resignation by New York City nurses, who, unsatisfied with their pay, were able to “make their point...in a dignified and professional manner.” Perry did not criticize unions *per se* in the brief letter, but he argued that the Newark teachers, in striking in violation of an injunction, had acted in a more “‘union’ oriented approach” than an “‘educator’ oriented approach.” Though the mass resignation was in reality a strike, Perry was able to make a fine distinction between an organization like the AFT that openly identified its tactics with those of the labor movement and one that did not. The implication was evident: it might be OK for blue-collar workers to form unions and to strike, but for “professionals” this was undignified. Furthermore, the behavior was a problem, as he then pointed out in a post-script, not just because of the indignity of white-collar workers going on the picket line, but also because “when teachers in a town go on strike they are really striking against us, you and me.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from David Perry, Apr. 15, 1970, AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

This type of language further assumed that the very act of striking set teachers, as white-collar professionals, outside the realm of the “public” to which Perry believed he (and a teacher like Selden) belonged.

Perry’s letter also speaks to a larger point. Teachers, as both “professionals” and as public employees, represented a departure from the public face of the labor movement of the postwar era—the blue collar production worker. If it was conventional wisdom that these workers were entitled to union representation, for teachers there was less consensus. As numerous scholars have pointed out, most teachers themselves resisted forming unions well into the 1960s, preferring instead to stay either unaffiliated or within the less combative NEA.<sup>15</sup> By forming unions and engaging in lengthy and contentious strikes like that in Newark in 1970 for which Selden had been imprisoned, the actions of teacher unions pushed the boundaries of who counted as part of the labor movement, and if they did not become *the* public face of labor in the 1970s very much came to take a large part of the spotlight. For this reason, individuals like Perry saw Selden as representing a larger shift in the scope of labor unions, and actions like that of the Newark teachers challenged him to reassess his views of unions. The letters to David Selden in 1970, then, give us an especially rich sense of this broader debate about the place of labor unions in the United States. In writing to the AFT President, critics

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<sup>15</sup> See Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Steve Golin, *The Newark Teacher Strikes: Hope on the Line* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Dennis Gaffney, *Teachers United: The Rise of New York State United Teachers* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

showed how they viewed not only the AFT, but also the legitimacy of all labor unions in the US.

Ralph Curcio was one of the many letter writers inspired by one of the Selden ads to draft a letter that very day. Clearly, the AFT campaign served as a convenient way for Curcio to vent his own growing distaste for labor unions. On April 15, he lectured Selden on the teachers' (and other unions') lack of restraint. He began by sarcastically exclaiming "Too bad!" to Selden's imprisonment. "Injunctions," he argued, "serve a useful purpose in our society—to prevent strikes from dragging out ad infinitum." Connecting them to corruption elsewhere in municipal and state government, Curcio asserted that "teachers as well as other public officials have taken unfair advantage of people in the past by stubbornly demanding the last penny." He concluded by pointing out that "fair compensation for anybody's work, whether teacher, policemen, sewer cleaner, laborer or whatever is certainly reasonable. But piggy-ness and greed have no place in contracts [underlining in original]."<sup>16</sup> This letter's fundamental point—that adequate compensation arises naturally and that public sector workers extort the public—gives us a clue into one of the basic contradictions of the growing frustration with public sector unions in the 1970s. In spite of Curcio's characterization of greedy, striking unions, teachers had only made significant wage increases through the action of militant unions, as it had taken either strikes or at the very least the threat of strikes to receive the "fair compensation" to which he believed all workers were entitled.

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<sup>16</sup> Letter from Ralph Curcio, Apr. 15, 1970, AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

Leon Hartman, from New York City, also criticized the tactics of the union, scolding Selden for “resort[ing] to anarchy to prove your point.” He further connected strikes by teachers and other workers to rising prices for everyone: “Have you considered that as a leader of organized labor you and other labor leaders are nursing the fires of inflation? Every time a union goes on strike, (and they always win), the cost of living goes up for everyone, including the strikers.” The very process of labor negotiations, it seemed, was destroying the country, and Hartman hoped for a different outcome: “When Labor and Management realize they are sending this country to ruin by their disregard of the public interest some sense will be restored.” Meg Jacobs’ work chronicling the relationship between the labor movement and consumerism has shown that opponents of unions used similar language to pass the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Clearly, the rhetoric from Hartman here is part of that tradition, and it shows how it had continued to be a part of the public discussion about unions since the Second World War. Moments of crisis, in both instances, had led many Americans to confront their assumptions about the labor movement. Following the post-World War II strike wave, many Americans (at least temporarily, given Truman’s re-election in 1948 and the Democrats’ regaining control of Congress) believed that the federal government should make it harder for unions to strike; similarly, following the crises represented by teacher strikes in the late 1960s, many Americans like Hartman believed that strikes—particularly by public sector workers—damaged the economy, and thus Selden’s punishment was just.

An advertisement from the *Chicago Tribune*—defaced and mailed to Selden—also blamed unions for inflation but made sure to separate workers from what he (or she) viewed as self-aggrandizing union leaders. Identifying him (or her) self as a “citizen who

has been badly hurt by inflation,” the writer condemned Selden and all labor leaders:

“The unions are all right, but when you and all the other labor union leaders demand and get exorbitant wage increases and plunge our country into an ever expanding inflationary cycle you are guilty of treason. All you finks want is power with no thoughts for the overall benefit of the country. All you labor leaders are rotten [underlining in original].”<sup>17</sup> This kind of language is notable in particular for the stark characterization of labor leaders. It is not a mild rebuke of the tactics of union leaders—none of whom are differentiated—but rather a critique of labor leaders who were, in this person’s eyes, quite literally destroying the nation.

A postcard, sent from a self-identified “teacher” from the Bronx, stated matter-of-factly that “all unions are corrupt....Any teacher who belongs to a union should not be in a classroom.” A defaced ad from the *New York Times* simply argued that “teachers should not belong to a union” and wondered if teachers—stewards for the nation’s youth—could be unionized, who might be next: “Why not unionize ministers, priests, doctors, street ladies, etc. etc.” A postcard signed “Fed up...” and postmarked in San Diego asked why “you union people seem so insistent that you are above the law?” Connecting the AFT to a larger archetype of corrupt unions with shady underworld connections, “Fed up...” went on to ask Selden to “organize the prisoners while you are there, or have you already done that...they need your ‘protection’ also, and I’m sure your gang can use the money..... [ellipses in original].” A “Minnesota mother” accused the AFT teachers of using their position as educators to “push the ideological ideas of your

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<sup>17</sup> Unsigned, undated defacing of AFT advertisement in *Chicago Tribune*, *ibid.* The advertisement is from Apr. 17, 1970.

charges to the far left and disrespect for the American constitution. . . . I think the present idiotic actions of a small part of our youth are the results of the indoctrination of your infamous organization.”<sup>18</sup>

A letter signed by “Just an Ordinary Citizen” from Newark, N.J. bemoaned the fact that teacher unions had used the same tactics as other unions in striking. This letter writer called Selden’s critique of the strike injunction a “false, demagogic statement.” “Just an Ordinary Citizen” expected such behavior from “a Teamsters official or a garbage collectors union—but not from a teacher. . . . By your demands and your actions, you have shown that the teachers’ union is no different than some of the other strong-arm unions.” In separating the interests of union from the rest of the community he admonished Selden not to “try to kid the public. If you tell it like it is—that your union is out to get all it can—just like any other union—you might gain some respect, for the public likes people who are honest, even though they may disagree.” Another unsigned letter took this critique even further: “You, [UFT President and AFT Vice President Albert] Shanker, and the rest of your henchmen are a complete disgrace to this country, and a continuing threat to this country. The only thing that deters me from signing this epistle is the possibility of threats against my family by some of your ‘stool pigeons’. They are probably as unprincipled as you.”<sup>19</sup> Whether seriously afraid of union reprisals or not, this commentator clearly did not differentiate teachers unions from other unions with a proven history of corruption like the Teamsters. Through highly public events

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<sup>18</sup> Unsigned, undated postcard, postmarked Apr. 17, 1970; unsigned defaced advertisement from *New York Times*, Apr. 18, 1970; unsigned, undated letter, postmarked from San Diego, CA, Apr. 18, 1970; letter from “A Minnesota Mother,” Apr. 18, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Undated letter; unsigned letter, Apr. 20, 1970. Ibid.

like the Selden campaign, as the letters indicate, teachers unions had become, for good or ill, a key part of the national cultural picture of labor unions.

Others wrote letters that spoke to a growing sense of helplessness and lack of individual agency. To these commentators, labor unions underscored the helplessness of the individual who did not have protection from an institution. I. Goldberg, who described himself as a “lower middle-class tax-paying citizen,” believed that Selden “got just what [he] deserved—only not for long enough.” Goldberg bemoaned the fact that he had to simply do his job whether he liked it or not, “without recourse to politicians or union protectionists.” Morton Goldman, from Oceanside, New York, believed the “public is being abused by unions whose membership can paralyze a vital public service.” John Amber, from Marengo, Illinois, while sympathizing with Selden’s plight as a prisoner nonetheless argued that “there are other means of achieving desired ends rather than reducing municipalities, states, and the nation to helplessness brought about by striking public workers.”<sup>20</sup> These three letters all focus on the victimization of Americans by public sector unions and imply the haplessness of the state—either at the local or federal level—in protecting those aggrieved by the excesses of its own labor force. As Alice O’Connor has provocatively shown with regard to conservative intellectuals in the 1970s, think-tanks like the Hoover Institution and the American Enterprise Institute were able to successfully make the argument that both corporations and the white working-class suffered similar oppression as victims of the liberal state.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from I. Goldberg, Apr. 20, 1970; letter from Morton Goldman, Apr. 19, 1970; letter from John Amber, Apr. 17, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Alice O’Connor, “Financing the Counter-revolution,” in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 148-168.

These three letters may indicate why this rhetoric was such an easy sell since many Americans believed the predations of unions to be aided by a state unconcerned with such victimization. Teachers unions, one might argue, represented the shock troops of such oppression, as they were the literal embodiment of the liberal state, paid for by the very taxes of their supposed victims.

If most of the above letters to Selden are hostile to labor unions—or at the very least—hostile to labor leaders, a lengthy letter composed by a woman in Los Angeles shows that while many commentators were critical of the labor movement, others believed it was still an important component of American democracy. Ann Gettmann came from a union family. Her father, according to her letter, “was a very big part of helping to form the Teamsters Union back in my hometown, when it was just getting its start.” She wrote to Selden with the memory of growing up in the Great Depression era, and remembered well the “jail, harassment, bribery, violence, and financial stress” of the early union movement: “All this he suffered and we with him as he firmly believed he and his fellow members were working to improve the lives of their fellow men and the generations to come.” Gettmann, then, was not anti-union, and not even against unions for public sector workers, as she went on to tell Selden that “without doubt you have the right to organize and have designated people represent you in opinions, salary matters and even in policy matters.”<sup>22</sup>

Gettmann’s concern, and the reason she wrote a thirteen-page letter to an imprisoned union president after merely reading an advertisement in the *Los Angeles*

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Ann Gettmann, Apr. 17, 1970, AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

*Times*, was with the tactics of the union: “Too often in my life time have I seen the havoc union strikes make of lives of people, therefore I am against them and the people who promote them.” But hers was not a one-sided criticism. She recognized that while teachers were public employees, so were school boards, and as public employees, they had a responsibility to consider the grievances of teachers. She believed that teachers served a vital social role and were not paid enough. Still, she asked that teachers use their organization, instead of striking, either to make the public aware of the problems and rely on parents to put pressure on the local school board or, echoing the superior tactic of “mass resignation” lauded by Perry at the beginning of this section, to refuse to renew their contracts and work elsewhere.

A special concern with regard to teachers was that while Gettmann agreed that “their [sic] should be no need for injunctions forbidding people to continue their objections to their working conditions...now it is a law and the law should be obeyed if we are to have a peaceful nation.” Teachers, justified or not, set poor examples by violating injunctions and their specific position as educators was especially crucial: “We are fast becoming a nation of people who place personal gain and desires ahead of law and order, discipline, integrity, and patriotism.” Gettmann did not just fear moral declension, however; she also feared the specter of a new “depression that will make the one of the 1930’s seem like a party.” Along with the responsibility for setting an example of law and order, teacher unions then had an economic responsibility to help ascertain where school revenues might come from. Gettmann speculated that they “could

gain more friends if they helped to stabilize our economy and provided solutions rather than more problems to be solved.’’<sup>23</sup>

Gettmann’s letter is instructive for several reasons. First, the problem of striking public sector workers was clearly important to her, and she believed that it was simultaneously an economic and a moral problem. Her political viewpoint was not one in which, as many explanations for the implosion of the New Deal order imply, Americans separated cultural values and economic concerns, and chose the former over the latter. It is also significant because she believed labor unions were legitimate players in American politics; her assumptions about their tactics, however, neglected that, without at least the threat of a strike, workers in virtually any field—private or public sector—simply do not have the leverage to affect major change against a more powerful employer.

Public opinion polls are imperfect indicators of what their very name suggests they are. No matter how much pollsters try to find a perfectly representative sample and use neutral phrasing to get at the “public” viewpoint, polls are always open to distortion. Nonetheless, when we trace the public opinion in its broadest strokes, there does seem to be a general pattern that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. When asked by a Gallup poll in 1953, “In general do you approve or disapprove of labor unions?” 75% of those asked approved while only 18% disapproved. In 1965, these numbers had more or less held firm, as 71% of respondents answered in the affirmative while only 19%

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

answered in the negative. By 1973, these numbers had shifted drastically, to 59% and 26% respectively.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, Americans' views of labor unions were changing in the late 1960s and 70s, and it does not seem coincidental that the emergence of public sector militancy—especially by unionized teachers—corresponded with this change. The letters to Selden in this section help us to understand why. Some of those who wrote letters projected their preconceived notions of the minority of labor unions who had engaged in corrupt and illegal practices—like the Teamsters—onto unions like the American Federation of Teachers. This might have seemed logical given that Selden's nonviolent protest had been criminalized, conjuring images of other union leaders like Jimmy Hoffa who had been jailed for far more serious crimes. For others, the teachers' tactics were the issue, as striking necessarily caused disorder and unrest regardless of whether the strikers' cause was just or not.

In either case, it is evident that the cultural place of the labor movement was changing in the late 1960s and 70s. It might be overstating things to say that the striking teacher became *the* public face, so to speak, of labor unions in the United States in the 1970s. Unionized industrial workers, blue collar public sector workers like sanitation workers, firefighters, and policemen, and even athletes in nascent sports unions like the Major League Baseball Players Association figured prominently in the national spotlight. But, as these letters from across the United States suggest, the image of the striking teacher was suddenly a major part of how Americans understood labor unions.

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<sup>24</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "Labor Unions in the Public Mind," in Lipset (ed.) *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1986), 301.

Kim Moody's pioneering work on labor politics in the 1970s focuses on the role of conservative institutions like the Business Roundtable and the National Chamber of Commerce in assaulting and de-legitimizing the labor movement in paving the way for the assaults of the Reagan years.<sup>25</sup> These organizations were unquestioningly important in the success of these attacks. But the letters to Selden show us that the very legitimacy of labor unions was fragile well before the formation of the BR in 1972 and the subsequent political revitalization of groups like the Chamber of Commerce. I certainly do not want to suggest that striking teachers in Newark or anywhere else were somehow responsible for the collapse of the labor-liberal coalition. But strikes by teachers in an already turbulent time served as crisis points that forced many individuals—like the respondents to the Selden ads here—to consider and re-consider their own political positions with regard to public sector unions, which had become an increasingly prominent part of the US labor movement. It was this vulnerability that groups like the BR and the Chamber of Commerce could very well exploit later in the decade.

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<sup>25</sup> Kim Moody. *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso Press, 1988).

### **Teacher Strikes and the Decline of Law and Order**

Mrs. Barbara Mancbach, writing to David Selden on April 14, found the public relations campaign on the part of the AFT to be “truly sad.” She took offense at the notion that Selden had been “railroaded” into a jail cell. He had been imprisoned, she lectured him, because he “willfully disobeyed the law.” While she accepted perhaps that New Jersey law was unjust, the stakes of his actions were higher than the injustice of the injunction: “I too, feel that many laws discriminate against me, both economically and personally. Millions of other Americans feel other laws are unfair to them. If we all disobey these laws we disagree with we will have anarchy.” As her letter continued, Mancbach pointed out to Selden that he and the striking teachers had set a poor example for their students: “You’ve taught them how to disobey the law. Pick up any paper and read what’s happening on college campuses throughout the country. The students have learned well the teachings of their teachers. They are copying your methods to a ‘tee.’” To Mancbach, then, her response was no mere abstract civics lesson. She viewed the actions of teachers as part of a mounting concern that the United States was developing a generation of people without respect for the established legal and moral structure of the nation.<sup>26</sup>

Mancbach was not alone in this fear. Like her, many others presented a very different view of Selden—not as an overreaching labor leader but as an immoral teacher. Just as it had not mattered that Selden had never been connected with any sort of union corruption, so the fact that Selden had not been in a classroom for many years also did

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from Barbara Mancbach, Apr. 14, 1970, AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

not matter; just as some who wrote to Selden viewed him as an empty vessel for their shifting views of labor unions, others like Mancbach saw him, as Americans had for generations, in his role as a teacher as an arbiter of cultural values. If American-ness had meant respect for the rule of law, then Selden symbolized both the decline of that respect and its failure to be transmitted to the next generation.

The 1960s are known in popular culture as a decade in which radicalism of many different stripes—student protests, black power, women’s liberation, and gay rights—proliferated on the national stage, but an equally powerful trend in the decade was the emergence of the counter-radical notion of “law and order.” Opposed to the seeming chaos and disruption brought on by protests—symbolized most famously by the wide-scale beatings and arrests of student activists at the Democratic National Convention in 1968—the political proponents of “law-and-order” had both their national varieties (such as perpetual Presidential candidate George Wallace) and local flavors (such as Philadelphia police chief and later mayor Frank Rizzo). Even Richard Nixon used the idea for political ends. “Law and order” was a key component of his 1968 bid for the Presidency, and implicit in his famous reference to the “Great Silent Majority” in his November 1969 speech was that support for the Vietnam War lay with the bulk of those law-abiding citizens who disapproved of the student movement’s immoral protest tactics.

In this milieu, it is not surprising to find that many of those who wrote to Selden disapproving of the teachers’ tactics attempted to define themselves, in contrast to the teachers, as law-abiding citizens. John McKay, who claimed to speak “for 90 black and white families in New Jersey,” disfigured a *New York Times* advertisement from April 29, 1970. He asserted that “Selden broke the law, & accordingly, should have to pay the

penalty—if we broke the law, we would have to pay.”<sup>27</sup> In pointing out the discrepancy between Selden and the ordinary families in New Jersey with which he identified, McKay pointed to a nation in which law-abiding citizens were under assault from protestors who expected to flout society’s norms.

In another defaced ad from the *Times*, this one unsigned, the writer referred himself a “quiet, law-abiding citizen.” He had “only contempt for [Selden] and this advertisement.” He called it “dishonest,” pointing out that, among other things, “government employees are stopped by law from striking. They may resign get another job but not strike against me and you and John Doe.” Emphasizing the gulf between the “law-abiding” and the criminal, this critic told Selden that “no punishment is too great.”<sup>28</sup> Joseph Hobaica from Walpole, Massachusetts, also defined himself as a law-abiding citizen when he began his letter of April 20: “I obey the law. I expect others to do the same. Anybody who thumbs their nose at a court injunction deserves to go to jail.”<sup>29</sup> An undated letter signed only “Nuts to your type” lashed out at what she perceived to be Selden’s efforts to elide the categories of citizen and criminal: “I resent the fact you state that there is no moral difference between those behind bars and those in street [sic]. You broke a law. I didn’t. So there is a difference.”<sup>30</sup>

When John Miller, who defined himself as a “union member,” defaced the April 17 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, he obliquely criticized the lack of “law and order” in America at that time. He wrote to Selden that “It is really time that the laws are

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<sup>27</sup> Defaced ad from *New York Times*, April 19, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Unsigned defaced advertisement from *New York Times*, Apr. 18, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Joseph Hobaica, Apr. 20, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Unsigned, undated letter. Ibid.

enforced! You and all other teachers know before you sign a contract that you are not supposed to strike. So if you don't like it don't sign the contract and look for another job!" I.E. Davis, from Grosse Pointe, Michigan, lectured Selden with a numerical list of points: His first admitted that "teachers deserve more money," but his next four points expressed approval for Selden's sentence in addition to offering some advice:

- “2. Anyone who breaks the law should be punished.
3. You knowingly broke the law to gain an end objective.
4. You are paying for your convictions.
5. Spend the next contract interval in getting the law amended or changed.”

Finally, he attributed to teachers the same responsibility for the nation's failure of law and order when his final point sardonically told Selden to “enjoy your stay, it should show you whom parents, police, and judges and teachers have failed most [underline in original].”<sup>31</sup>

It is clear from the last statement that Davis hoped rhetorically to link teachers to the growing decline of law and order in the United States. But why did the arrest of a teacher—as opposed to any other striking worker defying an injunction—provoke such a maelstrom of fears about the degeneration of respect for the law? Davis's letter gives us a clue when he refers to those “whom...teachers failed the most.” Quite simply, teachers were blamed, because of their traditional responsibility for instructing children and adolescents not only in reading, math, science, and history, but also in moral values, for the actions of rebellious youth. That most of the protests on college campuses, sit-ins,

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<sup>31</sup> Defaced advertisement of *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 17, 1970; letter from I.E. Davis, Apr. 20, 1970, *ibid*.

and urban riots predated the national phenomenon of teacher strikes was irrelevant.

Teacher strikes, as shown by the letters to Selden, served as surrogates for the fears that the American value of respect for law and order was collapsing.

A defaced *New York Times* ad from April 19 made this fear abundantly clear. The commentator wrote in green marker next to Selden's picture that "teachers and their representatives should be of highest caliber—setting an example to CHILDREN on LAW & ORDER. RIOTS should not be their 'thing.'" Edward Withing from Caldwell, New Jersey, quite explicitly blamed Selden and other striking teachers for the narrative of moral declension. He believed that "it is no wonder our young people riot, burn and destroy with your group showing the way to disobey law and order." Withing further invoked a "wonderful" mythical past, one in which "teachers had pride and principle and the respect of the Community" to contrast against the present in which Selden and his "kind" had "pulled all this down." Jack Sherman, from New York City, agreed. Ignoring the chronology of student radicalism in the United States, he wrote Selden that "one of the reasons for all the violence and disorder that is going on in this world [meaning, the United States] is because our teachers, who are supposed to teach our children to respect and obey the law, instead sets [sic] an example and show our children how to become criminals."<sup>32</sup>

Other commentators framed Selden's civil disobedience as the work of extremists bent on rending the country asunder. Eileen Schroeder, from Pittsburgh, explained just how teachers helped to destroy respect for law order: "What do you think our children

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<sup>32</sup> Unsigned, defaced ad from *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1970; Letter from Edward Withing, Apr. 15, 1970; letter from Jack Sherman, Apr. 20, 1970. Ibid.

will surmise when they go to school one day and see their teachers picketing like insane radicals around the school. If they see their teachers not obeying certain necessary rules then they will say ‘Why should I have respect for the school when the teachers don’t?’” Schroeder admitted, as one would expect from a citizen of a city built on union culture, that “striking...was necessary in the early 1900’s when businesses did have too much power over the person” but she then asked, “don’t you think in this day you could get a peaceful settlement?” In a final lament for the decline of respect for the law, Schroeder commented that “it is a sad day when our children have to see order disintegrate in the form of their teachers who are supposed to prepare them for this society.”<sup>33</sup> Leon Hartman also believed that Selden “set a miserable example for the young people you are supposed to teach” by “resort[ing] to anarchy to prove your point.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Mary Gordon framed Selden’s actions within the context of a larger “teachers’ rebellion,” which she called “as much a criminal act as robbery.” She also charged that the “rebellion of teachers against the laws of the United States has led the way for the chaotic, riotous state of affairs in much of our academic world.”<sup>35</sup>

In an undated and unsigned letter, one person wrote a short message to Selden: “Better that you stay where you are than return to teaching and corrupt the minds of the children. Your greed exceeds your wits. Use the democratic process, not stupid strikes and picketing. People like you ruin what could be a beautiful free society.”<sup>36</sup> Anyone who has ever taught in a classroom at any level wishes he had the clout so many of the

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<sup>33</sup>Letter from Eileen Schroeder, Apr. 22, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Letter from Leon Hartman, Apr. 15, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Letter from Mary Gordon, Apr. 18, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Unsigned, undated letter. Ibid.

commentators like the one above believed teachers in the late 1960s and early 70s had. Just as one teacher cannot radically transform a troubled or uneducated student for the better, so a single teacher cannot single-handedly “corrupt” a child. The note’s assumption—that Selden would go back to teaching and ruin the morals of his students—underscores an even deeper misunderstanding on the part of the person who wrote this letter. Anyone really engaged in the politics of the Newark strike or of public sector unions more generally would have known that Selden, as the head of a powerful national union like the AFT would not be going anywhere near a classroom when he was released from the Essex County Penitentiary. And yet, this commentator was not only compelled to write Selden a letter but to charge him with “ruining” society. In making sense of the letters written to David Selden, then, it is clear that most of them were about everything but Selden’s role in defying an injunction in the Newark strike. In the case of this last letter, it was the disorder and unrest brought on by the tactics of the union—the “stupid strikes”—that symbolized a larger decline in respect for American moral values (in this case, the “democratic process”). Thus it really is not especially important whether this letter was written by a retiree, a union member, a housewife, or a school child; rather, this letter shows that for many Americans in 1970, the crises brought on by teacher strikes symbolized a larger crisis of American-ness.

### **Alienated Individuals, Re-Appropriating Narratives**

Most studies of the conservative “turn” in the 1960s and 70s focus on organized movements. Lisa McGirr, for instance, has shown how grassroots suburbanites in Orange County, California mobilized, largely around anticommunism, in the 1960s to become a political force in the Republican Party. Matthew Lassiter has shown how suburban activists in the metropolitan south worked to create a seemingly race-neutral defense of school segregation that became a template for the rest of the country. Kim Phillips-Fein has also pointed out the emergence of a growing “business consciousness” as corporate conservatives and free-market ideologues formed powerful lobbying groups and think-tanks in the postwar United States—especially in the 1970s.<sup>37</sup> The importance of these studies cannot be overstated. Simply put, without these sorts of forces pushing their way into American politics, the Republican party would never have taken the direction it has in the past 35 years or so—I do not think it a hyperbole to say that in a way that it had not before the 1970s, the party has become the unabashed defender of corporate interests and, contradictorily, the purveyor of both the deregulation of the market and the (re)regulation of “social values”—much less succeed in shifting the political mainstream of the nation far to the right.

It is, however, important to note that most of those Americans who ratified these big changes at the ballot box were not deregulation ideologues or staunch anti-integration activists. They were, like many of those who wrote letters to Selden, only episodically

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<sup>37</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Rise of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

tuned in to the shifting political controversies of the late 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, as Samuel Huntington pointed to as one of the symptoms of “the crisis of democracy” in the 1970s, fewer Americans relied on the apparatus of the political party to make these decisions as they had in the years immediately after World War II.<sup>38</sup> Whether or not, as Huntington argues, this has made democracy more or less tenable is up for debate; what is not debatable, however, is that as reflexive political party voting became much less significant in the decision-making process of many Americans in the quarter century following World War II. Thus, we may ask, what filled the void left by mostly straight party-voting for much of the duration of the New Deal order?

As the anonymous letter above charging the AFT President with ruining “what could be a beautiful free society” indicates, it was the periodic crisis—like a highly contentious strike that saw teachers imprisoned—that forced many Americans to confront big political ideas. For this reason, we have to pay attention to these letters—most of which were written to Selden from outside the confines of an organization—and what they tell us about the way many individuals were making broader political decisions in the early 1970s. In particular, the fact that a sizable minority of those who responded to the Selden advertisement did so by defacing the advertisement and sending it to the AFT President shows us that an important arena for the splintering of the New Deal coalition was the space where individuals encountered and reacted to the mass media.

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). See Chapter 3 on the United States, written exclusively by Huntington, especially pp. 85-86, in which he points out that in 1950 80% of Americans voted cast straight party ballots while in 1970 only 50% did so.

The AFT advertisement published in newspapers in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles in April 1970 resembled a news story. This could have been nothing but intentional on the part of the campaign strategists, as the bulleted information, bolded sub-headings, and vertical columns were meant to reflect the “objectivity” of familiar news reporting. For this reason, many of those who defaced and then sent a copy to Selden felt compelled to refute, point by point, the evidence presented in the “article.” One reader of the *Chicago Tribune* circled the series of questions: “Did you know-- that seven officers of the Newark Teachers Union also received six month sentences? —and that 192 other teachers got 10 to 30 days?—and that not one had a trial by jury?” He then drew a line to an empty space on the ad and answered, “Yes I know it and I think the penalties should be increased. It is about time somebody started to crack down on these law violators.” He then underlined the sentence—toward the end of the ad— “Teachers and public employees deserve the full rights of American citizenship” and answered it by arguing “And they should be held accountable when they violate the law.”<sup>39</sup>

Another individual who defaced the *New York Times* ad wrote “good” in blue pen in the margins next to the ad’s litany of purported abuses against teachers. She approved specifically of Selden’s arrest, the arrests of the other Newark teachers, teachers jailed in North Dakota, and teachers jailed in Illinois. Next to the question asking if she knew that “not one had a trial by jury?” she asked “why should you?” Next to the heading “Learn from teachers,” she asked, “Learn what? You aren’t teaching anything in school.” And finally, crossing out the first two words of the last line and adding a few of her own, she

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<sup>39</sup> Unsigned defacement of *Chicago Tribune* ad, Apr. 14, 1970, AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

changed “INJUNCTIONS DON’T IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS” to “IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS by reducing absenteeism.”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, another who defaced the *Times* advertisement also wrote “good” in the margin next to the query about the jailed Newark teachers. Next to the blurb about 22 teachers jailed in North Dakota, he wrote “HURRAY,” and next to the one about the 64 teachers sentenced in Illinois he wrote “NOT ENOUGH.” When the ad mentioned the extensive fines levied on those teachers who had not been arrested, the commentator remarked at length:

TOUGH. WHAT ABOUT LONG VACATION, SHORT HOURS, SICK LEAVE, PENSIONS, MEDICAL BENEFITS EVEN DENTAL THEY DON’T EVEN HAVE TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES THEY ARE BABIED. IT USED TO BE THAT ONLY WELL-BRED DECENT PEOPLE BECAME TEACHERS—NOW IT’S THE RABBLE—SALARY TIME OFF LITTLE SUPERVISION.<sup>41</sup>

What stands out here in the defacings is the implicit importance given to the advertisement itself. An individual certainly could have simply written a letter on a separate piece of paper, and many of course did so. But those who defaced the ads and sent them to Selden did so because they recognized the key role of the media in shaping political outcomes. Though the AFT ads were not actually news, many of those who saw it understood that its place in a major newspaper and similarity to a news story meant that it would have serious authority in shaping the way the “public” viewed Selden’s imprisonment and the larger crisis of striking teachers. Defacing the ad was a tacit admission of the power of the media as well as a way for these individuals both to think

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<sup>40</sup>Unsigned defacing of *New York Times* advertisement, Apr. 19, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Unsigned defacing of *New York Times* advertisement, Apr. 19, 1970. Ibid.

through the AFT's argument and to attempt to re-shape it in a more politically palatable way.

The act of defacing the advertisements and sending the disfigured version to Selden in prison, then, was a profoundly political act. These actors quite literally took the available material published in the newspaper and altered its very meaning. This is underscored by the defacing of the *New York Times* ad and sent to Selden by John McKay. McKay essentially wrote two messages: the first was addressed to "Mr. Selden" and lectured that he "should be ashamed of himself for defying the law and the courts and the ethics of your profession." The second, and more prominently placed message, however, only addressed Selden in the third person, suggesting that McKay was vicariously re-forming and re-publishing the intent of the ad: "Selden broke the law & accordingly should have to pay the penalty.... Teachers should uphold—not break, our laws...."<sup>42</sup>

Others who defaced them remade different meanings out of the AFT ads. One commentator scrawled directly over his picture with giant blue writing—in the process rendering Selden indistinguishable—with the lines "YOU GOT WHAT YOU DESERVED—CONGRATULATIONS FINALLY JUSTICE!" Here, she re-shaped the ad's narrative from one in which Selden was a political prisoner fighting for justice to one in which the only injustice perpetrated was that Selden had escaped punishment for so long (hence the use of the term "FINALLY" before "JUSTICE").<sup>43</sup> Re-appropriating an ad in the *Chicago Tribune*, another commentator also viewed the AFT President's

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<sup>42</sup> Defaced ad from *New York Times*, April 19, 1970. Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Defaced *New York Times* ad, Apr. 19, 1970. Ibid.

imprisonment as jubilation. He wrote next to Selden's picture: "CONGRATULATIONS: HOPE YOU SPEND ANOTHER 36 DAYS THERE. WE'RE SICK OF PROTEST DISSENTERS, RIOTS & ALL OTHER LEFT WING ACTIVITIES."<sup>44</sup>

Others re-wrote the meaning of the ad into a defense of what it meant to be American, a definition that did not include labor unions. The original ad had pointed out that "Great Britain, France, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Denmark—these are all modern nations where governments own or operate important sectors to the economy employing millions of people. State employees, like all others, occasionally stop work to demand improved conditions.... The right to strike is taken as a matter of course; the disputes end with agreement." Several commentators offered Selden different views of what it meant to be a "modern nation." One, in reference to the above comparison of the American public sector laws and those of European countries wrote Selden (hence unions) outside of the narrative of the nation when he wrote in the margin, "Why don't you go there? You love alien systems and you don't belong in this country except in jail." Another quite literally effaced the ad's message when he wrote over the original quote—in the process rendering it unreadable: "Unions are the ruination of this country. Why don't you go to those countries you love so much!"<sup>45</sup>

Another defaced ad re-wrote Selden into a larger narrative of union corruption. It expressed a sense of sarcastic jubilation that Selden was in prison and suggested how he might make full use of his time in prison: "Dear Dave—Congratulations, Dave. Have

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<sup>44</sup> Defaced *Chicago Tribune* ad, Apr. 16, 1970. Ibid. This person actually signed his/her name, but it is unfortunately illegible.

<sup>45</sup> Defaced *Chicago Tribune* ad, Apr. 14, 1970; defaced, undated *Chicago Tribune* ad (the ad was clipped by the defacer, so I cannot ascertain the date). Ibid.

fun. Be Happy, Dave. To help pass the time you might initiate a by mail chess game with that other votary of the public weal, Jimmy Hoffa! He was wronged too.”<sup>46</sup>

Though Selden had quite obviously been imprisoned for a very different reason than Hoffa, this commentator also re-fashioned the narrative to make sense of it. At the end of the 1960s—a time of increasing pessimism about the ability of social protest movements to create a more democratic society—Selden’s act of civil disobedience was here lumped in with the fraud and bribery convictions of the imprisoned Teamsters President.

By the beginning of the 1970s, inflation had begun to corrode the buying power of the wages of the working- and middle-classes, urban riots and social protests abounded, and, especially by the end of the decade, one of the seemingly ultimate bastions of stability—the school system—was perceived to be under assault from federal attempts to enforce racial integration as well as striking teachers. Some of those disenchanted by these developments organized, it is true, finding political outlets in such disparate places as Parent-Teacher Associations, Homeowners Associations, and Presidential campaigns of right-wing populists like George Wallace. But how do we make sense, as historians, of the mass of disenchanted voters who were disaffected with labor unions and liberalism in the 1960s and 70s? The defaced advertisements sent to Selden in April 1970 provide a snapshot of the ways in which these people were making sense of their world. The ways in which they re-appropriated and refigured the meaning of Selden’s imprisonment for violating an injunction in Newark indicate not only a declining faith in the ability of the liberal state to guarantee economic and social order,

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<sup>46</sup> Defaced *New York Times* ad, Apr. 18, 1970. Ibid.

but also the way these actors interacted with the media to shape the explanation for the nation's turmoil.

If, as postmodern scholars have argued, the postwar period (and especially the 1970s) represented the collapse of the “meta-narratives” driving the worldviews of “modern” peoples, then it stands to reason that that the archetypal “modern” purveyor of information—the newspaper—would lose its monopoly as the sole arbiter of what momentous events meant. Jean-Francois Lyotard describes postmodern communication as a series of “language games” in which interlocutors engage in discrete contests to push ideas in a desired direction.<sup>47</sup> The act of re-figuring the meaning of the Selden ad was perhaps a proto-acknowledgement by the defacers of the importance of the media, in an increasingly postmodern world, in controlling the parameters of the “language games” that showed other Americans what such crises “meant.”

Further, it may be that by lashing out at authorities—Selden both as the head of a prominent union bureaucracy *and* as a teacher, the newspaper editor as the gatekeeper of information—that many Americans were attempting to slay the symbolic “father” whose stultifying limits were responsible for the anxiety of the individual in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Sigmund Freud has argued with regard to the role of teachers, “it is indeed one of the most important social tasks of education to restrain, confine, and subject to individual control (itself identical with the demands of society) the sexual instinct when it breaks forth in the form of the reproductive function.” Under Jacques Lacan’s formulation, the “sexual instinct” discussed by Freud is really not a biological

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv, 14.

urge so much as it is a way to characterize desire of “the Other.” Thus, teachers, union leaders, newspaper editors—all involved in some way in “educating” Americans—could perhaps be seen as helping to repress the urges necessary for Americans to truly be free (certainly the commentator above who referred to Selden as an “ugly, old, and repressive pig” lends credence to this view). Moreover, transgressing the messages of teachers and the media by co-opting the advertisements serves—in Lacan’s terminology—as an attempt to reach the ultimate pleasure of *jouissance*. I do not want to overstate things here, but it is worth pointing out that the new free market conservatism emerging in the 1970s, taking center stage under Reagan, and persisting through the recent Tea Party movement revolved around a similar idea: namely that repressive bureaucracies—from the federal government to labor unions to the so-called “mainstream media”—need to be shackled in order to unleash the ingenuity of the risk-taking entrepreneur.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sigmund Freud, *An Introduction to Psycho-analysis: A Course of Twenty-eight Lectures Delivered at the University of Vienna* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1935). Quotation is on p. 273; Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

## Conclusion

“Tough shit Dave.”<sup>49</sup> An anonymous message scrawled on the AFT newspaper ad and sent back to Selden signified that the sender, in spite of the informal way he addressed him, had little sympathy for the union president’s incarceration. But beyond the simple message, with this pithy rejoinder, this anonymous defacer also summed up the direction of the country. Though I could do so, I am not referring to the hard times ahead. The social and economic turmoil of the 1970s were only just beginning; the real “tough shit” would be the “stagflation” brought on by Vietnam War spending and the international oil crisis in addition to the declining competitiveness of American heavy industry and the loss of confidence in the American government following the Watergate scandal. But the larger direction of change symbolized by the phrase was that “tough shit” would increasingly be the cynical political response to social and economic problems—i.e., that the state had few responsibilities to protect citizens from the vagaries of the “market”—when the smoke had cleared at the end of the decade. When President Ronald Reagan so famously remarked in his 1981 inauguration address that government was not the solution to various political crises but rather itself the problem, he was not so much introducing an idea from on high as he was mobilizing an already emergent discourse. As scholars of the 1970s have shown us, various economic deregulations had already begun in the Carter Administration, and successful assaults on the state’s protection of labor unions had also begun in earnest before Reagan’s actions against the PATCO workers in 1981. The 1970s ushered in a time in which the response of many

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<sup>49</sup> Defacing of *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1970, AFT Collection, WRA, Box 12.

politicians—on the right and the left—to the problems of struggling individuals could be summed up as “tough shit.”<sup>50</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that most Americans believed in 1970 that labor unions were illegitimate or that some mythological version of the “free market” could serve as a panacea for the nation’s economic and social ills. While there is some evidence of the former (though most of this is qualified as distaste for striking, corrupt leaders, or for the reach of unionization into the “professional class”) in the letters to Selden, there is virtually no evidence of the latter. The discursive work necessary for these two interrelated developments happened through the course of the decade.

What emerges so clearly in this collection of letters to a prisoner in the Essex County jail is that a media saturated with images of striking teachers catalyzed a profound sense of crisis in the United States in the years surrounding 1970. When we consider how big political ideas are imbued with legitimacy (or sapped of it in the case of postwar liberalism), we know that this is not inevitable and does not simply happen overnight. In this case, Americans did not collectively throw up their hands and embrace a neoliberal agenda when New Deal guarantees of rights for workers in labor unions and other market interventions appeared to be failing in the late 1960s and 1970s; we might, in fact, imagine a different outcome—one in which a *more* expansive federal state (represented by something like a more powerful version of the 1978 Humphrey-Hawkins

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<sup>50</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001) ; Joseph McCartin, “Fire the Hell Out of Them: Sanitation Workers’ Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in in the 1970s,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2 (Fall 2005), 67-92.

bill) or a galvanized labor movement (building on the widespread working-class discontent of the decade) took on the economic difficulties of the 1970s.

Furthermore, the critique of free-market conservatives did not come from nowhere; they had, after all, been pushing back against the New Deal since its very inception. In spite of some big victories like the Taft-Hartley Act, however, it was not until the 1970s that conservatives could destroy many of the fundamental assumptions of New Deal policy and successfully push neoliberal “reforms” in their place. The question is why then? As the snapshot provided by these letters to Selden indicates, crises like those represented by divisive teacher strikes provided one very important site in which individual actors reassessed their own cultural and political assumptions. Only after these crises created so much instability would the ideas of free-market conservatives find fertile ground later in the 1970s.

## **Chapter 3: “Who is Going to Run the Schools?” Philadelphia, St. Louis, and the Urban Crises of 1972-73**

In January and February of 1973, teacher strikes closed down the cities of St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Chicago. These actions meant that at one point, schools were closed almost simultaneously in the second, fourth, and eighteenth largest cities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Further, each of these cities was firmly entrenched in the cultural narrative of the nation—Philadelphia as a prominent site of the American Revolution (during the strike, in fact, citizens would refer to the national bicentennial celebration in 1976 which would be staged in Philadelphia), Chicago as a major industrial center and second city to New York, and St. Louis as the “gateway” to the West and the symbolic starting point of the continental conquest.

Observers in the media groped for a narrative to make sense of the strike wave in 1973. On the evening of February 2, for example, ABC News featured a story about the teacher strikes then going on in St. Louis and Philadelphia. Reporter Ron Miller spoke to what he viewed as the seemingly surging phenomenon of teacher strikes: “The growing national militancy among teachers is being addressed to a larger question: power and the traditional roles of education.” The report cut to a white teacher in St. Louis (then on strike for almost two weeks) who said that teachers were “tired of slavery.” They were, according to the teacher, “demanding emancipation...we really want to start making decisions about education.” The school board President dutifully expressed his

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab20.txt>> accessed Jan. 11, 2012. It is also notable that St. Louis, had, in the 1960 Census, been one of the ten largest cities in the United States.

skepticism about the benefits of letting unionized teachers dictate education policy.

Finally, Miller concluded the story by asserting that “the snowballing effect of teacher militancy will affect the seat of power in the educational establishment.”<sup>2</sup>

The language Miller used to describe the strikes tied St. Louis and Philadelphia to a larger sense of crisis around the American education system ushered in by the Ocean-Hill Brownsville and Newark strikes from 1968-71. Though his assessment of the saber-rattling on both sides was not inaccurate, Miller nonetheless missed the most important meaning of the St. Louis strike—and by extension, the Philadelphia strike that took place simultaneously in early 1973. Histrionics aside, these teacher strikes—and their place in the public discourse—did indeed revolve around power, but the ultimate manifestation of the competition for power involved finances. When teachers talked about “making decisions about education” they meant decisions about the kinds of salaries that would not only keep up with a turbulent economy but would also lure talented teachers into difficult city schools as well as funds that would create smaller class sizes and remedial programs for learning-challenged students. At bottom, all of these “education” decisions revolved around budgets and who would pay for them, particularly in metropolitan areas in which cities had to pay the unique costs of an urban area with a declining local tax base. Thus, the two long strikes—in St. Louis teachers struck for four weeks; in Philadelphia, eight weeks— became battlegrounds for raging debates about the crisis of urban school systems and, more generally, the American city.

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<sup>2</sup> “NBC Nightly News,” Feb. 2, 1973.

Teacher strikes like those in St. Louis and Philadelphia pushed the discourse of “crisis” to the breaking point, and in turn these urban crises would become a major site for the de-legitimation of the liberal state. When the smoke had cleared, the discussions had cast serious doubt on the American city’s ability to provide adequate services (or in the case of an education system that was shut down—any services whatsoever) to its population. Moreover, the public discourse of the strikes, while initially pointing to the unique problems associated with deindustrializing American cities and an urban-suburban political economy built on local property taxes, nonetheless increasingly focused on the intransigence of the teachers themselves. As the strikes ground on in Philadelphia, the discussion over finding new sources of revenues for the beleaguered city dissipated, and the discussion instead focused on the government—at both the city and state level—and its perceived inability to control the excessive demands of its own labor force. In St. Louis, the illegality of the teachers’ action also took center stage, and the drastic actions needed to divert some small amount of funds to education showed just how stark the crisis of the liberal state had become in that city.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter argues that teacher strikes in the early 1970s showed that explanations for urban financial crises increasingly revolved around the failure of the state and less around the structural problems of American metropolitan areas. I primarily use the example of Philadelphia because the strike represented the longest, the most contentious, and the one that received the most national media attention. I use St. Louis

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<sup>3</sup> On the Chicago strike, see, for instance, Edith Herman and Jack Houston, “Strike Ends; School Today,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1973; and Hope Justus, “School Board Fumbles Thru Another Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1973. For a casual link between the Chicago and St. Louis strikes, see “NBC Nightly News,” Jan. 22, 1973.

as a secondary case study and a point of comparison for Philadelphia. I do not treat the Chicago strike in detail primarily because it was relatively short: though it technically lasted over two weeks, once holidays and weekends were taken into account, students only missed nine days of school. Thus, while there was some grouching by both the local media about capitulating to the demands of the teachers—who received a mere 2.5% pay increase and a one-week reduction in the student school year—the strike did not last long enough for the discussion to broaden toward a critique of labor unions and the city’s political economy in the way the longer St. Louis and Philadelphia strikes did. Nevertheless, it is important to point out its existence since both national and local accounts casually referenced Chicago in the triad of city school systems shut down by “teacher militancy.”

As in the other parts of this study, this chapter views the media as a vital force—a character that shaped the discussion and asserted its own meaning of the events. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s view of different fields of cultural production, I regard the media as an institution with the symbolic capital to drive the conversation regarding the political explanation that emerged from the two strikes. In neither Philadelphia nor St. Louis were there many serious voices in the media who were anti-teacher or who really opposed unions *per se*. Firmly entrenched in the postwar labor-liberal consensus, most newspaper reporters and editors as well as television and radio news commentators in both St. Louis and Philadelphia accepted the basic legitimacy of labor unions in American life—even in the public sector. Nevertheless, the criminalization of striking teachers in each case drove the narrative in the media (and among “public” commentators) toward a discussion of the teachers’ transgressions and the city’s impotence vis-à-vis its own work force.

**Philadelphia: Sounding the alarm**

By 1972, the Philadelphia school system faced a dire financial crisis. Philadelphia had followed the trajectory of many industrial cities of the Northeast and the Mid-west in the years after World War II. African-Americans migrated in large numbers to the City of Brotherly Love in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, while whites had begun to leave the city to the suburban development subsidized by the federal government (the Levitt family's second eponymous all-white town was built just outside the city in 1951). Thus, from 1950 to 1970, the demographics of Philadelphia changed immensely: the white population actually decreased in those years, while the black population almost doubled, and the city's racial make-up shifted from 82% white in 1950 to about 65% in 1970.

Philadelphia also followed the pattern of many Eastern cities in the years after World War II, as industries shifted production from the city to outlying suburban areas (like suburban Bucks County, home of Levittown) or to right-to-work states in the South and West. Economic opportunities became scarcer in the city and property tax revenues could not keep up with the services necessary to keep a city of Philadelphia's size going. African-Americans became increasingly concentrated in specific areas of the city like North Philadelphia and West Philadelphia, while the white working class families who remained in the city lived mostly in Northeastern Philadelphia or South Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup>

The school board, at the opening of the 1970-71 academic year, faced a budget shortfall of almost \$50 million, and although teachers had agreed to a slightly longer workday in addition to a modest wage increase, by the time that contract's expiration

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 51-56.

came into view in 1972, the district faced a yearly budget deficit slightly larger than that of 1970. The Board publicly argued that the school system could no longer borrow money from local banks unless they formulated a plan to either reduce expenses or increase revenue, and that the schools would only have enough money to stay open until April—almost two months short of the end of the 1972-73 school year. Thus the board's contract offer in August 1972, if not intentionally designed to provoke a strike, nonetheless seemed certain to do so. In addition to freezing wages, the proposed contract would lengthen the teaching day for high school teachers by 40 minutes, eliminate 385 teaching jobs, and eliminate 187 non-teaching jobs, the effect of which would be to expect teachers to take over more hallway and bathroom supervision. The teachers asked for enough new jobs to reduce class sizes to 25 in addition to a 34% across the board increase, designed in part to offset the 7% inflation (since the last contract) that had limited the buying power of their wages from 1970. Clearly neither side expected to have their contract proposal implemented in total, but from viewing the opening proposals, one can see the enormous gap between the two sides at the beginning of the negotiations. Making the situation even more difficult, Frank Rizzo—the former city police chief and a leading proponent of the growing “law and order” discourse (see chapter 2) in the early 1970s, had won the 1971 mayoral election behind a pledge of no new taxes.<sup>5</sup>

The Board refused to allow teachers to work under the old contract during negotiations, so in what amounted to a virtual lockout, 13,000 teachers struck on September 5, 1972. After three weeks of the strike, the Board reversed its decision and

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<sup>5</sup>Charles F. Thomson, “Rizzo Draws Heat As Teachers Stay Out,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Sep. 24, 1972. Linda Loyd and Thomas Hine, “City’s Schools to Reopen Friday under Old Pact; Talks Continue,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sep. 28, 1972.

agreed to continue bargaining with the teachers while they went back to work under a new strike deadline of December 27. For three months, city residents, many of whom organized demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns to the union, the Board of Education, and the City Council, lived in fear that the schools would be shut down again as the new date approached. By the end of December, the impasse remained. After postponing the strike deadline another two weeks, the teachers struck again on January 8, and the Board sought an injunction, arguing that under PA 195—the Pennsylvania law that allowed public sector workers the limited right to strike—the strike constituted a danger to the “community welfare.” Three days later, a local judge enjoined it, ordering the teachers back to work. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) leadership refused to call off the strike, so they were fined and, by jury trial, convicted of contempt of court. Two union leaders were sentenced to jail terms of between six months and four years, and they were immediately imprisoned without bail. The strike dragged on into February. By the end of the month, the PFT had convinced the Philadelphia AFL-CIO to threaten a one-day general strike. At this point, President Nixon sent Assistant Secretary of Labor William Usery to mediate. The night before the threatened general strike, the PFT and the Board reached agreement on a four year, \$119 million contract that would raise the starting salary for a new teacher from \$8,900 to \$10,324 by the end of the period. The new contract would thus average a raise of 4% a year—increasing the costs of the school district for sure, but well below the 5.5% maximum pay increases suggested by the Nixon Administration’s anti-inflation policy and as it turns out, significantly below the rate of inflation during that period. All told, the second strike shut down one of the nation’s largest school districts for two months, and the two strikes, when taken

together, shut down the Philadelphia school system for three months. Further, though Mayor Rizzo would be forced to seek new revenue sources to keep the school system afloat, the entire ordeal failed to resolve any of the structural issues that caused the district to be in such dire financial straits to begin with.

At the beginning of the September strike the school board immediately staked out a position that justified its desired concessions on the part of the union by pointing to the excessive gains made by the PFT since the mid-1960s. At the first Board meeting after the strike began, one member argued that teachers could not have a significant increase without agreeing to fewer teaching jobs and longer hours: "...in the past the teachers union has been able to walk away from the bargaining table with both the penny and the cake too. This time, they are going to have to choose between one and the other. They can't continue to come in and ask for more money and less work. They are going to have to realize the fact that maybe their Santa Claus is dead and that a long strike is not going to resurrect him." Another Board member, who called himself a supporter of "strong teacher unions" and who had voted for the last three "extremely generous" contracts, implored the teachers to assist the Board by helping it to save money. Even William Ross, the school board President who was also on the executive board of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and a vice-president in the Philadelphia AFL-CIO council, decried the union's demands: "Two weeks ago, I stated that there was a race on as to who would close the School System down and the race was between the union and the banks. I thought that the union would get the hint because the banks said they wouldn't loan us any more money. But the union decided to jump the gun. In fact, they were in such a hurry that they decided to close down the school system on the very

first two days of operation which were not school days.” Ross, in criticizing the PFT’s unflinching attitude, compared the Philadelphia strike to a contemporary negotiation in Detroit in which teachers went back to school with no raises in order to keep the school system afloat.<sup>6</sup>

The rhetoric of the Board made clear that while the stated intention of the Pennsylvania Public Employee Act had been to make public sector unions equal bargaining agents, employers still did not regard them as equals. By referring to the “generosity” of an indulgent “Santa Claus,” the Board of Education characterized themselves as the more important agent in the negotiations. Only they, in representing the “public” interest, could rein in the excesses of a union intent on closing the schools. Even Ross, a life-long union leader, could argue that the teachers should simply accept a proposal with no wage gains as had their better behaved counterparts in Detroit.

The local media—both on television and in print—was, at least initially, somewhat more skeptical of the school board’s claims. Philadelphia had a lengthy history of union organization, from the textile industry to the construction industry to the police and public transit sectors. Most television and newspaper editors who worked their opinions into the public discussion of the teacher strike were—if not necessarily sympathetic to unions—realistic about the reciprocity of labor negotiations. Both of Philadelphia’s major newspapers had approved of the 1970 Pennsylvania Public Employee Act and had voiced sympathy for teacher salary increases during the strike that

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<sup>6</sup> September 11, 1972 board meeting, *Journal of the Board of Education of Philadelphia*, Philadelphia Free Library. The board members referred to were Mr. Hutt and Mr. Sebastian, respectively. Interestingly, the Detroit Federation of Teachers would be involved in their own lengthy and contentious strike in September 1973.

occurred in Philadelphia shortly after the legislation was passed. In the early 1970s, however, both newspapers reported extensively on the budget difficulties faced by the city, and as institutions whose very livelihood relied on a solvent city, saw the city's financial future as paramount. Further, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* top editor, Creed Black, had penned an editorial at the very onset of the first strike questioning both the effectiveness of Pennsylvania's public employee law and public sector employees' right to strike (Black had been an assistant secretary for Nixon's department of Health, Education, and Welfare when the law was passed and did not comment on it at the time).<sup>7</sup> Though Black was not necessarily hostile to the idea of labor organization, it is difficult to imagine that Black's position as editor-in-chief did not impact the paper's position with regard to the teachers' right to strike.

Several days before the strike began, WCAU-TV's (Philadelphia's CBS affiliate) Editorial Director Peter Duncan commented on the pending strike. He argued, in a piece broadcast during the station's local 6:30 pm news program that admitted the realities of labor negotiations, that teachers were right to seek a wage increase since they had watched other city workers recently receive higher wages. Still, Duncan also argued that this raise "must be within the realm of existing realities." The teachers (and the school board) needed to understand that "any settlement...will have to reflect the desperate financial straits in which the School District finds itself." While he clearly rejected the union's demands as out of hand (in a way that he did not indict the Board's contract offer) Duncan nonetheless did not single out either side and concluded by asking

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<sup>7</sup> See Creed C. Black, "State's Public Employee Law Isn't Working," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sep. 10, 1972.

both sides to avoid a strike by “hammer[ing] out” the contested issues at the “negotiating table.” He asked that the “schools open on time so that the city, the Board and the teachers can begin to fulfill their responsibility to the 285,000 school children in Philadelphia.”<sup>8</sup>

Two weeks later—after the teachers had struck—Duncan offered a more critical editorial exhorting the teachers to be more reasonable in their negotiations. Mayor Frank Rizzo—as a nationally-known proponent of “law and order” and a key ally of President Richard Nixon in his run for re-election—had visited Washington, DC and returned with a promise from the President of \$50 million in aid for the beleaguered city. The editorial pointed out that the mayor “hope[d] to divert some \$10 million to help the schools.” Duncan was optimistic that this “hope” for new money would entice the teachers to “begin to compromise.” In a subtle rebuke to the teachers’ intransigence in shutting down the schools, he pointed out that “labor negotiations are supposed to be a series of give and take, a compromise here, a settlement there.” Further, the teachers should remember their primary task: “After all, that’s why they exist—the teachers, the School Board, the city—to serve the public.”<sup>9</sup>

The city’s two major newspapers—the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*—both pointed to the critical nature of the school system’s budget shortfall, and each criticized the union’s refusal to make major concessions. With daily circulations of over 500,000 each (and Sunday circulations well above that figure),

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<sup>8</sup> WCAU-TV editorial, August 31, 1972, “Philadelphia Federation of Teachers Collection,,” Temple University Library, *Urban Archives*, Box 173.

<sup>9</sup> WCAU-TV editorial, Sep. 15, 1972. Ibid.

these two newspapers helped very much to frame the public discussion of the strike.<sup>10</sup>

The *Inquirer* placed a good deal more blame on the teachers for the city's difficult situation while the *Bulletin*, at least during the September strike, attempted to assess the structural limitations within which the city—in addition to the striking teachers—found itself.

On September 10, for example, a *Bulletin* Sunday editorial asserted that both sides were “trying to achieve the same goal” of improving the Philadelphia school system. Nonetheless, the newspaper defended the Board's proposed contract, arguing that it “appears to have widespread public support in its stand.” How “public” was defined here was anything but clear, and even less clear was how “public” support could be measured, but what is evident is that the newspaper's invoking of the widespread support for the Board set it at odds with the goals of the union. In other words, the financial solvency of the school district—at just about any costs—outweighed well-qualified teachers and smaller class sizes.<sup>11</sup>

On September 17, the *Evening Bulletin*, in response to an encouraging announcement that Mayor Rizzo had found a way to divert extra money from the city budget and convinced the state government to advance some money to the city, was still pessimistic: “Even if the teacher strike is settled tomorrow (which is highly unlikely) the Philadelphia School District's monumental problems will remain monumental....The money problem is chronic, and the ordeal is very real and desperate.” The newspaper

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Sterling and Timothy Haight, *The Mass Media: Aspen Institute Guide to Communication Industry Trends* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978), pp. 335-337. The numbers cited in the study are from 1975, but it seems reasonable to extrapolate that, given no major changes in the Philadelphia newspaper industry, the data is similar in 1972-73.

<sup>11</sup> “Public School Deadlock,” *Sunday Bulletin*, Sep. 20, 1972.

editor cited a recent Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce position paper that described the teacher strike as “merely compound[ing] an existing crisis.” Rather than criticizing the teachers’ demands (though, it is true, the paper went well short of endorsing them), the piece grudgingly agreed with the Chamber’s call for an increase in both the city’s property tax and a minimum business tax. It admitted, in what now seems unimaginable given the turn to the right by the Chamber in the latter half of the 1970s, that “when Philadelphia’s business community sanctions an increase in property taxes and a floor to the business tax, it certainly dramatizes the gravity of the schools’ plight.” A week-and-a-half later, after the teachers agreed to go back to work while continuing to negotiate, the *Bulletin*, while calling on the teachers to make concessions, nonetheless emphasized that these should be trade-offs given in exchange for wage increases. The editorial argued that the “teachers who have benefitted from unionization in the past several years...have an obligation to give more in return for increasingly higher wages.”<sup>12</sup>

Several days later, as a potential settlement fell apart at the eleventh hour, the *Evening Bulletin* had a much more pointed criticism of the teachers union. Specifically, the newspaper emphasized the salary gains made by teachers through the strike threat in the late 1960s and 70s as a major part of the school system’s budget deficiency: “The union is accustomed to the notion that everyone will press the panic button over a teacher walkout, forcing a political settlement, no matter how fiscally imprudent. This has happened before, and some of the results have contributed to this year’s impasse.” The

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<sup>12</sup> “Beyond the Strike,” *The Sunday Bulletin*, Sep. 17, 1972; “A Truce for Schools,” *The Evening Bulletin*, Sep. 28, 1972. On the Chamber of Commerce, see Bethany Moreton, “Make Payroll, Not War: Business Culture as Youth Culture,” in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 52-70.

teachers needed to “accept the fact that the schools are in a truly desperate financial condition (partly due to generous teacher settlements) and the squeeze on the taxpayer has finally changed things.”<sup>13</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which in spite of some misgivings about PA 195 had expressed guarded optimism in 1970 about the equity of a law that allowed public sector unions the limited right to strike, was much more critical in 1972. In an editorial the next day that asked the teachers to “end this senseless and futile strike” the newspaper went further in backing up the Board’s claim to concessions from the PFT. The Board had offered to cut only 385 instead of 485 jobs, and the *Inquirer* argued that this was a substantial enough modification of the Board’s offer that teachers should resume working under these terms. This was the best possible scenario at the moment, since the “Board of Education would be committing financial suicide if it agreed to reopen the schools” without extending the work day and cutting teacher jobs.<sup>14</sup>

On September 30, in response to the agreement by the PFT and the Board of Education to halt the strike and continuing negotiating under the terms of the old contract until December 31 (which meant that the Board agreed to delay any potential concessions), George Wilson of the *Inquirer* editorial board asserted one of the first openly anti-union critiques of the strike, roundly condemning the teachers’ role in the collective bargaining process. He argued that union leaders had gone too far in attempting to expand their bargaining power over the managerial prerogatives of the school board and the individual school administrators. Too much discretion on the part

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<sup>13</sup> “The Schools Stay Shut,” *EB*, Sep. 20, 1972.

<sup>14</sup> “The Teachers Should Reconsider,” *PI*, Sep. 21, 1972.

of labor unions—in both the public and private sectors—was a “major cause of inflation, unemployment, and high taxes.” How did a teacher union attempting to bargain over class sizes lead to the degeneration of American prosperity? The explanation, according to Wilson, was that unions kept those with the best ability to manage from doing so: “When unions usurp management powers in private industry—by imposing inefficient work rules on railroads, for example—the result is higher prices and a diminished ability to compete with foreign products at home or abroad. When the same thing happens in the public sector—as in the administration of public education—the result is higher taxes to subsidize waste and inefficiency.” The major question as the September strike ended, then, was “who is going to run the schools—the Board of Education or the Federation of Teachers?”<sup>15</sup> But in pointing to this question, Wilson implied that what was at stake was not just *how much* money would be spent, but *who* would have a say in how it was spent. It cut to a growing alternative explanation for American prosperity in the early 1970s, namely that by keeping labor unions from gaining too much power, the United States had become an economic powerhouse, and that excessive union control over managerial prerogative had led to the decline then underway. If the PFT was able to prevent the Board of Education from cutting jobs, the piece implied, the ability of the city to provide an education for its children would continue to spiral downward.

If the local media criticized the striking teachers—to varying degrees—for their part in the crisis in the Philadelphia education system, how did the “public” respond to this framing of the September teacher strike? Fortunately, there is an extensive record of

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<sup>15</sup> George Wilson, “Still the Key Issue: Who Runs Schools?” *PI*, Sep. 30, 1972.

the local debate. Many of the two major newspapers' readers wrote letters to the editor in direct response to either the strike or the respective newspapers' understanding of the strike. Though these letters were selected for publication by the editors themselves, in both papers there were published widely different opinions—many of which contradicted the basic editorial position of the papers—on the strike. Further, many interested parties—some interested because they had children in the school system, and many others for very different reasons—wrote letters directly to the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers President Frank Sullivan. Some of these letters resulted from campaigns orchestrated by local Home and School Associations—the Philadelphia version of the PTA—to pressure both sides into negotiating a settlement—especially during the interregnum between the end of the first strike and the looming deadline of the second strike on December 31, but others appear to have been written without any such prompting.

In general, there were four discursive views of the first strike that constituted the public debate. The first was that of the teachers and their family members, who argued that the concession of hard-won gains, especially after other city workers had achieved major salary increases in the past year, was anathema to the logic of the labor movement. Second, there was a constituency which can best be characterized as liberals. This constituency, who mostly lived in either the white middle-class or the white working-class areas of the city, viewed education as crucial and worth spending money on. They believed that teachers deserved higher salaries and that schools needed smaller class sizes, and their basic solution to the education crisis was to find means to bring more revenue to the city's coffers. The third discursive constituency was that of a growing

opposition on the part of white middle- and working-class Philadelphians, mostly centered in the white neighborhoods in Northeast Philadelphia and allied with Mayor Rizzo, who were against paying more taxes under any conditions, and in some cases, flatly linked this to an aversion for paying for “ghetto” schools. The final basic constituency believed that education was important and worth spending money on but, after years of failing efforts to provide decent schools in West Philadelphia and North Philadelphia, viewed the claims of teacher unions to improve the education system through more spending with cynicism. They attempted to expose some of what they believed to be the union’s racial assumptions and to press the teachers to go back to work.

Philip Rosen, a teacher at Northeast High School, wrote candidly to President Sullivan in the middle of the strike. He outlined, after taking an “informal poll” of his colleagues, exactly what he thought would be a reasonable settlement to the strike. First, he believed that the teachers should give in on the issue of the longer-school day, as “an additional 40 minutes would not be unbearable.” Furthermore, “giving in” on the issue, as it was “symbolic to many as a form of ‘dedication’” would be appropriate. Second, Rosen believed that given the “hard times” in which the school district found itself, a 5.5% salary increase in the new contract (which would have been lower than the rate of inflation since the last contract) would be “satisfactory.” “Class size,” however was “most important” and “unnegotiable.” Rosen pointed to the difficulty of teaching classes

in which the maximum class roster was 35 instead of the 40 or 50 proposed by the Board.<sup>16</sup>

Rosen's letter speaks to two broader issues with regard to the teachers' point of view in the strike. First, teachers were not seeking exorbitant wage increases. The 35% figure cited by the board and the media was part of a usual dance in which the union began with a sizable increase and came down substantially. Rosen—as a union teacher—clearly understood that teachers' raises would be much more modest. Second, in pointing to the “symbolic” nature of an increase in the school day, he believed that garnering the support of the “public” of tax-paying citizens was important in winning the strike. Following the same logic, other teachers and their family members would try their best to influence the debate by responding in the local newspapers.

On September 20, for example, the *Evening Bulletin* published three letters from teachers to the editor that defended the strike. These letters vied for attention on the editorial page with the *Bulletin's* critical editorial mentioned above, another letter to the editor blasting teachers for their poor performance, and two more letters to the editor imploring both sides to work together in the name of the students. Though the *Bulletin* indeed had a position with regard to the strike, the weight of the newspaper's opinion relied on at least the appearance of an open forum in which free debate could take place, and so teachers could use the venue to attempt to shape the meaning of the strike.

Barbara Mitchell began her letter by complaining that “my colleagues and I are tired of

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<sup>16</sup> Letter to Frank Sullivan, Sep. 20, 1972, “PFT Collection,” UA, Box 173. One of the pieces of contention in the new contract was whether maximum class sizes would be based on the initial roster or the actual attendance in school. The Board wanted to base the maximum on the number of students who actually attended school, while the PFT wanted it based on the initial class roster.

being scapegoats.” She accused the Board of “unilaterally returning to conditions we had seven years ago before there was a bargaining unit” and appealed to the labor culture of Philadelphia by asking “is there a union member in this city who would give up benefits his union strived so hard to get for him?” To agree to the “immoral” changes the Board wanted to make, she offered, would mean that she and her fellow teachers “have lost our self-respect as professionals.” Similarly, Sharyn Callahan appealed to professionalism in supporting the strike effort. She argued that if the Board cut the school district’s non-teaching jobs and she were forced to monitor the cafeteria, she would not have time to call students’ parents and consult with school counselors about difficult students. These cuts would directly impinge on her ability to take part in the “professional obligations which make up the role of the teacher.” Finally, Edwin Steeble took direct aim at the September 10 editorial that had asserted the public’s support of the Board’s position. Steeble asked “what proof do you have that” the public supported the board? “I have seen nothing in your news columns to this effect,” he argued, “and I read them daily.”<sup>17</sup>

On September 22, the *Bulletin* published a letter from a teacher named A. Beaumont. He explained that he had been inspired to write after “search[ing] the papers in vain for a fair representation of the teachers’ point of view in regard to the current work stoppage.” He pointed out that the city was asking the teachers to “make the sacrifice” after giving raises to the city’s police and firemen without any changes to the workday. Beaumont also excoriated Mayor Rizzo for making teachers take cuts, “which shows where education comes on his list of priorities”; though he did not point it out, he

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<sup>17</sup> “Should Teachers Sacrifice Previous Gains?”, “Wants to Teach Not Supervise,” “Editorial Showed ‘Tortuous’ Logic,” *EB*, Sep. 20, 1972.

surely implied that Rizzo's history as police chief and proponent of "law and order" undergirded his strategy. He concluded by cutting to the logic of concession bargaining that would become all-too-familiar in the private sector in the latter part of the 1970s: "If [the Board members] are justified in demanding a deterioration of working conditions now, they will be equally justified in asking additional 'sacrifices' from teachers in each succeeding contract."<sup>18</sup>

On the same day, the *Inquirer* published a letter from Richard Meyer on the same page as an editorial that argued that the PFT's demands "make it clear where the responsibility lies" for the closing of the schools. Meyer admitted that the "teachers' union must accommodate itself to the notion that adjustments to generate some cost reductions are imperative" and conceded that the teachers would need to teach a longer school day. Nevertheless he criticized the Board for its "inflexibility" and "intransigence" in holding fast to the other proposed job cuts. He further criticized the *Inquirer* for "whipping up public sentiment against the union."<sup>19</sup> If Meyer's version of the public was just as nebulous as was that of the way the media had used it, it nonetheless acknowledged the importance the newspapers held in shaping the meaning of the strike.

The above letters from teachers point to the challenges of mounting a defense against the media's effort to frame the strike in a certain way. Though the two Philadelphia newspapers published all five letters (even Steeble's letter that directly attacked an earlier editorial), the editorials that condemned the strike on each page still

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<sup>18</sup> "Strike is over Working Conditions," *EB*, Sep. 22, 1972

<sup>19</sup> "School Board is the Intransigent Party," *PI*, Sep. 22, 1972.

controlled more space than any individual response, and as the moderators of the newspaper forum the editors of the *Bulletin* and the *Inquirer*, respectively still enjoyed what, drawing on Bourdieu, we might call the symbolic intellectual capital that came from editing the paper.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to know how any individual reader might have interpreted this newspaper—much probably depending on their individual subjectivity—but it does seem evident that teachers’ attempts to defend a strike that the newspaper asserted went against the “public” seems like an unequal fight indeed.

Liberals had a different view of the strike. The common organizing principle of the discourse was that while the strike was regrettable, a central portion of the blame was affixed to the school board and the city leadership—especially Mayor Rizzo—for failing to provide the resources necessary for the school system. Most members of this constituency were likely to be Democrats (as was Rizzo and many of the members of the Board), but they were not adherents of “law and order.” Their critique of the strike focused on the importance of top-notch, state-financed public education as a means to solve social and economic conflict by providing equality of opportunity. A central theme in their view—flying directly in the face of the media’s call for austerity—was that the city needed to find new forms of revenue to curtail the school crisis.

Claire Kuperman, writing to the *Evening Bulletin* on September 20, outlined what for her was the basic frustration of the strike and fiscal crisis. She lamented that parents were “sick and tired of hearing the same old rhetoric.” She pointed out that “many of the teachers’ points are valid and in the interest of our children,” but she also empathized

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<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), Ch. 1.

with “the Board of Education which have been reduced to mere beggars, going from one government official to another, with hands out. We want a long-range solution to these problems, once and for all.”<sup>21</sup> Jack Morris, writing to PFT President Sullivan on September 21, had a long-range solution that did not involve cutting teaching jobs. He suggested a “campaign from the grass roots level” to get new funds from the state and the federal governments. He asked that Sullivan use the strike picket lines as a means to “get a flood of requests for financial help to Harrisburg and Washington.”<sup>22</sup>

Two letters to the editor of the *Bulletin* on September 22 made far-ranging critiques of both the Philadelphia and American systems of political economy. Commenting on Nixon’s promised \$50 million aid package to Mayor Rizzo, Isabella Posch believed the city’s priorities were far afield from where they should be:

With rage and shock, I just heard a report on TV that Mayor Rizzo is going to hire 900 more policemen. The money promised from President Nixon to meet Philadelphia’s growing urban problems is most certainly welcome. However, first priority should be given to the educational crisis. If the mayor applied the same yardstick which he has applied to the striking teachers, he would have asked Philadelphia’s policemen to be more dedicated and work longer shifts at the same salary.

Jay Schuchar went even further than this, criticizing spending priorities on the federal level. He pointed out that 250,000 Philadelphia school children were out of school because of a 50 million shortage while the yearly appropriation for the Vietnam War was between 2.5 and 5 billion dollars. “Fifty to one hundred cities like Philadelphia,” he continued, “could have their school problems solved if there was no war.” He asked, as a

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<sup>21</sup> “Sick and Tired,” *EB*, Sep. 20, 1972.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Jack J. Morris, Sep. 21, 1972, “PFT Collection,” *UA*, Box 173.

nation, to “stop bombing, burning, and maiming little children running naked and screaming with napalm burns from their schools, and spend the money to put our children back in their schools.”<sup>23</sup>

Mrs. Peggy Definis, who located herself in the white working-class Northeastern section of the city, had a solution to the crisis that was closer to home. She acknowledged that she “hate[d] paying taxes as much as anyone else,” but she also recognized that the city, because of the challenge of servicing so many students, needed additional schools and “need[ed] to make salaries for teachers attractive enough that they’ll put up with overcrowded conditions in the existing classrooms.” She advocated an unspecified tax hike: “I think our children need and deserve an education, and I don’t think I’m alone in saying I’m willing to pay for it.”<sup>24</sup>

Meredith Savery, Chair of the Education Committee of the Philadelphia League of Women Voters, also argued that more local funding could solve the school crisis. In a letter to the *Inquirer*, she questioned the City Council’s commitment to funding the schools. She argued that the Council had done very little since 1965 to raise additional revenues while disingenuously blaming the teachers for the school crisis. She argued, to answer the council’s assertion that “there is no deep [financial] commitment to public education among the citizens of this city,” that “the League of Women Voters thinks he’s

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<sup>23</sup> “School First, Then More Police”; “Divert Vietnam Billions to Schools,” *EB*, Sep. 22, 1972. These are not isolated instances of critiques of urban and national political economy. Lois Hayes, for instance, wrote to the *Inquirer* that “we need more teachers before we need more policemen” while Edith Holman asked if “the space program and the Vietnam War are more important than our children?” See “Teachers Needed,” Sep. 29, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> “Pupils, Adults Blame Teachers for Strike in Phila. Schools,” *Sunday Bulletin*, Sept 24, 1972.

dead wrong.” It was the City Council, she believed, that was refusing to find the revenue to do so.<sup>25</sup>

As late as December, liberal constituencies still vehemently argued that more funding was the key to solving the school crisis and averting the second strike. A petition signed by thirty parents from the Joseph Brown Home and School Association—a school located in Northeast Philadelphia—appealed to President Sullivan not to go through with the second strike. In making the plea, the petition attempted to hit a note of civic pride: “Our children are the future of this city, and must receive a quality education. Philadelphia began as the taproots of a great nation. There is no reason why it should not continue to do so with the cooperation of all concerned.” Beyond this, the appeal pointed indirectly to the assumption that more money was needed. The parents of the school had “worked hard to write letters, send telegrams, etc., to try and secure the necessary funds to keep our schools open through every avenue available to us.” The union should “meet and negotiate in good faith and make realistic settlement for the sake of our children.”<sup>26</sup>

The President of the Finletter Home and School Association, located in the multi-racial neighborhood of Olney, sent a similar, if more militant letter to the PFT. Sending a carbon copy to the “editor” (the letter did not specify the newspaper[s]), Mrs. Joan Goldberg began by staunchly asserting that “we will not tolerate a second teachers' strike.” The Home and School Association, she pointed out, had “been in communication by means of meetings, telephone calls, telegrams, letters, petitions, etc., with state, city and national officials including the governor, the mayor, the councilmen, among others,

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<sup>25</sup> “Bellis Is Insensitive to School Problems,” *PI*, Sep. 29, 1972.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Frank Sullivan, Dec. 8, 1972, “PFT Collection,” *UA*, Box 173.

arguing for funding of the schools.” Now they had planned a mass rally as a means of “voicing our concerns to the elected officials and the public at large over this current school crisis, this twofold crisis of a threatened strike and/or an early closing.”<sup>27</sup> If this was a much more hortatory letter than that of the Brown HSA cited above, it nonetheless pointed to the necessity of gaining more funds as the ultimate solution to the crisis.

What is clear from the “liberal” discourse found in the public debate is that early in the crisis, a powerful critique of the existing urban/national political economy was present. Individuals and organizations alike could argue that the city’s and the nation’s spending priorities were askew. The two letters from local Home and School Associations show that many citizens worked to try and secure more funding for a public education system that they believed was worth spending money to maintain. They did not blame teachers, as late as December 1972, for causing the city’s deficit emergency.

The third major constituency, however, most assuredly blamed teachers in some part for the city’s deficit problem. Following the anti-taxation, law-and-order politics of Mayor Rizzo, this discourse was organized around the notion that the teachers union should make major concessions and believed that austerity was the key to solving the school crisis. Rizzo himself perhaps best summed up this position when, at the end of the September strike, he linked the tough stand symbolic of law and order with the “outrageous demands” of the union: “The union mistook kindness for weakness. If they think we’re a bunch of patsies they’re in for a rude awakening.” He insisted that if he

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<sup>27</sup> Letter to Frank Sullivan, Dec. 8, 1972. Ibid.

gave in to teachers, then “tomorrow every teacher will want a donkey.”<sup>28</sup> Further, as Matthew Countryman has shown in his work on the black power movement in Philadelphia, Rizzo’s following, established during his efforts to bring “law and order” to the city as police chief, relied on explicitly racist attempts to maintain white spatial supremacy.<sup>29</sup> Following within this rubric, some commentators even referred to their reluctance to improve hopeless “ghetto” schools through more taxes.

About two weeks into the strike, Bill DeSimone wrote a letter directly to President Sullivan, in which he accused the union of “not being rational and living up to their responsibilities.” He excoriated the union for its “unwillingness to accept a minimal increase in pay so that the budget may be eventually balanced,” asking “how much should teachers make? They only work for approximately 9 months a year.” What is of most interest, however, is the way DeSimone identified his major political interest. He did not call himself a parent (though it was clear by the end of the letter that he was one), but instead referred to himself as a “taxpayer” and asked, “how can we, as taxpayers, champion your cause?” He then gave a clue as to why—he felt squeezed by the economic conditions of the time and resented the unionized teachers. Commenting on the teachers’ resistance to extending their workday, he wondered, “How many poor low-level management people (most earning less money than your ‘dedicated’ teachers) spend 2, 3, and 4 hours at night after working a full day in preparation for the next day. You’d be surprised! Can’t you see how ridiculous you sound whenever you try to defend your

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hine and Linda Lloyd, “Rizzo: We’re Not a Bunch of Patsies,” *PI*, Sep. 27, 1972.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 214-220.

union. You're much better off than you deserve to be."<sup>30</sup> For "a poor low-level management" type like DeSimone, the crisis brought on by the teacher strike provided an outlet for him to vent the frustrations of his own economic position. It forced him to confront his relationship to the state and to the labor movement. As "low-level management" he had no union to fight for his economic rights and believed he had no organization to advocate for him. Further, he viewed the public sector union not as a valuable entity providing protections that everyone who works for a living should have, but instead as group that had overstepped its bounds. The state, for him, was failing, as he saw it as doing little more than forcibly transferring his income through taxes to teachers who worked less and made more money than he did.

Writing from Northeast Philadelphia, J.L. Simonsen ordered the teachers to "go back to school and teach our children!" "The Board of Education," he asserted, "is trying to save money and balance its budget. Why don't you cooperate so we don't have to hear that the schools cannot remain open every year?" To Arnold Ifill, the teacher union was not just guilty of causing budget shortfalls; a larger concern was that the teachers "are asking for top dollar and producing some of the poorest quality of educated students in the country. When the students throughout Philadelphia start achieving average or better scores on the national tests, then the teachers should get a raise." Not only should teachers not be given raises, but the school board needed to "take appropriate action"

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<sup>30</sup> Letter to Frank Sullivan, Sep. 17, 1972, "PFT Collection," UA, Box 173.

against underachieving teachers. What those actions were the reader can only guess, but clearly Ifill did not believe that spending more money was the answer.<sup>31</sup>

A key part of the anti-strike, anti-tax discourse focused more specifically on teachers as union members. E.E. Pearson explained the school crisis, in a letter to the *Bulletin*, as the “harvest” of the “disastrous day in the field of public education when the AFL/CIO decided to organize the teachers.” The teachers had adopted the “classic techniques of longshoremen, assembly-line workers, etc.” who “with little provocation...walk off the job. If they do not immediately get all their demands they accuse management of not bargaining in good faith.” The educational crisis could not be solved, concluded Pearson, because the union was so “intransigent.” Charlotte Paulsen wrote to the *Inquirer* from Ocean City, New Jersey. Teachers should not be like other workers, she argued: “If Philadelphia teachers are more concerned about a few dollars pay increase or a few extra hours work than their responsibilities to their pupils, they are not worthy of the status they presume as members of the teaching profession.” Further, Paulsen assumed that higher taxes would not solve the problem and that the teachers should agree to concessions instead of expecting “an insolvent employer to meet their demands for higher wages....that [would] invariably result in heavier expenses or higher taxes.”<sup>32</sup>

In November, the Stephen Decatur Home and School Association (HSA)—based in northeastern Philadelphia, held a meeting to figure out what action to take to try to stop

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<sup>31</sup> Letter to Frank Sullivan, Sep. 18, 1972, “PFT Collection,” *UA*, Box 173; “Letters to the editor,” *PI*, Sep. 22, 1972.

<sup>32</sup> “Teachers Act Like Longshoremen,” *EB*, Sep. 26, 1972; “Striking Teacher Unworthy of Title,” *PI*, Sep. 26, 1972.

the January strike. In the meeting, HSA leaders distributed polls to parents to determine what course of action they favored. The ten polls sent to President Sullivan that remain in the archive are invaluable as a window into the mindset of the largely anti-tax constituency of white working-class Philadelphia. The first three questions asked participants if they would support efforts to meet with local councilmen, organize a bus caravan of parents to Harrisburg to pressure the state to provide more education funds, and to convoke a mass rally at John F. Kennedy Plaza downtown to “spotlight the crisis facing the Philadelphia schools.” On these three questions virtually every participant answered yes. The fourth question, however, asked if parents would “support a tax increase...to support the Public schools.” With one exception, all parents answered in the negative, and even the one affirmative answer was heavily qualified.

What is even more instructive, however, are the comments parents added underneath the poll. One respondent (who did not include her name) made an argument quite similar to Jay Schuchar, who had argued that money spent on the Vietnam War could instead go to education: “Taxes are high enough. Use some of the money now being wasted in defense, civil service, etc. to pay for education—esp. federal tax money. A lottery for education is also in order.” A second respondent, Mrs. Margaret Griffin, agreed. “I feel we are taxed enough at present. If funds were utilized properly, additional taxes would not be necessary.” And Mrs. A.J. Evans believed that “there is plenty of money around. It is used the wrong way and not for the right things.”

Unlike the first respondent, Griffin and Evans did not specify what they meant when they said funds were used incorrectly. It may very well be that they meant the nation’s priorities were out of whack, or that the city spent too much on its police force.

Two additional respondents, however, made quite clear that there was an additional interpretation of the spending issue. Mrs. Michael Sullivan, who supported a tax increase, did so on the condition that “it included all sections of the city including a tax on apartment dwellers, because they also have children attending school.” If the racial coding of “apartment dwellers” as opposed to the white property owners in Northeastern Philadelphia was not entirely explicit, J. E. Blasch made it unambiguous: “The Northeast pays enough taxes and gets little in return. Our taxes are supporting the ghetto areas.”<sup>33</sup>

As the December deadline approached, the anti-tax constituency attempted to ratchet up the pressure on the PFT. On November 27, Evelyn Jarrett wrote to the teacher union, beginning by describing herself as “one of the silent majority” and ending by imploring the teachers to “negotiate with an open mind, not making unfair demands.” Dated the next day, a petition from 35 “tax paying parents” of the Thomas Holme School (in Northeast Philadelphia), “urged” President Sullivan to “endeavor to secure funds from the City and State by Revenue Sharing or by some other means, but not by any more Taxes! [underlining in original]” On December 6, Edward Schneider, also a resident of Northeastern Philadelphia, called the teacher demands “insulting to the public at large.....Reading the tabulation of salaries paid by other large Cities in the United States, there seems to be no question that the Philadelphia teachers are being treated fairly and adequately.” Schneider, like the various media outlets during the first strike, referred to an amorphous “public” but it was clear that for him, the public meant the white property owner: “The people are up to their necks in taxes and want no more and the urgent

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<sup>33</sup> “PFT Collection,” UA, Box 173.

problem is now to get the School Board; City; and our Federal government out of debt deficits.” Finally, Joseph Fayer, a center-city “father of four children and a taxpayer” threatened the union with the specter of a further erosion of the city tax base. “If there is another strike in January, I intend to move myself and my business out of Philadelphia. I feel certain many more middle class and upper class taxpayers will also move. In the long run your demands will result only in fewer teaching jobs and less money to run the schools [underlining in original].”<sup>34</sup>

The fourth and final constituency also opposed the teacher strike and stringently criticized the union, though for very different reasons than the anti-tax critique. This constituency wrote from the predominantly African-American neighborhoods of West and North Philadelphia.<sup>35</sup> Unlike some of the anti-tax constituency of the Northeast, this constituency was optimistic about the ability of Philadelphia school students to gain opportunity through education. But, as had happened in other cities like New York City and Newark in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some African-American activists believed that the union—which featured a majority of white teachers—worked against reform. The PFT in particular had threatened a teacher strike in 1968 to prevent the Philadelphia school district from implementing a teacher transfer plan as part of the city’s “decentralization” (as opposed to busing) to achieve court-ordered desegregation.<sup>36</sup> Just

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<sup>34</sup> Letter to John Ryan, Nov. 27, 1972; Letters to Frank Sullivan, Nov. 28, Dec. 6, and Dec. 11, 1972, “PFT Collection,” UA, Box 173.

<sup>35</sup> I have used the return addresses from these letters to place them in areas of the city in West Philadelphia and North Philadelphia that were, because of the spatial separation of the city, almost entirely black areas. Several of the letters I use as evidence also specifically identify the letter writer as African-American or critique the view of “our” children as unable to learn even if given the opportunity, a view clearly held by some working-class whites about African-American students.

<sup>36</sup> Countryman, *Up South*, 244-255.

as much of the black community opposed the teachers' unions in Ocean-Hill Brownsville in 1968 and in Newark in 1970 and 1971, some black Philadelphians believed that the union's efforts at gaining smaller classes and better-paid teaching positions was not worth the time lost to the students.

Mrs. Joy Brooks, writing to President Sullivan from West Philadelphia during the first strike, told him that "it is inconceivable to me, as a parent and a taxpayer that you can continue to force children to suffer a lack of educational advantage while you dicker over time and money....There are thousands of highly educated and skilled technicians and engineers standing in unemployment and welfare lines—crying to earn a living—and you have the audacity to argue away our children's lives over 40 minutes and a few more dollars." Walter Desher, from North Philadelphia, condemned the union for its disingenuousness: "If you were really interested [in the children] then you would make some compromises. Since this strike started you have made no new offers, no new suggestions or new ideas of any kind. You have only stubbornly and bull headedly maintained the status quo." Dorothy Raunch made a much angrier and more cynical critique. She asked if the children were "learning anything that will benefit them in later life" before the schools closed. She accused the Board of wasting money, but was pessimistic about the union's ability to "show the public the facts....because you can't, people would raise hell....But because the students are black," she concluded, "we get a lot of bull-shit like always. If the system don't work get rid of it."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Letters to Frank Sullivan, Sep. 12, 1972; Sep. 15, 1972; and Sep. 16, 1972, "PFT Collection," UA, Box 173.

As the second strike date approached, Mr. and Mrs. E. Weber turned what they presumed to be the teachers' racial assumptions about the students on their head: "A second strike, within the same school year, would seem to us to be a farce. To upset the normal learning processes and schedules which have been set up since the first stoppage would throw the entire system into a shambles....PLEASE THINK OF THE CHILDREN! They're not all delinquents." Mrs. S. Pearl pleaded with the teachers union to "stop this playing around with our children and their most important learning years." Whatever gains the union might make would not be worth the lost instruction during the strike: "Our children are getting so little education in the public school system as it is, that they cannot afford to lose any school time." Finally, Emily Crane from West Philadelphia urged President Sullivan to "consider the unfairness of another strike. We all have to work for a living and teachers are no worse off than a good many other people." She had a novel idea to solve the city's financial crisis. She suggested that, rather than striking, teachers should "direct your talents and time to help those who want to develop some kind of on-going program to raise money for the schools each year rather than threaten the community with a strike each time a contract expires (which is all too often)."<sup>38</sup>

As the second strike approached, these four discursive constituencies would enter into the local debate over the strike. As it dragged on through the entire months of January and February however, the supposed intractability of the teacher union emerged as the ultimate explanation for a dysfunctional school system.

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<sup>38</sup> Letters to Frank Sullivan, Nov. 16, 1972; Dec. 11, 1972; and Dec. 12, 1972, in *ibid.*

On January 3, the PFT membership, by a margin of almost 5 to 1, voted to strike again, and the next day, the Board of Education held a televised meeting in which its members voted unanimously to seek an injunction to force the teachers back to work. Recall that much of the public discussion of the school crisis precipitated by the first strike focused on the necessity to bring in additional revenues from the state and federal government. The Board's explanation for seeking the injunction continued to frame the problem as one in which teachers' demands—though brought down substantially from their opening offer in the past September—necessitated a firm response. President Ross, as a union leader, was reluctant to vote to seek a labor injunction and so abstained from an 8-0 vote, nonetheless criticized the teachers union for its callousness. He had hoped that the PFT would “show compassion for the students in the situation they were facing” as teachers did in Pittsburgh and Detroit “where realistic negotiations took place.” Unfortunately, he continued, “that kind of compassion is not characteristic of our Teachers' Union in this City.” The teachers were striking against the very public, he argued: “Actually this is a political strike that they're talking about. It's a strike against the community. We have to get the community to see what the teachers demand. Actually they want to brow-beat the whole community and of course, who gets hurt in the brow-beating, the children in the school system.”<sup>39</sup>

Another member of the school board, Dolores Olberholtzer, had no qualms about seeking an injunction. In fact, she questioned the legitimacy of the notion that teachers should be allowed to collectively bargain in the first place, since, as public sector

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<sup>39</sup> Jan 5, 1973 board meeting, *Journal of the Board of Education of Philadelphia*, PFL.

workers, they did not face the same accountability as workers in the private sector: “If a plumber messes up, they’ll get called back....If a teacher turns out to be a functional illiterate, that is just the breaks, you know, that’s the way it goes.” Compared to other public sector workers, she reckoned, they did not in any case deserve to get a raise. Teachers, she argued, citing the amount of classroom teaching required of those in the city’s secondary schools, only worked “a little over four hours a day.” Policemen and firemen deserved raises because they had more dangerous jobs and were on call even when they were at home. Beyond supporting the injunction, she also called on parents to assert their “right as a taxpayer....to demand” that the teachers to go back to work.<sup>40</sup>

Mayor Rizzo continued to hold the line against the teachers, similarly conflating the interests of the taxpayer as the interest of the “public.” Commenting on the January strike, he asserted that “we cannot, nor will we, capitulate to irresponsible demands which are not consistent with the public interest.” He further argued that any tax increase would cause “the people who are paying the tax load right now... [to] flee, leaving only those who cannot pay.” Finally, he contrasted the irresponsibility of the PFT with the “responsible actions” of teachers in Pittsburgh and Detroit—where Pittsburgh teachers had accepted wage increases less than that recommended by a state fact-finder and in Detroit where the teachers had deferred any wage increase for a year to keep the beleaguered school system afloat.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, though of course not known to Rizzo, these two cities would each in the next three years face their own explosive and polarizing teacher strikes.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Jon Katz, “Report to School Monday, Rizzo Tells Teachers, Pupils” *PI*, Jan. 6, 1973.

Even during the early days of the second strike threat, the local media, while supporting a tough stance against the demands of the teachers, nevertheless continued to ask bigger questions about the way to solve the school's fiscal crisis as well as pressing Mayor Rizzo on his no-tax policy. An editorial reprinted from the suburban newspaper *The Main Line Times* and seconded by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* offered that the solution was to regionalize the school system, asking "when will we recognize the interdependence of the city and the suburbs...and start saving the whole region. If the city dies we will go with it, make no mistake." The *Sunday Bulletin*, while criticizing the January strike, also criticized Mayor Rizzo for "ignor[ing] the legitimate and long overdue claim the schools have on local tax revenues which have yielded only an additional \$30 million for schools in the past six years compared to a fourfold increase in state subsidies."<sup>42</sup>

Teachers, for their part, vocally defended the second strike, offering an explanation for the fiscal crisis which was very different from that of the Board of Education and Mayor Rizzo. H.H. McCreesh, a teacher whose epistolary defense was published in both of the city's major newspapers, is representative of this view. He believed that "most parents, taxpayers, the general public, and editorial writers are unfairly critical of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and its membership." The financial crisis was "in no way the fault of teachers. We should not sacrifice, as did no one else, for the blunders and shortsightedness demonstrated by our elected public

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<sup>42</sup> "Philadelphia Schools Do Concern Main Line," *PI*, Jan. 3, 1973; "A Strike Won't Help," *SB*, Jan. 7, 1973.

officials, especially City Council and the mayor.” He believed that “while a campaign of no new taxes is good politics, it is also very poor public policy.”<sup>43</sup>

If, at the very beginning of the January strike, a lively discussion of how to solve the larger financial crisis of the city—a crisis exacerbated by the teachers’ demands for higher wages and smaller class sizes—still existed, two turning points during the course of the strike worked to minimize that part of the debate. First, on January 11, Common Pleas Court Judge Donald Jamiesen enjoined the strike, while the leadership and most of the union’s rank-and-file in turn refused to obey the injunction and stayed on strike. On February 9, the PFT’s President Frank Sullivan and Treasurer (and chief negotiator) John Ryan were convicted of contempt of court and sentenced by Judge Jamiesen to substantial prison terms. These actions shifted the debate to one that, after criminalizing the strike, focused almost exclusively on the moral turpitude of the teachers’ tactics. When the teachers continued to strike, the public discussion centered on whether PA 195 or any effort on the part of the state was capable of ensuring basic services to the city’s citizens.

### **Criminalizing the Strike**

In American labor history, injunctions have often been wielded as a weapon to break strikes. Invoking the sanctity of private property rights, state and local judiciaries often wielded injunctions to break strikes in the private sector in the years before the advent of

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<sup>43</sup> “Teachers Have Their Say on Strike Threat,” *EB*, Jan. 5, 1973; “Blame City Teachers for the School Crisis,” *PI*, Jan. 7, 1973.

New Deal labor policy. Even the federal government had issued anti-strike injunctions, as when a U.S. circuit court did so against Eugene V. Debs and the American Railway Union during the 1894 strike of the Pullman Palace Car Company. Though the Wagner Act had codified private sector workers' rights to strike in 1935, public sector workers did not enjoy the right to strike in most of the United States. Most state laws considered public sector strikes to violate the sovereignty of the government, and local and state governments alike issued injunctions to order workers to return to the job. Public sector law in Pennsylvania represented an exception, as most state and county employees enjoyed the right to strike, but even then the strike could be enjoined when it posed a "clear and present danger" to the public welfare. Judge Jamiesen enjoined the strike in Philadelphia in January 1973, when, after almost four weeks of lost instruction time, he argued that the strike presented a threat to the "educational welfare" of "low achievement pupils" as well as a threat to the "public safety" following "the release of children on the streets during the strike."<sup>44</sup>

PFT leadership immediately vowed to defy the injunction, and though a few teachers went back to work the next day, the large majority continued to stay on strike. Furthermore, the injunction pointed to one of the fundamental contradictions of PA 195: though teachers had the right to strike, the "clear and present danger" clause could be defined at the discretion of the local courts. And, while a judge could fine and imprison the union leadership and even the rank-and-file, doing so was not likely to end a strike, as the action tended to galvanize even stauncher opposition from striking teachers. This had

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Thomson, "Judge Jamiesen Issues Injunction to End 4-Day Teachers' Strike," *EB*, Jan. 11, 1973; "For Philadelphia's Children 'A Clear and Present Danger,'" *EB*, Jan. 12, 1973.

been the case in Newark in 1970, when local union leaders, almost 400 strikers, and even the AFT President were arrested and imprisoned, but the strike had continued anyway.

In the case of the Philadelphia teachers, Judge Jamiesen's order shifted the terms of debate about the strike from solving the city's financial crisis to the (now) illegality of the strike. On January 12, for example, both the *Bulletin* and the *Inquirer* admonished the striking teachers to obey the injunction. The *Inquirer* appealed to the "conscience of individual teachers" in suggesting that they return to their classrooms over the direction of union leadership. Referring to Act 195, it argued that "teachers who exercise their right to strike under the law also have a responsibility to respect the law's provisions regarding rights of the public." The *Bulletin* went further than this, linking the union's intransigence in vowing not to obey the injunction to "its insistence on a settlement that far exceeds the school board's capacity to pay." The union could only "redeem itself in the public eye," according to the editorial, through the twin action of "obeying the injunction and continuing the negotiation."<sup>45</sup>

Since the injunction had defined the strike as illegal, it was neither a surprise to see Mayor Rizzo—the law-and-order proponent—heighten the rhetoric of standing firm against the teachers nor to see Rizzo's followers focus on the importance of upholding the "rule of law" in forcing the teachers back to work. On January 14, for instance, Rizzo was clear on the stakes of the strike. Referring to the PFT President, he asserted that "I'm running this city, not Ryan....No responsible official would give in." Although he supported the idea of labor unions as a "union man all my life," Rizzo believed that "the

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<sup>45</sup> "The Teachers Should Comply with the Law and the Court," *PI*, Jan. 12, 1973; "For Philadelphia's Children 'A Clear and Present Danger,'" *EB*, Jan. 12, 1973.

leaders of their union are irresponsible and I will never surrender to their outrageous demands.”<sup>46</sup>

Philadelphian Edward Jenkins concurred. Highlighting the illegality of the strike, he wrote to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to publicly accuse the teachers of “attempting to blackmail the two million tax payers of Philadelphia” and he hoped “that Mayor Rizzo has the courage and fortitude to use all means to replace the striking teachers with the thousands of recent graduates who can qualify for these openings.” William Humm, writing from outside the city, similarly called the PFT “an extortion group” who “harassed” the public. He wanted “to see this union’s activities come to an end, even if it means that my children will miss an entire school year.” M. Regina Black, from Philadelphia, linked even more starkly the teacher strike to the “law and order” discourse: “Mayor Rizzo heads a large group of taxpayers who do not wish to pay more for sub-standard education of social delinquents who mar the daily existence of Philadelphia citizens with vandalism, graffiti, muggings, and public obscenities.” Finally, Emily Klebon admitted that “as much as I want my daughter to have an uninterrupted education, I hope Mayor Rizzo sticks to his guns.”<sup>47</sup>

The discursive link between teachers and the decline of law-and-order in Philadelphia was only heightened several days later when the media began calling for the court to prosecute the union leadership for contempt. The *Bulletin*, for instance, on January 16, asserted that “whatever public sympathy the public school teachers may have enjoyed at the start of the walkout has now largely eroded.” It asked the court to “act

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<sup>46</sup> Jon Katz, “Rizzo Considers Strike Personal Battle,” *PI*, Jan. 14, 1973.

<sup>47</sup> “Hire the Dedicated,” *PI*, Jan. 14, 1973; “Union Criticized,” *SB*, Jan. 14, 1973; “The Rule of Law,” *PI*, Jan. 16, 1973; “Applauds Rizzo,” *EB*, Jan. 16, 1973.

swiftly and firmly.” Two days later, WCAU-TV argued that “we feel that the teachers are taking the law into their own hands. We wonder how many times many of these same people have whined and cried about the lawlessness of their students (and being lawless means that one has taken the law into his own hands)...What kind of teacher is it who teaches—by personal example—open defiance of the law?”<sup>48</sup> Stating that the teachers had lost public support likely did much to reify that very narrative, whether it had actually been the case or not. Pointing to the “defiance” of an anonymous “whining” teacher did much to frame the strike as one in which teachers wanted to have the law both ways.

The effect of the discursive shift brought on by criminalizing the strike was that the debate was now broken into two irreconcilable positions: a “public” view, which entered into a feedback loop with the media’s view that the atrocity represented by the union’s defiance of an injunction was the ultimate meaning of the strike, and attempts, almost exclusively by teachers, to justify their shut down of the schools as necessary to force the city to deal with its dire financial straits without punishing teachers and students.

Moving beyond merely the detriment to academics, the former position focused heavily on the moral and cultural damage done to Philadelphia school children, regardless of the justice of the teachers’ cause. Joseph Banik, for example, wrote to the *Evening Bulletin* that he took “no side in the school teachers’ dispute....” He argued that whatever the settlement to the strike looked like, “it should be done within the framework

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<sup>48</sup> “Defying the Court,” *EB*, Jan. 16, 1973; WCAU-TV editorial, Jan. 18, 1973, PFT Collection,” *UA*, Box 173.

of the law, rather than in defiance to it.” Obeying the law was especially important because “the children are the future of Philadelphia and the nation. To teach them defiance to the law by example is not, in my view, in the best interests of society.”

Edward Kaplan, wrote a similar, if more scathing, letter from the Philadelphia suburb of Cherry Hill, New Jersey. He could not “overlook the fact that these openly defiant and judicially contemptuous persons are ‘teachers.’ There can be no question of their understanding of the consequence of their unlawful acts. If let go unpunished, what lesson can their students draw from this?” Harry Holt Smith questioned the moral degeneration of the American work ethic by the teachers who declined to return to work: “What has become of our dedicated workers? ...I look back on the days of dedicated workers like myself whose motto was: ‘My boss’s success means my success.’ Years ago, the unions did a lot of good for the working man, but in recent years, a vicious circle has developed, not only hurting the U.S. but the entire world. Where are the dedicated teachers, doctors, etc.?”<sup>49</sup>

As the trial of the PFT leadership commenced, the critics grew louder. Jean Gordon asked “what right do the teachers have to ignore the injunction and paralyze the education system in the city and leave the children with time on their hands to get into trouble?” Eileen Antinnuci used an anecdote of a striking female teacher who called a male strikebreaker a “scab” to make her point. Questioning the striker’s proper role as a woman, she continued, “Here was an educated woman, a person supposed to mold young minds. She reduced herself to a cheap, loud-mouthed, sign-carrying law-breaker.” Grace

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<sup>49</sup> “Within the Law,” *EB*, Jan. 18, 1973; “Teacher Should Obey Injunction,” *PI*, Jan. 20, 1973; “Dedicated Workers,” *PI*, Jan. 19, 1973.

Anne Randall perhaps painted the bleakest picture of the strikers' defying the injunction when she criticized labor unions for both the "high cost of living" and for a rash of work stoppages: "Schools shut, piers closed along our waterfront nationwide, and you expect me to say unions are good. Good for whom? Good for what? Our country is going to hell on jet-propelled roller skates—thanks to greed and low morals. Just to help it along we have X-rated movies. We no longer deserve to have on our coins 'In God We Trust'—do we really? Look what we give to our young people. Shame on us!"<sup>50</sup>

Teachers defended the illegal strike action in a variety of ways. Winifred Rosenbaum, for instance, believed the school crisis was "sexist." She believed teachers were justified in continuing to strike in defiance of the law because teachers—who were associated with the notion of "women's work"—were being unfairly asked to make sacrifices to get the city schools out of the red. "Would anyone seriously suggest," she asked, "that policemen, firemen, lawyers, doctors, or any member of a male associated occupation make such noble sacrifices for the public good? Society is accustomed to making unrealistic demands on women, and to utilize them everywhere as cheap labor, that it is a natural carry-over to any occupation associated with them." Another teacher more pointedly defended the teachers' defiance of the injunction. Citing Martin Luther King's defiance of injunctions in the civil rights movement, she argued that "teachers defy an injunction to insure a decent, full year program for all Philadelphia school children." Finally, Linda Berman pointed to the practical difficulties of educating students given the current level of funding: "For so long teachers have asked for help in

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<sup>50</sup> "Critics of Teachers' Strike Sound Off," *EB*, Jan. 26, 1973; "Real Teachers," *PI*, Jan. 29, 1973.

learning how to teach new programs but have received little aid. It is important for the public to realize that to be a creative teacher one must constantly be attuned to new ideas. To do this takes money, training, and communication.”<sup>51</sup>

The week of February 4-10 proved to be the final escalation point in the rhetoric around the strike. On Sunday, February 4, a four-hour televised debate between the Board and PFT representatives indicated that a compromise was still a long way off and inspired a renewed round of dire dialogue from the public. Even more importantly, on February 9, Judge Jamiesen sentenced Sullivan and Ryan to the lengthy prison terms cited above, and they went to jail immediately. At their sentencing, Jamiesen called the defiance of the injunction “a brutish, clumsy attack on the public welfare....In taking on a court order, the defendants have played with the future life of this city, and the mental image of some 275,000 of its children of what democracy is.”<sup>52</sup> Suddenly the “defiance” of the law was not an abstract question but a concrete debate featuring the immediate consequences of two individuals locked up in jail.

On February 6, Mrs. John Boysen wrote to PFT negotiator John Ryan that she and her family had “watched the wrangle between the school board and teachers on Sunday. I think you should know that none of the parents I polled are in support of your position.” She believed that the future of Philadelphia was at stake in the strike, as “the cost of our public employees is getting to the breaking point. You are asking the people of

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<sup>51</sup> “Sexist School Crisis,” *PI*, Jan. 17, 1973; “Dr. King Cited,” *EB*, Jan. 18, 1973. The teacher, Mrs. Phyllis Rein, would send the same letter—published two days later—to the *Inquirer*. That newspaper would publish an additional paragraph that called the strike “a fight for the preservation of public education in the city of Philadelphia, and also for the salvation of the city of Philadelphia itself.”; “Why They Protest,” *EB*, Jan. 22, 1973.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Thomson, “Sullivan, Ryan Get 6-Month Jail Terms; 48 Labor Chiefs Threaten General Strike,” *EB*, Feb. 9, 1973.

Philadelphia to support your demands from far poorer salaries than you command.” She begged Ryan to “please be reasonable.” And then, with a dire prediction that indicated her fears of a racial hierarchy turned upside-down, she argued that “you are pricing yourselves right out of our lives. The city is emptying of its productive citizens who pay the bills. Soon there will be nothing left but white Catholics in parish schools, who have it tough enough already, and helpless blacks. We are almost to that point now.” The same day, an anonymous postcard, sent to Sonya Richmond, a female negotiator who was featured prominently in the televised negotiations, unleashed the writer’s misogynist rage at the illegal teacher strike: “A kid out of Temple U gets \$8900 a year to start. That’s \$234 a week for 9 ½ months work that’s why the school system is broke!!! You Twat!!! You’re nothing but a goddam thief!!!”<sup>53</sup>

For their part, the media ratified the harsh judicial decision by initiating a round of equally stark calls to the teachers to give up the strike. The *Inquirer*, for example, lauded the judge’s decision, arguing that the tough sentence “made it clear that court orders are to be taken seriously and that criminal contempt of court is an offense not to be committed lightly.” They urged those teachers still on strike to “end their defiance of the law and the court, and return to the classroom.” The *Bulletin* asserted that “the court acted as defender of the public’s interests in the school crisis....The teachers are in no sense in an oppressed situation where they can argue for obeying a ‘higher-law’ of civil disobedience, ignoring the court’s rightful authority.” The union, the newspaper

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<sup>53</sup> Letter to John Ryan, Feb. 6, 1973; Letter to Sonya Richman, postmarked Feb. 6, 1973, “PFT Collection,” UA, Box 173. On Feb. 10, the same writer, in unmistakably the same handwriting wrote—again to Richman: “When you act like Jesse James you get treated like Jesse James. Your demands are outrageous, you are acting like stevedores.”

continued, needed to “drop its intransigence, return to work, and bargain in a serious and realistic manner.” News radio station WFIL twice aired an editorial that supported the jail terms: “What it does is to affirm the power of the court to have its orders obeyed. In this case the union and the officials have been convicted of criminal contempt of a court order to end picketing and go back to work. The conviction has been upheld by a higher court. The law has been broken—a penalty must be paid.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus began the crescendo to the public backlash against the teacher union as the remaining two weeks of the strike featured vitriolic critiques not just of the PFT but of the legitimacy of the labor movement itself. I. Buckman believed that the union “has already saturated their usefulness and value as a labor force in its short lifetime. True when they first organized, their salaries and benefits were inadequate, but through constant bargaining they were able to bring themselves to a very respectable level. But, as with many labor unions, their demands have become superfluous.” Al Oakem, who identified himself as a retired teacher from Philadelphia, called the jailed union leaders “scofflaws” and hoped that “perhaps this country has at least reached the stage when it will move to protect itself from public servants who defy the law and cause irreparable social damage. Who knows, perhaps Philadelphia will become the site of a new declaration of independence—independence from unconscionable strikes by public employees.” Edward Mau, from the suburb of St. Davids, Pennsylvania, connected the sentence meted out by Jamiesen to then Senator Robert Kennedy’s “conscientious courage” in prosecuting Jimmy Hoffa some years before. To Mau, both Kennedy and

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<sup>54</sup> “The Cost of Contempt: Jail Terms and Fines,” *PI*, Feb. 10, 1973; “The Teachers’ Strike: Firmness and Anguish,” *SB*, Feb 11, 1973; WFIL-56 editorial, aired Feb. 10 and Feb. 11, 1973, “PFT Collection,” *UA*, Box 173.

Jamiesen were heroes: “I am grateful for these great Americans who risk their lives to thwart the evil forces of unionism from controlling our juries, our courts, and ultimately, of course, the destiny of our nation.”<sup>55</sup>

By the end of the strike in late February, an editorial by the *Evening Bulletin* showed just how far the meaning of the strike had shifted since its beginnings back in September, 1972. The piece admitted that the financial crisis had been the initial cause of the strike, and that the settlement had done nothing to solve it. More importantly, however, it argued that the primary meaning to result from the strike was that the state’s attempt to solve the contentious problem of public sector strikes had failed: “Above all, perhaps, the school strike showed that Pennsylvania has still not found a reliable means of dealing with devastating strikes by public employees.”<sup>56</sup>

The *Bulletin* was not the only critic of the ability of the state—through Act 195—to rationally handle labor conflict. In late January, a bipartisan group of representatives in the Pennsylvania General Assembly held hearings and initiated legislation to repeal public sector workers’ right to strike. Members of the “public” like Theodore Robb questioned the effectiveness of the labor-liberal arrangement to public sector employment, while also chastising the media: “For some reason or other all editorial writers seem convinced that the world’s social ills can all be papered over with either dollars or new legislation.” He believed that the only real solution to the strike crisis was for Mayor Rizzo to “ring down the curtain on Philadelphia, much like a play that no longer has an audience (a) who is interested, or (b) who can afford the tickets to watch

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<sup>55</sup>“Suggestion to Avoid a Mass Strike,” *EB*, Feb. 23, 1973; “Did Union Leaders Deserve Jail Terms?” *PI*, Feb. 14, 1973.

<sup>56</sup>“While Teachers Vote—a Sigh of Relief,” *EB*, Feb. 28, 1973.

the current tragic-comedy-satire which has been unfolding before us.” The strike also inspired the *Harrisburg Patriot* to reassess its view of the law’s effectiveness: “The strike...showed that Act 195 is in dire need of reexamination. Currently Pennsylvania and Hawaii are the only two states in the U.S. granting public employees even a limited right to strike. We think there should soon be only one: Hawaii.”<sup>57</sup>

Commentary like the above shows that the framing of the teacher strike, precipitated by a school board attempting to wring concessions from teachers during a financial crisis, moved markedly during the course of the six-month long battle. Initially, most of the discourse around the strike assumed that teachers—as public sector workers—deserved collective bargaining rights, including the right to strike. If many believed teachers needed to be more “reasonable” in their negotiating demands, they nonetheless viewed the financial crisis as one outside of the teachers’ control. The early debate focused on solutions to the crisis—from concessions on the part of the teachers, to increased local revenue to larger metropolitan and even federal solutions. However, once the strike was criminalized, the perceived inability of the state to control its own labor force through legal repression led to a very different meaning of the strike—the declining legitimacy of both the labor movement *and* the liberal policy designed to prevent disruption in the state’s ability to provide public services.

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<sup>57</sup> Howard Shapiro and Kathy Begley, “Teacher Strike Ban Proposed for State,” *PI*, Jan. 28, 1973; “Readers Study the Strike Lesson,” *EB*, Feb. 4, 1973; “School Strike Showed Act 195 Worthless,” *Harrisburg Patriot*, Mar. 2, 1972, reprinted in *PI*, Mar. 3, 1973. Recall, from chapter one, the paper’s optimism about the new law.

### **St. Louis: Illegal from the Start**

Though the St. Louis Teachers Union (STLTU) had been around since the 1930s, it was not until the latter part of the 1960s that teachers in Missouri's largest city were sufficiently organized and militant to press for collective bargaining in a meaningful way. The state's 1959 public employee law gave teachers the right to form professional associations—to “meet and confer”—but local school boards were under no obligation to bargain. A decision by the state's Attorney General in 1968 further clarified the statute by asserting that teachers had the legal right to “form unions and to present proposals to the school board” but a board was not “compelled to negotiate or even meet with the teachers.”<sup>58</sup>

In the same year, the new “teacher militancy” in the city—in the words of STLTU President Demosthenes DuBose—inspired that union to threaten a strike if teachers did not receive raises and collective bargaining rights. The teachers received the former but not the latter in 1969, which was enough to postpone the threat of another strike until late 1972. By then, many teachers, who had not received any more raises since 1969, were dissatisfied with the declining earning power of their wages. Since the state law did not sanction the election of a sole collective bargaining agent, two unions by 1972 competed for the city's teachers—the slightly-larger, AFT-affiliated STLTU and the NEA-affiliated St. Louis Teachers Association (SLTA). In December, 1972, the two sides joined forces in threatening a strike by the end of January unless the St. Louis Board of Education

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<sup>58</sup> “Board Backed by Opinions,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 22, 1973; the quote is from the state Attorney General, reprinted by the *Post-Dispatch*.

agreed to a collective bargaining election, hospitalization insurance, and a “substantial” mid-year raise.<sup>59</sup>

The Board for its part not only argued that it would not bargain with teachers, but also that bargaining with teachers was actually “illegal.” Board members further claimed that while the teachers deserved higher pay, the St. Louis school system was already running a deficit of several million dollars and so could not provide raises, particularly in the middle of the year when the budget had already been fixed. Leadership of the teachers’ unions—especially the STLTU’s DuBose—disputed the Board’s numbers—arguing that their assertion of deficit spending relied on a standard of holding several million dollars in cash reserve over for the next year as a hedge against potentially declining revenues. The budgeting formula would become a key point of contention in the ensuing strike, but it was clear that, like Philadelphia, the city of St. Louis was facing a systemic revenue problem due to the fact that residents continued to move out of the city in the late 1960s and early 1970s and property values declined.<sup>60</sup>

By the time teachers took a strike vote, many St. Louisans knew that teachers were already striking in both Chicago and Philadelphia. Though the Chicago strike would end just before the St. Louis teachers struck, Philadelphia teachers were then entering their third week. Local reportage—like that in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on January 13, 1973—connected the city’s first teacher strike to a nation-wide “conflict over the issues of education and teachers rights” which was “about to bear down upon

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<sup>59</sup> DuBose Press Release, Sep. 4, 1968, in Office of the President Correspondences, Reuther; letter from Jerry Abernathy and DuBose to Adella Smiley, Dec. 22, 1972, in St. Louis Teachers Union Collection, Walter Reuther Archives, Wayne State University, Box 18.

<sup>60</sup> Meeting Minutes, Jan. 9, 1973, *Printed Record of the St. Louis Board of Education*, Missouri History Museum; letter from DuBose to Nathaniel Johnson, Jan. 16, 1973, in STLTUC, WRA, Box 18.

the 4,170 teachers and 103,987 students in the St. Louis system.”<sup>61</sup> St. Louis Circuit Court Judge Thomas McGuire made the strike a criminal action from the start, issuing a restraining order to prevent strike leaders from calling on teachers to walk off their jobs. On January 22, however, 3,000 of the city’s teachers were on strike, and the number increased to 3,500 the next day. Five days after that, McGuire issued a formal injunction against leaders of the strike, asserting that not only was it illegal but also that, just as the Board had argued, any binding collective bargaining by teachers was illegal under Missouri law. By the middle of February, Judge McGuire had levied substantial fines on both the STLTU and the SLTA, and leaders from both unions had disappeared from public view in order to avoid appearing before the court as individual violators of the injunction. Both sides called for more state aid from Democratic Governor Christopher Bond, who promptly declined, calling the strike a “local matter.” It was not until the St. Louis Board of Aldermen diverted \$1 million in federal revenue sharing money to the schools that the Board of Education agreed to a modest mid-year raise and promised to raise teacher salaries the next year as well. The Board also agreed to pay for hospitalization insurance for teachers, and—though stopping short of calling it a collective bargaining election—to allow a future vote by teachers to determine “majority status” for one single teacher organization.<sup>62</sup> Although they had not won much of a raise, it had clearly been a significant victory for the strikers, as, in spite of the substantial fines the two unions had had to pay after defying the injunction, they had essentially forced the Board of Education to bargain collectively. Further, the election that made the STLTU

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<sup>61</sup> Karen Van Meter, “Teachers’ Choice: To Carry Textbook or Picket Sign,” *SPD*, Jan. 12, 1973.

<sup>62</sup>“Bans Teacher Strike, Defiance Predicted,” *SPD*, Jan. 31, 1973; Robert Kelly, “School Strike Ends,” *SPD*, Feb 19, 1973; Ellen Scherberg and Karen Marshall, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Feb. 19, 1973.

the collective bargaining agent for St. Louis teachers in 1974 would not have been possible without the clout shown by the teachers during the strike.

The narrative that played out in the media was multi-faceted and substantially different from that in Philadelphia. Labor politics in St. Louis straddled the line between the kind of liberal support for organized labor traditionally found in industrial states like New York and Pennsylvania and the Sunbelt labor politics defined by state “right-to-work” laws that came in the wake of section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. With sizable unionized workforces in Kansas City and St. Louis, Missourians had rejected the right-to-work law—which precludes the establishment of union membership as the default option for a job site—that three of its four neighbors (Kansas, Iowa, and Arkansas) had on their books. Support for labor unions, however, clearly had not reached the same level whereby public sector workers enjoyed rights similar to those in the Northeast. In such a climate, it is no surprise that two seemingly contradictory narratives emerged simultaneously in the media. According to some explanations, the crisis was one caused by teachers who refused to abide by the law. In the eyes of others, the crisis was caused by an unfair funding system, in which teachers deserved more money, but the state—either the St. Louis municipal government and/or the state of Missouri—had not done enough to adequately fund the schools. What brought the two explanations together was the government’s failure—both to control its labor force from illegal action and to provide the necessary resources for the citizens of the city. Though the St. Louis narrative came in several flavors—the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, for example, in roughly equal circulation as its major counterpart, was much more conservative than the *Post-Dispatch* and issued many patently anti-union editorials—it

nonetheless centered on the notion that that state had failed to deliver in the public's interest.

Before the strike had even begun, the *Globe-Democrat* explained the potential walkout as the result of “a crew of agitators” from the NEA and the AFT who were “stirring up strike trouble.” These “outsiders,” the newspaper went on, did not have the “best interests of the community at heart.” The editorial lauded the decision of the court to issue a restraining order against leaders of the teachers union, defining the public interest as one in which “a threatened shutdown of public schools in the city” would be “avert[ed].” Nevertheless, while blasting the strike as the work of professional organizers, the piece also admitted that “St. Louis teachers deserve the pay raises they are pushing for” even though prudence dictated that teachers wait until the school system was not in “its presently precarious financial position.”<sup>63</sup>

Once the strike started, characterizations of the teachers' “illegal” action took center stage. Ninety percent of the teachers did not report to teach by the strike's second day, prompting the district to close most schools. Clyde Miller, the superintendent, however, blamed the “mob action” of some striking teachers for keeping out a sizable bloc of those who wanted to teach and only then forcing the district to turn students away. In doing so, he pointed to the chaotic consequences which would ultimately result: “Will St. Louis public schools be surrendered to mob rule? If they are, then the destiny of the teachers, the children and the community will be cast into the hands of the strongest muscles at the moment. And who among us can say what mob might emerge

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<sup>63</sup> “No Strike Agitators Needed Here,” *SGD*, Jan. 19, 1973.

with the hardest fists next week, next month, or next year?” In an editorial on January 24 which served essentially as a mouthpiece for the school administrator, the *Globe-Democrat* echoed Miller’s concerns. The newspaper called the striking teachers “heady with the wine of mass disruption” and charged them with “resort[ing] to mob action to close the schools still operating after the start of their strike. And they succeeded.” Drawing on the trope of “immoral” anti-war protesters, the editorial argued that “such hooliganism might be expected of some student radicals, but it is abhorrent coming from the Teamster-affiliated St. Louis Teachers Union or the more professional St. Louis Association of Teachers.”<sup>64</sup>

The more sympathetic *Post-Dispatch* also criticized the teachers’ tactics. In a report on the strike’s first day, the newspaper’s Connie Rosenbaum wrote a feature story on an elementary school in which every teacher reported for work and the school remained open. Rosenbaum pointed out that the teachers there “expressed a strong sense of dedication and obligation to their students.” One veteran teacher did not strike, according to the piece, because she viewed herself as a “professional.” The principal heaped praise on his “good group” of teachers who “had not deserted the students.” Finally, another long-time teacher “just d[id]n’t believe that teachers should strike....Unions are OK for businesses and industry, but not for teachers....If I defied the court restraining order, how could I instruct [my students] to obey the law?”<sup>65</sup> The framing of the story—the only one in the newspaper that week to feature one particular

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<sup>64</sup> Ellen Sherberg and Karen Marshall, “All City Schools Closed by Board,” *SGD*, Jan. 24, 1973; “Lawless Teachers Hit New Low,” *SGD*, Jan. 25, 1973. The *Globe-Democrat*’s assertion that the St. Louis Teachers Union was affiliated with the Teamsters was ridiculous—the Teamsters had been expelled from the AFL-CIO in 1957.

<sup>65</sup> Connie Rosenbaum, “Strike Impact Is Slight at South Side School,” *SPD*, Jan. 23, 1973.

school—clearly highlighted the newspaper’s position on the strike. When the overwhelming majority of the teachers in the city felt aggrieved enough to go on strike, the anti-walkout climate at this one school did not represent most St. Louis teachers, and the very existence of the story served as a discursive example of how teachers *should* have been behaving.

KMOX—the city’s premier news radio station—also came down harshly on the teachers. The station admitted that teachers needed smaller class sizes and better wages and even fervently argued that “teachers, like other public employees, should have a right to organize and bargain collectively.” Nevertheless, the editorial’s response to the strike was inseparable from either of the two major newspapers: “...we do not believe that teachers should leave their classrooms and take to the streets in defiance of the law....One of our hopes for our public schools is that they will help instill respect for the law in our children, but how can teachers impart respect for the law when they are defying it themselves?” The piece continued by lamenting the same declension narrative so many other witnesses to teacher strikes elsewhere had bemoaned since the early 1970s: “Our children today see enough examples of flaunting the law. Teachers fail their duty to the young if they themselves do not respect the laws of the land.”<sup>66</sup>

After Judge McGuire’s temporary restraining order became a formal injunction to union leaders to send the teachers back into the classrooms, the local media’s attacks on the strike deepened. The *Post-Dispatch*, on February 1, held that the injunction

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<sup>66</sup> KMOX editorial, Jan. 25, 1973 (aired at 8:50 am and 5:20 pm), STLTUC, WRA, Box 18. WRTH-radio ran a similar editorial on Jan. 29 imploring the teachers to return to work: “There must have been some other way to settle the differences, without forcing the closing of the schools, the disruption of the educational process, the possible loss of state and federal support funds, and the setting of a questionable example for the students they teach.” See STLTUC, WRA, Box 18.

represented a “logical legal development.” While teacher salaries may have fallen below where they should have been, the newspaper lectured the strikers on the fiscal realities: “The Board’s financial position seems not to have impressed the strike leaders, but we think it should.” The piece then called on the teachers to call off the strike and work with the Board to get new funds. The editors at the *Globe-Democrat* became practically apoplectic at the thought that the teachers had ignored the judge’s order to end the strike: “At this point the teachers have about as much logic on their side as the fabled army officer in Vietnam who reportedly told his troops: ‘we’re going to have to destroy this town to save it.’”<sup>67</sup>

On February 6, Judge McGuire fined the SLTA the enormous sum of \$150,000 for violating the injunction (SLTA President Jerry Abernathy had been more vocal in refusing to abide by the injunction than the STLTU leaders). Just as it had in Philadelphia when the strike leaders were jailed, the hefty punishment kept the actions of the teachers at the center of the conflict. The *Globe-Democrat* staunchly defended McGuire’s action, heartily offering him “the gratitude of the law-abiding community for cracking down.” A resident of suburban Florissant was “disheartened to observe the defiance of a court order and the raucous behavior of so many teachers at meetings.” He longed for the days when teachers had “imparted not only the basic knowledge we had to possess but more than that, a deep moral sense of responsibility, respect for authority,

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<sup>67</sup> “Finding a Strike Solution,” *SPD*, Feb. 1, 1973; “Teachers Not Above the Law,” *SGD*, Feb. 1, 1973.

courtesy, and love of home and country.” A week later, the *Globe-Democrat* simply opined that the “public is being punished severely” by the “unreasonable strike.”<sup>68</sup>

Unlike in Philadelphia, however, the strike did not last long enough nor were the punishments severe enough for the discourse of the criminal teacher to totally eclipse the discussion of the intractable problem of the metropolitan political economy or of the failure of the state to solve it. St. Louis, like many Eastern industrial cities in the United States, faced deindustrialization almost at the moment the nation began demobilizing from World War II. The city followed a similar trajectory to that described in Thomas Sugrue’s work on Detroit in the postwar era: African Americans—many from the rural South—continued to pour into the city in the years immediately after the war while the jobs moved—along with white single-family homeowners abetted by federal housing policy—out into the suburbs or to the more capital-friendly environs of the Sunbelt.<sup>69</sup>

The population of the city, in fact, declined from a height of over 850,000 in 1950 to around 620,000 in 1970; 517,000 in 1977; and 453,000 in 1980. Much of the decline in population was represented by the continuing movement of white property-owning families into the suburbs: in 1970, the African-American population of the city made up about 40% of the total population (a drastic increase from 13% in 1940), but the percentage of blacks in the public schools stood over 70%. These demographic changes led to a substantial drop in the property taxes needed to finance the schools: not only were there simply fewer tax-paying citizens, but in 1970 one-third of the city’s residents

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<sup>68</sup> “Teachers Get Just Reward—Big Fines,” *SGD*, Feb. 7, 1973; “Teachers ‘Situation Ethics’ Harm Pupils,” *SGD*, Feb. , 1973; “Teachers Deaf to Reason,” *SGD*, Feb. 14, 1973.

<sup>69</sup> Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 13-22. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*. For a similar story elsewhere, see Robert Self’s study of Oakland, *American Babylon*.

were on welfare rolls—thus not very likely to contribute much in property taxes beyond what their rents might contribute to the taxes paid by rental-property owners.

Exacerbating the problem was that St. Louis's borders were permanently fixed following its secession from the county in the nineteenth century, so it was barred from adding any more taxable communities.<sup>70</sup> The school system, as a result, relied on major injections of revenue from the state of Missouri to meet its financial obligations. Thus, the only options for teachers to secure raises would be an increase in property taxes, more state aid, or deficit spending.

The Board unequivocally refused to finance teacher raises by going into debt, so public discussion focused on the other two alternatives—higher property taxes or more money from the state—and whether they criticized the teachers' action or believed it was an unwelcome necessity, commentators in each case criticized the failure of the state to solve the problem. Just days before the teachers went out on strike, for instance, the *Globe-Democrat*—around the exact time its editor made his scathing attacks on the strike as one brought on by “outside agitators”—offered a narrative that defined the strike as a structural problem as much as one in which teachers were behaving irresponsibly. In a political cartoon on January 17 printed on the newspaper's editorial page entitled “Belt Tightening,” an emaciated figure named “Local School System Financing” was being strangled around the waist by a belt emblazoned with the words “Taxpayer Resistance.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> U.S. Census, <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html>> accessed Jan. 11, 2012; Missouri Advocacy Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, “School Desegregation in the St. Louis and Kansas City Areas,” (Jan. 1981), 2-3.; Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 10-11. A useful discussion of these changes also takes place in the documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*. Directed by Chad Friedrichs (2010).

<sup>71</sup> Don Hesse, “Belt Tightening,” *SGD*, Jan. 17, 1973.

The implication was clear: the government was unable to appropriately fund the schools because they were starved of money by city taxpayers.

Several days into the strike, the *Globe-Democrat* augmented its anti-union position with one that called for more aid from the state of Missouri. The newspaper's editorial in its January 27-28 weekend edition pointed out the declining property tax base the city had to contend with. It then attempted to draw attention to the state's unfair formula for giving aid to local school districts: "Presently, state-wide funding averages 42 per cent. But St. Louis, which has a greater need than most school districts, gets only 37 per cent! ... It should be obvious that a maximum effort must be made by the city and everyone interested in better schools to gain passage of [a new] legislative package. The future of St. Louis schools is at stake. And what could be more important to a city?"<sup>72</sup>

The *Post-Dispatch* argued a similar point. On January 23, the editor criticized the "total irresponsibility" of the teachers' "illegal strong arm tactic" and characterized the action as a strike "against the people of St. Louis and their children." Nonetheless, the larger problem was that the schools were "in very serious financial difficulties." Ultimately, the school system "must have major assistance from the state to avert a crisis in the years immediately ahead." The teachers' goal was not wrong, then, but as the piece pointed out, their tactic should have been instead to work with the school board to lobby the state legislature instead of shutting down the schools.<sup>73</sup>

Letters to the editor also placed blame for the strike on a failed system. Many of these came from teachers like Bill Diffley, who asserted that "dedication" would not get

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<sup>72</sup> "City Short-Changed on School Aid," *SGD*, Jan. 27-28, 1973.

<sup>73</sup> "End Illegal School Strike," *SPD*, Jan. 23, 1973.

him a discount when he went to pay his bills. Taking issue with the notion that service to students should outweigh all other considerations, he went on to point out that “with dedication and fifteen cents you can get a cup of coffee most anywhere.”<sup>74</sup> Others, however, who were not in the profession, also criticized the system of American metropolitan political economy that seemed to force teachers to strike. From across the river in Edwardsville, Illinois, Nancy Duncan argued that

...until the parent cares as much about his child’s education as he expects the teacher to care, his child’s education will be deficient.... the taxpayer turns down school tax appropriations because he can. He pays his military taxes because he must. The former results in larger classes with less individual and remedial student learning. The latter pays for millions of dollars in cost over-runs and misguided wars. Isn’t our country’s best defense our children, not bullets?<sup>75</sup>

Nor were these critiques written out of the explanation for the strike—as they were in Philadelphia—after the teachers were punished. For example, a student from just outside the city limits—in nearby Clayton, Missouri—wrote a letter to the *Post-Dispatch* several days after the heavy fines had been levied on the SLTA. To him, the strike pointed to the inequity of the very framework of metropolitan schools: “As a student at Clayton High School, I can find no justice in the fact that school is continuing as usual in Clayton, while just across Skinker Boulevard [the boundary between St. Louis and Clayton] my fellow students in the city are being deprived of their education through no fault of their own. The teachers’ strike is, however, merely a manifestation of a much greater national problem: the inequality of our school systems.” He concluded by

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<sup>74</sup> “Tough Job,” *SGD*, Jan. 29, 1973.

<sup>75</sup> Letter to the editor from Nancy Duncan, *SPD*, February 7, 1973.

asserting that to rectify the situation “huge sums of money should be appropriated to raise other districts to the level of Clayton.”<sup>76</sup>

Several days later, Francis Thomas characterized the strike in a similar, if more vociferous, manner: “The fundamental cause of the St. Louis school strike is not the militancy of the Board of Education but the niggardly St. Louis taxpayer.” In particular, he excoriated white middle-class taxpayers in St. Louis:

My children attend parochial schools, so why should I pay for public schools? The children in the schools are predominantly black, so why should I be concerned about them? These are some of the arguments advanced by many who pay lip service to education but are unwilling to pay for a first-rate public school system. The school tax rate in St. Louis is far lower than that of most St. Louis County districts; until St. Louisans can be persuaded to adopt a more altruistic attitude toward the financing of their public school system it will continue to be troubled by the financial uncertainty and justifiably dissatisfied teachers.<sup>77</sup>

It is possible that Thomas was a striking teacher attempting to defend the union’s tactics, but given the level of animosity many teachers felt toward a recalcitrant school board that had been so opposed to any collective bargaining rights and the fact that he did not criticize them, it seems more likely that Thomas was either a parent or a disinterested onlooker.

In the waning days of the strike, even the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, which had called on the teachers multiple times to go back to work, asserted that the most important question to emerge from the strike was the result of a sub-par system of financing. On February 16, an editorial urged Governor Bond to find a way to bring more money to the

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<sup>76</sup> “Unequal Schools,” *SPD*, Feb. 11, 1973.

<sup>77</sup> “At the Root Money,” *SPD*, Feb. 15, 1973.

city of St. Louis. The piece urged the Governor to consider the example of Detroit, then \$90 million in debt and considering closing the schools before the academic year ended: “If something is not done fairly soon” in St. Louis, the editor urged, “the situation could continue to deteriorate, with disastrous consequences.” In spite of the illegal actions of the teachers in St. Louis, “the basic nagging facts continue to be that the teachers deserve more money and the School Board does not have the funds to meet their needs.”<sup>78</sup>

Four days later, after it had become obvious that Governor Bond would not bring any additional state money to St. Louis, the Board of Aldermen diverted a scant \$1 million (the annual operating budget of the Board of Education was around \$80 million) to fund a small portion of the teachers’ proposed raise. The teachers went back to work. As the schools reopened and city life returned to normal, the *Post-Dispatch* continued to point to the dysfunctional circumstances of the school system. “Settlement of the strike,” the newspaper argued, “does not solve the long-range problems of school financing; the Board ought to propose a comprehensive plan that will attract public support.” Since Governor Bond had declined to offer financial assistance, “now the School Board needs to find additional sources of money, and it should carefully evaluate the suggestions made during the strike, including submission of a major tax increase to St. Louis voters and various measures by the State Legislature to provide financial help.”<sup>79</sup>

On May 10, 1973, the *Globe-Democrat* offered a concluding assessment on the St. Louis teacher strike. Consistent with its vehement anti-strike position, it accused teachers of having “bludgeoned the Board into granting a [salary] increase.” At the same

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<sup>78</sup> “What about the Governor?” *SPD*, Feb. 16, 1973.

<sup>79</sup> “Schools are Open,” *SPD*, Feb. 20, 1973.

time, what is instructive about the editorial is the way it characterized the efforts of the Board. While the striking teachers had certainly been guilty, in the eyes of the newspaper, of extorting the “public” by illegally walking off their jobs, the editor reserved a large sum of his disapprobation for the Board. In particular, the Board was guilty of “knuckling under” to the teachers. Now, it needed more funds to pay higher teacher salaries, and it was, according to the *Globe*, left with a lose-lose choice between deficit financing or attempting—probably unsuccessfully—to convince taxpayers to approve a higher property tax rate.

Unlike in Philadelphia—where the length of the strike, the city’s strike history, and the harsh punishments meted out to teachers had all but erased a discussion of the city’s political economy from the public discourse—the city’s financial difficulties continued to occupy a prominent place in St. Louis until the end of the strike. Ultimately, however, the public discourse emphasized that the liberal state had failed in St. Louis just as it had in Philadelphia. The city government could neither control its own labor force in St. Louis by getting it back to work nor could it (in conjunction with the state of Missouri) adequately solve the problem of financing the school system. Liberal assumptions about the efficacy of the state—as well as the role of labor unions—foundered indeed in the early 1970s, and the sense of failure brought on by lengthy teacher strikes like those in St. Louis and Philadelphia represented hothouses in which that process of de-legitimation began to mature.

In 1979 and 1981, respectively, St. Louis and Philadelphia would each undergo another long and controversial strike. By that time, however, the political climate in the nation had turned drastically away from the notion that either the state or labor unions

could play a positive role in alleviating social and economic conflict. As we will see in Chapter 6, teacher unions in those cities would be fighting defensive battles against an openly antagonistic “public.”

## **Chapter 4: Striking Against the Public: The Pittsburgh Teachers Strike of 1975-76 and the Mounting Crisis of Labor-Liberalism**

On December 1, 1975, Pittsburgh's public school teachers went on strike. Under the state's public employee law—passed just five years before—the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) had the right to strike against the Board of Public Education. In addition to both sanctioning and encouraging the formation of public sector unions, the law had been the first of any industrial state to give public sector workers the right to strike. This apparent victory, however, came with a catch: local judges—using their own discretion—could enjoin such strikes if they endangered the “welfare, health, and safety of the general public.” Clearly, no one could make the argument that a teacher strike endangered either the health or safety of the “public,” but the welfare clause—as we saw in Philadelphia in 1973—could be interpreted quite broadly. Thus, it was in the context of a welter of public debate in Pittsburgh, that a local judge on January 10, 1976 issued an injunction to force the teachers back to work in the interests of the community's “welfare.”

Much of the discussion about this strike—especially before it was enjoined and before the teachers violated a court order by continuing to stay out of the city's classrooms for another two weeks—evidenced a good deal of support for union rights and for adequate teacher salaries. Many of the same supporters, however, vehemently criticized the teachers' walkout, pointing out to us a larger, fundamental contradiction in the relationship between the postwar New Deal order and the labor movement. For much

of the 1960s and into the 1970s, most Americans believed that labor unions were not only legitimate but also necessary to counteract the power of the corporation and/or the state. At the same time, many believed that unions should not use their most important asset—the ability to force employers to provide better pay and working conditions by withholding their labor—because such an action was against the “public interest.”

This tension, I will argue, represents a neglected piece of the explanation for why so many turned against labor-liberalism in the 1970s. While historians have rightly pointed to some of the key contradictions in postwar liberalism—scholars have shown, for example, that liberal Keynesianism’s inability to satisfactorily “solve” the racial contradictions of the 1960s and 70s worked to rend the New Deal coalition—no one has yet shown how the particular public manifestations of organized labor in the 1970s both exposed the limitations of liberalism and allowed free-market activists to exploit those limitations for political gain.

This chapter uses Pittsburgh, and more particularly the teacher strike in the winter of 1975-76, as a case study to explore the relationship between public conceptions of labor unions, liberalism, and the role of the state. Pittsburgh represents a case study of special interest for reasons of both place and time. Indeed, Pittsburgh is notable because of its long history as a central site for the American labor movement, and thus shows the emergence of a prominent anti-union discourse in a city long committed to organized labor. Recall that Pennsylvania was the first state aside from Hawaii to formally guarantee—in certain instances—public sector workers’ rights to strike and thus also shows in stark relief the tensions between the liberal state and the labor movement.

Further, the Pittsburgh strike occurred at a crucial turning point in American labor politics in the 1970s. First, it followed on the crest of several years of private and public sector labor turmoil, resulting from an economic downturn coupled with exploding energy prices beginning in 1973. 1975 alone brought with it 478 public employee work stoppages, virtually all of which were at the state or local level. In terms of the workers involved, more public sector workers struck in that year than any other year in American history, with the exception of 1970, and at the state and local level, in any year period. Teacher strikes represented a large part of those public sector strikes: one month into the 1975-76 school year, there had already been over 100 teacher strikes in the US, a number which represented more teacher strikes in the nation than in the entire 1974-75 school year.<sup>1</sup>

Second, it was the longest and the most prominent teacher strike to come on the immediate heels of the New York City fiscal crisis of 1975 (and in fact, a week-long strike in New York City that fall to protest the austerity measures demanded by the city's lenders). New York City's near bankruptcy, attributed by many commentators to the purportedly insatiable demands of the city's public sector unions, struck fear into dozens of other smaller cities on the East Coast and in the Midwest, and Pittsburgh thus represented an important test for cities seeking to cope with the new age of municipal austerity that emerged from the crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, "Walkouts Disrupting U.S. Cities," *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1974; Associated Press, "Nearly 600 Strikes Grip Nation," *Hartford Courant*, July 17, 1974.

### **The context for the strike**

By the beginning of the strike in late 1975, Pittsburghers, like many other Americans in the Northeast and Midwest, were well-accustomed to conflict between teachers and school boards when it came time to bargain for a new contract. As I have documented, Pittsburgh had undergone two short strikes in 1968 and 1971. Further, the Ocean-Hill Brownsville strike, the Newark strike, and the wave of strikes—particularly in St. Louis and Philadelphia—in early 1973 had emerged as prominent national news.

It is also worth pointing out the public sector strikes in Baltimore—a city of a size similar to Pittsburgh and one less than 200 miles away—that garnered national attention in 1974. In February, the Public School Teachers Association (PSTA—an NEA affiliate) and the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU—an AFT affiliate) staged a joint strike to gain wage increases of \$275 across-the-board (what amounted to around 2%) for the remainder of the 1973-74 school year and an 11% package of salary and fringe benefits for 1974-75. Union leaders pointed out that inflation had caused consumer prices to increase 13% since their last pay increase, so the proposed increases would merely bring the teachers' pay up to par with rising prices.<sup>2</sup>

Baltimore, like Philadelphia and St. Louis, suffered from a fiscal crunch in the 1970s. Like St. Louis, Baltimore had seceded from the surrounding county in the nineteenth century and so could not annex any new taxable areas. Also, as in St. Louis, the public discussion of the month-long strike in Baltimore focused on obtaining more state aid as a means of dealing with the crisis. Unlike in St. Louis, however, while

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<sup>2</sup> “Summary of Issues in Teachers’ Contract Dispute,” *The Sun*, Feb. 4, 1974; PSTA strike flyer, William Donald Schaefer papers, *Baltimore City Archives*, Box 139.

criticisms of the teachers' strike tactics did occasionally seep into the public debate, for the most part, the mayor, the press, and citizens' groups were united in explaining the strike in terms of the state government's failure to provide needed funds to the city.

The Mayor of Baltimore, Democrat William Donald Schaefer, for example, responded by attempting to delay penalizing what was an illegal job action. Three weeks into the four-week strike, he asked the judge presiding over the Baltimore Board of Education's injunction request to postpone the contempt citation hearing. In a press release on February 22, he asked teachers to consider an offer of a raise half as large as they initially requested while the Baltimore delegation to the state legislature pressed for more funds from the state. "The city," he argued, "simply does not have the money to meet the demands for an 11 percent pay increase being made by the teachers. . . . We must make it clear to the Governor, to the Legislature, and to our fellow Marylanders that Baltimore needs and deserves help in meeting the crisis that faces us."<sup>3</sup>

Baltimore's major newspaper *The Sun* framed the strike as one loud protest in the national "cry of the cities." It sympathized with public sector employees who were "generally fed up with being asked year after year to sacrifice because the city cannot afford to give them the raises to which they feel entitled." Ultimately, however, Mayor Schaefer was not to blame since "the plight of city government is genuine. . . . and any help at this point must come from Annapolis, where the Governor and Maryland legislators

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<sup>3</sup> Mayor's Office News Release, Feb. 21, 1974, WDS Papers, BCA, Box 139. Schaefer was not simply grandstanding here, either. On February 11, he had provided area legislators with an articulate description of the city's political economy, highlighting how the city had to pay disproportionately for police protection and sanitation services, services that were often enjoyed by suburban residents who worked in the city without paying for them. See "Presentation by William Donald Schaefer to Baltimore City Members of General Assembly, Feb 11, 1974," WDS Papers, BCA, Box 139.

are sitting.”<sup>4</sup> Though the occasional letter-to-the-editor criticized teachers in some of the same terms we have seen in the other case studies above, the city’s parents overwhelmingly supported teachers and expressed discontent toward state and local political leaders. Joan Larichiuta, President of a local PTA, in explaining why parents were keeping their children out of the schools during the strike argued that “the teachers have been pushed to their limit.” Jane Cohen, a parent of two school-age children, felt “completely let down by the city and state governments. . . . It is obvious that the teachers deserve their raise and a way should be found to give it to them as quickly as possible without jeopardizing the education of the children. The funding will have to come from the state since Baltimore’s low tax base cannot adequately support its school population.”<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, after four weeks of staying off the job, union leaders decided against drawing the strike out any longer after it became apparent that Governor Marvin Mandel (D)—reluctant to raise taxes in an election year—was not going to add any significant revenue to support teacher salaries in Baltimore. In essence, they settled for Schaefer’s offer, sweetened by an additional 1% in the second year but still far behind the rate of inflation.

Though no “public” narrative of teacher culpability had really developed in Baltimore in February 1974, the lengthy school shut-down certainly weighed on the local understanding of the highly controversial sanitation and police strikes that exploded in

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<sup>4</sup> “Teacher Demands on Empty Purse,” *The Sun*, Feb. 5, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> “Parents Rally around Cause of Striking Schoolteachers,” *The Sun*, Feb. 7, 1974; “The City’s Children,” *The Sun*, Feb. 17, 1974. For an instance of a letter critical of teachers, one letter writer argued that teachers set a “miserable example. . . for their students by defying a court order and breaking the law! That some parents are willing to help them is beyond my understanding. What do they teach their children?” See “Miserable Example,” *The Sun*, Feb. 17, 1974.

the city the following July. For the same reason that teachers saw the necessity to strike against the cash-strapped city in February, so the city's blue-collar workers—led by a wildcat strike by garbage collectors on July 1—and then a large portion of the city's police force from July 11-15—struck to gain higher wages.<sup>6</sup> Though the city exacted retribution for the strikes—by laying off city workers to pay for wage increases and by firing eighty probationary policemen who were not protected by the police union—these two strike efforts were more successful than the teachers had been in the sense that each group gained sizable wage increases. Nevertheless, the two municipal strikes—especially the police strike—galvanized a local “public” discourse in which the city's unions were leading to run-away taxation and a breakdown in law-and-order. Two days into the police strike, a retired police captain, for example, wrote to the mayor that “I am in favor of doing something about pay raises [for the policemen], but where in the HELL IS THE MONEY GOING to come from? I paid taxes on my home in 1950, about \$350, now it up to close to \$800. I am a retired man, on FIXED SALARY, at the age of 73, and still working, trying to make ends meet.” He suggested that Police Commissioner Donald Pomerleau should “SUSPEND ALL THE POLICE, who failed to show up for duty, take in their guns, badges, etc.” Fellow Baltimorean Adeline Berluti also connected the actions of the city's public sector workers to the city's tax base, while additionally criticizing the tactics of the police strikes:

I deplore and condemn strikes which jeopardize the welfare of the general public. Such strikes should be not only illegal but absolutely not tolerated. I also feel that ever-increasing taxation must cease. The terrible inflation

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<sup>6</sup> Various estimates place the number of striking policemen from anywhere from 600-1200 of the city's 2400 police force. See Fred Barbash, “Baltimore Work Strike Ends; Police May Settle Today” *The Washington Post*, July 16, 1974.

we are today experiencing is playing havoc in the lives of most of us. For these reasons it is understandable that everyone should wish to earn more. But civil workers get paid thru [sic] taxation and this taxation falls on only a segment of the population that is, the property owner, who at the same time is hit just as hard by inflation as anyone else. Also, it must be kept in mind that amongst property owners there are those whose income is even less than that of the city, state or government worker. This makes for an impossible situation.

Richard Clarke, from the suburb of Towson, accused the police of “harassing the public” during the strike. Tellingly, he asserted that the police strike was indicative of the labor movement writ large when he confessed to Mayor Schaefer that “I heartily support your resistance of the illegal and unethical activities of the labor unions and their leaders and hope that you will continue to resist them.” Finally, the “three voters” in the household of Joseph C. Wolfkill connected the police strike directly to the February teacher strike when they argued that “all city workers (including teachers) elect to work for the city of Baltimore...since the budget was already approved, the city workers currently on strike are breaking the law.” They then urged the mayor to “stick to your guns...If you see fit to call the National Guard to help police the streets and empty the garbage, we are sure you will have more support from the tax-paying public than you have ever had from your own city employees.”<sup>7</sup>

The two Baltimore strikes also became part of a national narrative of a seemingly interminable strike-wave in the early summer of 1974. Total strike by workers in groups of 1,000 or more spiked from 250 to 424 from 1972-74, and the number of workers on

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<sup>7</sup> Letters to Mayor Schaefer, first three dated July 12, 1974, the fourth July 8, 1974, in WDS Papers, BCA, Box 190.

strike nearly doubled in the same period, from 975,000 to around 1.8 million.<sup>8</sup> Contracts timed to expire as the Nixon administration's wage and price controls led to strikes in many different parts of the nation at the same time as the Baltimore strikes. As the sanitation and police strikes concluded in Charm City, state employees in Ohio's prisons and mental institutions, machinists for National Airlines, and San Francisco transit workers were also out on strike. Syndicated stories with headlines like "Walkouts Disrupting U.S. Cities" and "Nearly 600 Strikes Grip Nation" proliferated in most major American newspapers and the Baltimore strikes represented the most prominent example featured in the columns.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the Baltimore strikes made American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) President Jerry Wurf a symbol of a harshly critical discursive understanding of public sector strikes. AFSCME had been the national organization with which both the sanitation workers and the police had been affiliated, and Wurf had argued vehemently that public employees like those in Baltimore should have the right to withhold their labor as part of the collective bargaining process. In particular, the contention by Governor Mandel that during negotiations with AFSCME Wurf had "warned me that Baltimore City would burn to the ground unless the city gave in to his demands" seemed to highlight how little union leaders cared for the public.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Work Stoppages Involving 1000 or More Workers, 1947-2011." <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.t01.htm>> accessed 1/4/2013.

<sup>9</sup> Associated Press, "Walkouts Disrupting U.S. Cities," *Chicago Tribune*, July 15, 1974; Associated Press, "Nearly 600 Strikes Grip Nation," *Hartford Courant*, July 17, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Walsh, "Mandel Scores Union Chief's Strike Role," *Washington Post*, Aug., 2, 1974.

Wurf denied the statement,<sup>11</sup> but his denial did little to dislodge the association of public sector strikes with the sentiment, and the next year, conservative anti-union journalist Ralph de Toledano published a treatise devoted to halting a federal public sector bargaining law and rolling back the “Big Labor feudalism” brought on by public sector strikes, entitled (in a clear reference to Wurf’s purported statement) *Let Our Cities Burn*. Compared with Robert Braun’s *Teachers and Power*, from 1972 (See Chapter 1), Toledano’s slim volume on the evils of public sector unionization in 1975 shows how those opposing public sector strikes not only had more material from which to make increasingly virulent assaults on union leaders, but more importantly, how these assaults went beyond a simple narrative of power-hungry labor leaders intent on grabbing power to encompass public sector workers as a whole.

To be sure, much of *Let Our Cities Burn* is built around a conspiracy theory in which public sector labor leaders had attempted to usurp the democratic prerogatives of the local state. In his chapter on the “nature of unions” Toledano argues that the notion that “organized labor represents the American wage earner” is a “myth.” The union, rather, “is an instrument of class warriors there to create grievances.”<sup>12</sup> Fleshing out his criticism of labor leaders, Toledano focused primarily on two in particular: Wurf, and the current President of the AFT, Albert Shanker. With regard to Wurf, Toledano argued, he “meant precisely what he was saying [during the Baltimore strike]. Let our cities burn, let the public be damned.”<sup>13</sup> Shanker, for his part, was “dour and dictatorial.” “His

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<sup>11</sup> Wurf, through a spokesman, called Mandel’s statement a “new pack of lies” and contemplated suing Governor Mandel for libel. *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ralph de Toledano, *Let Our Cities Burn* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1975), 24-27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

goal,” according to Toledano, “is to amass the kind of power that leadership of the largest union in the country would give him. He could then put his stamp on the education of the young by the kind of indoctrination he is already injecting into the New York city schools.”<sup>14</sup>

If this sort of discussion does not differ very much from the labor leader conspiracy theory leveled by Braun in 1972, it does differ significantly in that the union as an institution and as a collective of individual teachers is equally to blame for the threat to democracy. Whereas for Braun, it was the corrupted union leader like Selden who bore the ultimate responsibility while union teachers had been merely “dupes,” Toledano—following the proliferation of teacher strikes in the early part of the decade—believed he could credibly argue that the rank-and-file teachers were equally to blame. He argued that the “avowed purpose” of New York city teachers, for instance, “is to seize from the elected representatives of the people the direction of education—textbooks, curriculum, promotions, guidance, and how children’s minds should be molded in their formative years.” Apparently, the teachers had very little in mind with regard to these goals as they were simultaneously more interested in “avoiding work than in educating children.”<sup>15</sup>

Though we should be cautious about viewing Toledano’s conspiracy theory as indicative of a general trend in the “public” view of labor unions, we might view *Let Our Cities Burn* as important in spite of its marginal position. Whether Toledano believed in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 58-69. How Shanker wanted to “indoctrinate” the city’s school students is unclear from the text, though the discussion of the AFT President was juxtaposed against a lesson plan on a strike at GE supposedly distributed to AFT locals across the nation, so ostensibly it was in the form of unjust union power.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 58-59, 64.

his own narrative or cynically appropriated what were increasingly prominent views of public sector unions is not important; what matters is that he clearly believed that those views—forged as they were by discursive representations of public sector strikes in the 1960s and 70s—were more plausible by the middle of the 1970s. As we will see, by the end of the 1970s, Toledano’s strategy would prove to be ahead of its time.

Views of public workers as irresponsible to the wishes of the “public” would only be exacerbated by the fact that New York City reached the precipice of bankruptcy several times in 1975, as banks that had funded the city’s massive debt obligations declined to continue to do so. Though contemporary explanations for the near collapse included critiques of the unfair spatial division of tax resources and services as well as the federal government’s inability to adequately subsidize underfunded city and state governments, the most prominent strain in understanding the crisis centered on the city’s municipal unions. Unsurprisingly, neoconservative Nathan Glazer advocated a “serious confrontation with the trade unions” in order to “figure out a way of providing more services with less highly paid employees.” The critiques, however, did not just come from the right: Vernon Jordan of the National Urban League also argued that weak leadership by New York’s politicians afraid to suppress public sector strikes and irresponsible leadership on the part of municipal unions were to blame.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Alcaly and David Mermelstein (eds.), *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, pp. 5-9. John Kenneth Galbraith offered the most cogent critique of the spatial misdistribution of resources, arguing that “it’s outrageous that the development of the metropolitan community has been organized with escape hatches that allow people to enjoy the proximity of the city while not paying their share of taxes.” Joseph A. Pechman, from the Brookings Institution, argued that countercyclical federal/state revenue sharing would have prevented the crisis. Critics who blamed the unions also included Edward C. Banfield, public policy and political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The media also explained the fiscal crisis largely as one in which exorbitant public sector salaries and benefits need to be curtailed. See, among many

*Reader's Digest*—the popular monthly magazine that combined entertainment features, fictional excerpts, and news stories—brought the view that overpaid public sector workers had caused the city's fiscal crisis more squarely into the realm of popular culture. A piece by Irwin Ross in the October 1975 issue, entitled “The Fiscal Follies of New York City,” offered “a moral here for every city in the land.” The piece asserted that the large budget deficit in New York City could be pinned on high salaries and benefits for “its vast army of employees,” about 90% of whom were organized in unions. Ross specifically singled out New York City teachers—“city employees who have done particularly well”—for their high pay and 55 year-old retirement age. The article concluded by imploring “other cities [to] ponder the lessons of New York City's travail. To wit: bountiful municipal services must be limited by ability to pay; munificent pension plans make politicians popular and win union support, but the burden of financing such largess becomes enormous as the years toll on...”<sup>17</sup>

The *Digest* was not a mere magazine, as the readership of the periodical dwarfed any other during the decade with the exception of the ubiquitous *TV Guide*. *Reader's Digest's* 1976 monthly circulation of over 18 million was well over four times the circulation of the next magazine—*Time*—that discussed current events. One study of the media in the 1970s has estimated that the magazine regularly reached about 25% of the US adult population in the 1970s. Further, when one accounts for the fact that white

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examples, “New York's Fat Pension Purse,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 3, 1975, which argued that “New Yorkers must see the unions' coercive tactics for what they are, and insist that productivity be increased,” or “...Or so Mr. Shanker Hopes” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 27, 1975, which asserted that “a major reason for New York's financial problems...has been the insatiable demands of New York's municipal unions.”

<sup>17</sup> Irwin Ross, “The Fiscal Follies of New York City,” *Reader's Digest*, Oct. 1975, 181-189.

Americans in the urban/suburban Northeast accounted for a disproportionate amount of the total American magazine circulation at the time, it seems likely that an even broader section of middle- and working-class white Pittsburghers may have seen *Reader's Digest* each month.<sup>18</sup> And, if as Joanne Sharp has argued, over half of the magazine's readers read each issue from cover to cover, it seems quite likely that *Reader's Digest's* explanation would have a significant effect indeed on the way the Pittsburghers would view the city's strike.<sup>19</sup>

The public discourse around the Pittsburgh strike that began in December 1975, then, drew heavily on the national context of teacher union action as well as engaging with a broad fear of becoming “another New York City.” Pittsburgh, in particular, was vulnerable to such a fear since it had acquired a national reputation as a city that had spent wisely and proved to be a counter-model to the supposed recklessness of New York City. An *ABC Nightly News* story from June 5, 1975, for example, shows this context for the discussion during the strike. Following on the heels of the state of New York's formation of the Municipal Assistance Corporation to prevent New York City from going bankrupt, the piece compared the nation's largest yet debt-ridden city to Pittsburgh. While the “enormous” power of New York's municipal unions inflated salaries—the report pointed specifically to the high salaries of public school teachers—and created superfluous jobs, Pittsburgh had been able to remain “solidly in the black” for the previous six years. Pittsburgh was the city that lived within its means; it had, the piece

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Sterling and Timothy Haight, *The Mass Media: Aspen Institute Guide to Communication Industry Trends* (New York: Praeger, 1978), 346-350.

<sup>19</sup> Joanne Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 47.

pointed out, actually *cut* public sector jobs since 1970 and as a result had even been able to lower property taxes.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Strike**

Amidst this context of escalating fears about a New York City collapse,<sup>21</sup> the contract between the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the Board of Public Education expired on November 30, 1975. The teachers refused to work without a contract. In seeking a new pact, the PFT sought pay raises, over two years, ranging from \$2,700 at the bottom of the scale (for teachers making around \$8,700 a year) to \$6,000 for the highest paid teachers (who at the time made \$16,700). The board offered a \$1,000 raise across all levels with the second year subject to negotiation. The teachers also wanted to lower class sizes, while the board wanted to increase teachers' work hours. The union's primary justification for such as an ample pay increase centered on the near double digit yearly inflation from 1973-75, while the board argued that a larger increase in teacher salaries would not be feasible without a tax hike.

On November 31, the teachers voted to strike. On December 1 and 2, the school board laid off almost 1,500 workers—teachers, counselors, maintenance workers, etc.—who were not members of the union and had not struck. Scarce little negotiation between the school board and the union occurred until the Pittsburgh Council of Parent-Teachers Association sought an injunction to “prove [under the Public Employee Act] that the

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<sup>20</sup> ABC Nightly News, June, 5, 1975.

<sup>21</sup> The PFT and Board of Education negotiated at the same time that the Ford Administration negotiated, reluctantly, with the New York City government on a bail-out plan.

strike constitutes a public danger.”<sup>22</sup> On December 22, Justice Alfred Ziegler of the county Court of Common Pleas ordered the Board and the PFT to negotiate for fourteen hours a day until the strike was settled. On January 3, Ziegler, a Democrat, ordered the teachers to return to work, and when they refused, held the teachers union in contempt of court on January 8, closing union headquarters and seizing union assets to pay fines. Union leadership continued to ignore the back-to-work order, and on January 12, Judge Ziegler ordered a fact-finding panel to recommend a solution to the strike. The panel recommended that the board triple the amount of money available for pay increases and that both parties submit to binding arbitration. Both sides refused the arbitration. With all options exhausted short of arresting union leadership and scores of teachers for refusing to return to work, the Board settled the strike by agreeing to raises of 11.3% in 1976, 8.3% in 1977 and 5.1 % in 1978, bringing salaries to \$10,000 and \$20,000 for the lowest and highest grade teachers respectively by the end of the contract. On January 26, the teachers ratified the two-and-a-half year contract, and teachers returned to work the next day.<sup>23</sup>

The Pittsburgh strike of 1975-76 featured a variety of interests contending to make their case in the public forum. The Board of Public Education placed a premium on controlling costs, arguing that there was only money available for a limited salary increase for Pittsburgh teachers. The mayor, in a December message to the city council, essentially supported that stance while wanted to limit budget expenditures to prevent Pittsburgh from becoming “another New York, or even slip[ping] to the brink of financial

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<sup>22</sup> Joyce Gemperlein, “PTA Backs Suit in School Strike,” *PPG*, Dec. 17, 1975.

<sup>23</sup> “Eight Week School Strike Ends,” *PPG*, January 27, 1976.

crisis like many other major cities in the United States.”<sup>24</sup> Though some teachers were clearly interested in controlling class sizes and supplementary reading programs for their students, for most teachers it basically boiled down to attempting to keep up with inflation. As one teacher characterized it, from 1974-76, the cost of living in Pittsburgh had increased roughly 30% while teachers had only received a pay increase of 3% per year.<sup>25</sup> The major “public” interests can be defined as two-fold: first, receiving quality education while avoiding an interruption of instruction, and second, especially in neighborhoods where most of the residents believed schooling was already adequate, avoiding a serious tax increase.

The “public” understanding of school policy and taxes was, to some extent, racially coded. Militant African-American activists had agitated in the so-called “Summer of Discontent” of 1968 for more access to education spending and for more control over the Pittsburgh school board. Further, as in many metropolitan areas in the decade, by the mid-1970s, the total school age population of the city was declining while the percentage of black students increased.<sup>26</sup> Still, race was not at the center of the discourse on the 1975-76 strike in the way that it had been in other nationally prominent strikes in the 1970s, especially the Newark strikes in 1970-71 and the Philadelphia strikes in 1972-73. Though a few commentators were outspoken in arguing that higher teacher

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<sup>24</sup> “Mayor Pete Flaherty address to the City Council,” Dec. 12, 1975, printed in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec. 13, 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to editor, *Pittsburgh Press*, January 14, 1976.

<sup>26</sup> *Report of the Select Commission to Study the Pittsburgh School Board* (1969), Heinz Historical Center Archives, Pittsburgh Schools collection, Box 136; “Pittsburgh Public Schools Membership Report as of Oct 4, 1976”, HHCA, “Pittsburgh Schools Collection,” Box 51.

salaries were necessary to provide better educational opportunities for African-American students, racial conflict was not as central to the public discourse as it was in Newark or Philadelphia.

The debate over the teachers' demands revolved primarily around several competing cultural assumptions. First, there was the liberal assumption that public education was tied to providing economic and social opportunity to everyone, and that good teachers were fundamental in providing that opportunity. Second, commentators on both sides of the political spectrum assumed that teachers were key players in providing instruction in "American-ness"—moral assumptions about what it meant to be American—and that teachers held an important responsibility in the transmission of moral values. Third, going back to assumptions rooted at least as early as the McCarthy era, many Americans believed that intellectuals—including teachers—could not adequately solve social problems as well as could ordinary Americans with "common sense" values.

In Pittsburgh, these ideas would be used by both supporters and opponents of the teachers in the 1975-76 strike. Through interchange between newspaper editors and reporters and "citizen activists" who responded to the strike, the "public" sympathy that existed for teacher unions evaporated as the strike dragged on.<sup>27</sup> It was not the mere length of the strike, however, that led to this development; rather the public discussion

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<sup>27</sup> On the concept of "citizen activist" I am drawing on Edward Carmines and James Stimson's work. Carmines and Stimson refer to vocal members of the community who help to shift the view of the community at large. If we view the opinion page of a newspaper as a "community" document, then, those who write letters to the editor can be seen as "citizen activists," working to shift the opinion of those less vocal newspaper readers who see themselves as part of the same local "public." See Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 106-114.

itself, as played out in the media, was crucial. Editorials and letters to the editor of the two major Pittsburgh dailies in addition to several suburban newspapers allow us to map this change. These documents do not represent perfect reflections of some pristine “public” viewpoint; rather, they show that the way the discussion was framed—just as it had in Philadelphia and St. Louis in 1972-1973—worked to change the very meaning of the strike.

The two major Pittsburgh newspapers, going back to the 1968 PFT action, had long been critical—if not of unionization exactly—of attempts by teachers to use strikes to gain higher salaries (see Chapter 1). Still, though the two major Pittsburgh newspapers had been critical of the teacher union during the 1968 and 1971 strikes, they nonetheless had shown support on an abstract level for higher teacher salaries.<sup>28</sup> Some of that support still existed in late 1975, but by the end of the strike, it had all but evaporated. Support in the media for the strike itself can be found in the letters to the editor section of both major Pittsburgh dailies in addition to suburban papers, but virtually every letter of support published was written by someone who identified themselves as a teacher. The criticism, which came from editors and “citizens” who portrayed themselves as representatives of the “public”, worked to produce an explanation for the strike in which the interests of the “public” were juxtaposed against those of teachers. As self-proclaimed gatekeepers of public opinion, the press framed the strike as one in which the

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the *Pittsburgh Press* editorial “The Teachers’ Threat” from February 20, 1968, which identified the strike as against the public interest but admitted that “there are many people who are convinced—particularly after learning how much garbage collectors in New York City earn—that teachers do deserve more favorable treatment.” Or from March 4, in which the newspaper asserted that “there is plenty of support both among voters and among officials, for the idea of tying teachers’ salaries [sic] more in line with their professional standing.”

interests of the public and the interests of the teachers were incompatible. Thus the strike was an action against the public interest, and as the strike continued, the criticism of the “public” focused on the perception of a heightened violation of the community by union teachers. By the end of the strike, a local discourse predominated in which teacher unions, the labor movement more generally, and liberal policy like Public Employee Act 195 had all become antithetical to the democratic functioning of society.

Commentary in the first days of the strike, if critical of the strike action, was nonetheless more subdued, because of Pittsburgh having undergone teachers’ strikes before and, by late 1975, the quotidian nature of teacher strikes in the national news. An editorial from the *Post-Gazette*, for example, hoped that “this one will be as short as the first two,” but nevertheless asserted that “if it isn’t, the skies won’t fall.” More harmful, according to the editor, than the shutdown of the schools was the “inflationary impact” of high costs and high taxes brought on by teacher salaries. It urged the Board to be “fiscally responsible”—even more crucial in the wake of the New York City crisis—and to resist large increases in salaries.<sup>29</sup>

Though letters to the editor—at least those that did not come from self-identified teachers—were mostly critical of the strike, early on they tended to focus on the rapacity and mismanagement of union leadership—especially PFT President Albert Fondy. Lauding one of Cy Hungerford’s published cartoons from November 29, Mrs. E.W. Luttig asked the *Post-Gazette* to “reprint the picture and accompany it with a strong editorial.” The newspaper obliged on both counts. The cartoon showed a suited man

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<sup>29</sup> “Another Blow to the Schools,” *PPG*, December 2, 1975.

leaving the “Board of Education”—presumably the Superintendent—with a caption reading, “Shouldn’t schoolteachers be paddled if they walked out on a strike?” Mrs. Luttig then concluded her letter by arguing that “the teachers’ actions are the worst example possible. Can’t somebody throw Fondy out?” Luttig’s letter is notable because it shows, first, the interaction between newspaper and citizen activist. It shows not only that the letter writer believed editorials and cartoons important, but also that, in selecting the letter, the *Post-Gazette* found public validation to be important, too. Second, Luttig’s casual reference to Fondy showed that he had become a household name in Pittsburgh and, especially early in the strike, a lightning rod for public criticism.

A letter to the editor from Craig Martin in Perryopolis (a suburb of Pittsburgh) in the next day’s newspaper criticized Fondy by tying him to a larger distrust of politicians in the Democratic majority state assembly. Martin sarcastically asked:

Pittsburghers: Why don’t you run Al Fondy for a seat in our Harrisburg legislature? He’s just what the Harrisburg crowd needs, and the legislative conglomerate appears to be just what Al needs. Each would complement the other. In the House or Senate Al could vote himself a raise every year or two without the fanfare of extended negotiations. Al could stay off the job for any number of sessions and no demands made. Al could vote himself any number of fringe benefits, none of which need to be negotiated or publicized. And, in addition, Pittsburghers, Al would be off your immediate backs. You might, in this way, share him with all of us Pennsylvanians. Lucky us!<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, Martin characterized the leadership of the PFT, in addition to the state’s lawmakers, as not responsive to the public interest. Further, in this characterization, Fondy was not motivated by improving the working conditions of teachers but by his

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<sup>30</sup> “Rep. Al Fondy?” *PPG*, December 3, 1975.

own personal acquisition of wealth, just as, according to Martin, were the state legislators.

Some public commentators, while not exactly supporting the strike, nonetheless supported raises for teachers—at least early in the strike. Betty Dunlap, from Pittsburgh, asked “why is the school board trying to deny the people who give our children their chance to be successful as adults...a decent living wage?” She argued that without professional salaries, the school board “will force the most capable people out of teaching into other areas and our children will be spending five days a week with people who are teaching only because they can’t do anything else.”<sup>31</sup> A letter from Janice Kane, who identified herself as “a parent,” on December 6 was more critical of the strike, asserting that “Mr. Fondy and the PFT have not learned any lesson from New York City’s near collapse from deficit spending largely incurred due to excessive demands for city employees coupled with expenditures necessary for swollen welfare rolls, generous free education facilities and other group pressure demands.” If this rhetoric—aside from echoing the language used by national media outlets like television news and *Readers’ Digest*—sounds very much like the critique of mainstream 1970s conservatives like William F. Buckley and Nathan Glazer, Kane later espoused the liberal notion that “it is certainly important for any group or individual employee to air grievances and better working conditions and receive adequate compensation.” Certainly the notion that unions were, *a priori*, dangerous threats to the sanctity of the free market had not taken hold yet with this commentator. Kane believed that teachers were entitled to a raise from

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<sup>31</sup>“A Living Wage,” *PPG*, Dec. 4, 1975.

the Board. Ultimately, the question for her boiled down to the loss of the mythological dedication that for teachers should have taken precedence over salary increases. Those teachers “who enter the field of public trust because of a desire to teach coupled with the ability to do so creatively and successfully” were no longer “the majority.” The truly good teachers, according to Kane, while perhaps belonging to a union, would nonetheless be those who crossed the picket line and taught their students. To her, that was the ultimate tragedy of the teacher strike: the degradation of the commitment to children’s educations, as that commitment was incompatible with the right of the teacher, as a worker, to withhold her labor to achieve a higher salary.<sup>32</sup>

On December 8, now the second week of the strike, criticisms of teachers as teachers began to surface. I. Hershoren’s letter was one of the first to explicitly criticize the teachers not just for striking but for poor performance. He responded directly, in fact, to Betty Dunlap’s letter from the previous week. In the letter, he identified himself as a parent of a high school senior who was “counting fingers when doing math homework and telling me they were permitted to do it in school.” He argued that public school teachers were unlikely to be sufficient educators any time soon because only those students who had no better career options became teachers in the first place. He concluded by asserting that “the basics of education have not deserved the caption ‘quality education’ for years. More money will not suddenly make better teachers.”<sup>33</sup>

As the criticisms of teachers mounted, teachers themselves became more defensive. On December 9, Ruth Hertzberg responded to Kane’s letter bemoaning the

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<sup>32</sup>“A Parent’s Answer to School Strike,” *PPG*, Dec. 6, 1975.

<sup>33</sup>“Money for Teachers,” *PPG*, Dec. 8, 1975.

decline of teachers' commitment to teaching above all else. She argued that teachers were justified in striking because the Board's proposed \$1,000 across the board raise would actually have been a pay cut for most highly trained teachers. This represented a problem, according to Hertzberg, because of the very importance of teachers as stewards of the nation's youth and providers of opportunity through education. She argued that in Pittsburgh, where "the majority of students attend decrepit schools, with inferior facilities, and study from outdated textbooks," highly trained and dedicated teachers were the students' only hope for a "quality education." The only way, in turn, to maintain a highly qualified body of teachers was to pay them well. By this logic, the "truly dedicated teachers" were those who were striking to ensure that students had access to opportunity.<sup>34</sup>

The next day, the *Post-Gazette* published a letter from Paul Mickey Toner, who, criticized the union rank-and-file directly for the strike. No longer were teachers simply dupes of Fondy's attempts at self-aggrandizement, but they were "indifferent" when in the classroom, and, in a role reversal, acting as the "petulant" children they ordinarily taught. "Today's student," according to Toner, was a "functional illiterate." On December 12, two commentators responded directly to Toner's attack on the teachers. The first happily asserted that Toner "has distilled a series of confusing issues into focus." He wished that Toner were the head of the PFT because if so, "our teachers would be teaching." The second, by using the exact language of "functional illiterate" showed that O.F. Jedlick, Jr. had clearly read Toner's letter. He argued, in what was just

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<sup>34</sup> "A Teacher's Reply," *PPG*, Dec. 9, 1975.

then becoming a key policy dream of the free market-inspired right, the solution to the teachers' strike was to "let ALL salaries be determined by the scholastic achievement of their students."<sup>35</sup>

Such simplistic solutions, to teachers, did not do justice to the nuances of the situation. In a letter to the editor from an elementary school teacher who identified herself as both African-American and a member of the PFT, Effie Moore admitted that the teachers' strike was "regrettable." For the black community in Pittsburgh, the strike was nothing short of a "major catastrophe." Moore argued that black students in the district were at more of a disadvantage than whites since "work for both black parents is an absolute necessity to make ends meet ninety-five percent of the time." The strike, then for Moore, was not the result of "greedy" teachers but instead a damaged system of political economy in the United States. The choice was evident: "Quality education is costly from every angle. If the city of Pittsburgh really wants quality education for its youth, then citizens must be willing to pay the bill." Moore's critique, in fact, directly paralleled John Kenneth Galbraith's view in *The Affluent Society*, in which he argued for the shift toward a "social balance" of an impoverished public sector and an inordinately wealthy private sector. Though vestiges of this postwar liberal ideal certainly remained in 1975 as is evident from Moore's letter, clearly this position was being relegated to the domain of what conservatives would later call "interest groups" such as teacher unions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Time to Teach!" *PPG*, Dec. 10, 1975; "My Solution" and "Clarion Call," *PPG*, Dec 12, 1975.

<sup>36</sup> "City School Strike Hurts Blacks," *PPG*, Dec. 15, 1975. See William Rusher, publisher of the *National Review* and author of a syndicated column called "The Conservative Advocate," who in the same year published a book in which he framed the new economic division as one that "pits the producers—businessmen, manufacturers, hard-hats, blue-collar workers and farmers—against a new and powerful class of non-producers comprised of a liberal verbalist elite (the dominant media, the major foundations and

Though not referring directly to Moore's letter, J.S. Burns, from Allison Park, may as well have done so in his response to the strike the next day. Burns argued that the "just raise taxes" attitude was against the public interest. He reiterated the connection between Pittsburgh and the Big Apple, by averring that the "fallacy" of raising taxes "is nowhere more evident than in New York City, which rewards its municipal employees in a more than princely manner, and has succeeded, in the process, in eroding a good share of its tax base, with more to follow." He argued that Pittsburgh would be better off with a more "austere" school budget.<sup>37</sup>

As the strike approached a month in duration, criticism of the teachers by "the public" increased in intensity. On December 30, Don Meier, from Erie, Pennsylvania, explained that strikes in the public sector were very different from those in the private sector. Under "private enterprise," the public had the option of obtaining services elsewhere when one company was struck. Not so in the public sector. The teachers, because "there are no alternative sources for [their services]" were guilty of "abuse of the public interest." The public, according to Meier, was "helpless" and had been "violated." While Patty Calderone, from McKees Rocks, criticized the Board for being "cheap," she withheld most of her criticism for the teachers, calling them "greedy." According to Calderone, "the teachers will try to get everything they can, even if it means bankrupting the board of education," while the "real losers" in the strike were the school children.<sup>38</sup>

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research institutions, the educational establishment, the federal and state bureaucracies)." *The Making of the New Majority Party* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 1975), xxi.

<sup>37</sup> "Just Raise Taxes?" *PPG*, Dec. 16, 1975.

<sup>38</sup> "No Strike Right," *PPG*, Dec. 30, 1975; "Calls Teachers Greedy," Dec. 31, 1975.

As the strike dragged on into its second month and the nation's Bicentennial year, critics ratcheted up their attacks on the teachers. Gone was any sympathy for the union's position, and commentators—both professional and amateur—began to broaden the discussion by heightening their attack on teachers as a profession, questioning the limits of the effectiveness of the liberal state to solve social conflict, and attempting to determine what was happening to the American way of life.

Cy Hungerford's New Year's Day cartoon, "The New Year Baby" shows the broadened sense of crisis evoked by many commentators as the strike wore on. In the cartoon, a baby whose diaper is marked with the year "1976" outside a door labeled "PGH. PUBLIC SCHOOL" cries inconsolably while a scowling Albert Fondy hangs a sign on the school door that says, "ON STRIKE—NOBODY HOME." Of course many newspaper readers were likely to immediately notice the callousness of Fondy—on a literal level leaving an innocent, defenseless child to fend for itself. On a more symbolic level, however, since the baby is marked with the year, the cartoon was also likely to evoke a sense of foreboding for the upcoming year, as if Fondy and the teachers held the year itself hostage in staging the school strike.

This sense of crisis reached a boiling point on January 3, when Judge Ziegler issued an injunction to force the teachers to return to work, calling the strike, under Public Employees Act 195, a "clear and present danger" to the welfare of the public and thereby criminalizing it. Ziegler cited, among other things, the "general harm" to city school students, the difficulties for parents who could not afford childcare, and non-striking school district employees who had been laid off due to the strike. In the next day's *Pittsburgh Press*, the front page headline read, "Judge Orders Teachers Back in

Class Tomorrow; Will Defy Injunction, Fondy Says.” Though the article’s headline implies that Fondy directly used the term “defy,” Fondy was only quoted as saying that “the strike will not end as a result of this injunction.” This may seem like a semantic point, but the terminology was crucial. Though neither Fondy nor any other teachers commenting on the strike used the term “defy” or “defiance” to frame the strikers’ disobedience of the injunction, the idea of “defiance”—with its connotations to disorder and recklessness would come to define the teachers’ actions in the public debate.<sup>39</sup>

On January 6, both the *Press* and the *Post-Gazette* posted editorials denouncing the strikers for not returning to work. The *Post-Gazette* asked that teachers “consult their consciences and realize the necessity of obeying the law.” If they wouldn’t, the editorial asked Judge Ziegler to fine and/or jail union leaders if the teachers did not immediately return to work.<sup>40</sup> The *Press*, continuing in its editorials as it had in its reportage by characterizing the strikers as “defiant” flatly asserted that the strikers were wrong. The strikers were guilty of subverting the law and “declar[ing] themselves the only arbiters of what’s legally right and what’s legally wrong in deciding whether or not to obey a court order.”<sup>41</sup>

In the *Post-Gazette* on January 8, two documents on the editorial page show the increasing rift between critics of the striking teachers and the vehement defense of the effort by teachers. Hungerford continued his attack on the union with a cartoon entitled “The Spirit of ’76.” The nation’s bicentennial celebration was not far from the

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<sup>39</sup> “Judge Orders Teachers Back in Class Tomorrow; Will Defy Injunction, Fondy Says,” *PP*, January 4, 1976. When the teachers carried through their promise not to return to work, the January 5 front page of the *Press* also used the “defiance” notion: “School Board Back in Court as Union Defies Injunction.”

<sup>40</sup> “Teachers Should Obey,” *PPG*, January 6, 1976.

<sup>41</sup> “Defying the Law,” *PP*, January 6, 1976.

cartoonist's mind as the graphic showed Albert Fondy, this time dressed in Revolutionary War garb and flanked on either side by a drummer and a flautist, the latter holding a sign entitled "We Will Fight to the Finish." The Board of Education, represented by an emasculated, bespectacled man prone on the ground simply exclaimed, "Help!" The piece attempted to assert that the unions had perverted the legacy of the American revolutionaries by paralyzing the legitimate authorities. Below the cartoon, in a letter to the editor, Jim Beyer, "a teacher employed by the Pittsburgh Board of Education," portrayed the strike in a vastly different light. He pointed out the high inflation of the previous two years and defended Fondy, saying that in acting "like any other labor leader" he was defending the union members' interests. Finally, Beyer upped the ante, averring that critics of the strike used the same arguments "that perpetuated the sweatshops of the 1920s."<sup>42</sup>

Also on January 8, the *Valley Independent*, a newspaper published in Monessen, a suburb about 20 miles south of downtown Pittsburgh, published an editorial criticizing public sector strikes. First, the editor criticized Public Employee Act 195 for causing strikes instead of preventing them as it was intended to do. More importantly, however, the newspaper editorial characterized public sector strikes as "abusing the public interest," and argued, in contrast to "private enterprise," that when teachers strike, "the public thus becomes helpless, the public interest is violated." Strikingly, this editorial reproduced almost exactly the same language as did Donald Meier's December 30 letter to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Meier, however, hailed from Erie—some 125 miles

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<sup>42</sup> Hungerford, "The Spirit of '76," and "Twisted Points," *PP*, January 8, 1976. Beyer's letter, incidentally, also found publication in the suburban *North Hills News Record* weekend edition of January 10-11.

North of Pittsburgh—and had no affiliation to the *Valley Independent*. Thus, incredibly, either Meier and the *Independent* editorial both cited arguments from one single source—which I have not been able to identify—or the *Independent* simply built its own editorial from the letter. In either case, it is evident that characterizations of labor unions—especially public sector unions—as pernicious circulated quickly through the public sphere.<sup>43</sup>

After PFT leadership was held in contempt and fined for not returning to work, public criticism of the teachers strike boiled over. On January 9, letters to the editor in the *Press* built on the newspapers' representations of the strike. Robert McCully, from Pittsburgh, asserted that Albert Fondy “has taught impressionable youngsters to *defy* the judicial system in this country. He has taught school children that if you don't like legal decisions, you flout them. He has taught this community that if you don't get your own way, let the city be damned [*italics added*].” He went on to levy criticisms on the larger body of teachers, too: “The teachers may have a justifiable case in their own minds but breaking the law by *defying* a court injunction is certainly not the answer [*italics added*].” Bob Howard, from Aliquippa, also used the same language in characterizing the union effort: “I see Albert Fondy is at it again. He is willing to *defy* the law and the judge who is trying to enforce it [*italics added*].” Hugh Young, from Squirrel Hill, called the PFT's not following the injunction “open and arrogant *defiance* [*italics added*].”

Aside from emphasizing the “defiance” of the striking teachers, Young went on to show a deeper shift in the public reaction to the strike. Now, as the impasse between the

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<sup>43</sup> “Public Strikes Abuse Power,” *The Valley Independent*, January 8, 1976.

Board and the PFT mounted, and the teachers refused to give up their negotiating leverage, citizens like Young began to call the teachers' demands "totally outrageous." A final letter writer, a mother from a Pittsburgh suburb, put the choice in terms that exhibited what Joseph McCartin has shown in the 1970s to be the blueprint for Reagan-era labor relations, the "striker replacement strategy": "We mothers should stick together and protest too. Make them [the teachers] work or fire them."<sup>44</sup>

Two days later, in the January 11 edition of the *Press*, a letter from Judy Holzwarth highlighted just how far many Pittsburghers' views of the teachers union had shifted since the late 1960s. As most letters to the editor groused about an inability to get tickets to the upcoming Super Bowl (featuring the city's beloved Steelers), Holzwarth's letter submitted that she had been "in favor of the teachers getting the right to strike," but she had been wrong. She attributed her mistake to believing that while the teachers deserved "the right to strike for decent wages, they promised not to hijack us for exorbitant wages once they received decent wages. They betrayed everyone who backed them then." Now, Holzwarth was unsure "if I really want some of the striking teachers back."<sup>45</sup>

Though part of the public discourse around the teachers strike, in one sense, focused on the "defiance" of the teachers and the "greed" associated with their demands,

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<sup>44</sup> "Teachers' Union Tactics Denounced," "What Fondy Teachers Youth," "Teachers Set Bad Example," *PP*, Jan. 9, 1976. On the striker replacement strategy, see "Fire the Hell Out of Them: Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2 (Fall 2005), 67-92. The notion of "defiance" was not relegated to the major Pittsburgh dailies. Witness the headline of the *Leader-Times*, a local newspaper serving Kitanning and several smaller towns around 35 miles east of Pittsburgh. The January 13, 1976 edition featured a story from the UPI newswire but with (as was common practice) a headline provided by the newspaper reading as follows: "For Defiance of Back-to-work Order, Teachers Facing \$100 a Day Fines."

<sup>45</sup> "Teacher Backer Changes Mind," *PP*, Jan. 11, 1975.

as the strike reached a crisis point, with Judge Ziegler seizing the PFT's assets and publicly contemplating jailing the PFT leadership while the strike began to make the rounds of national television news, commentary in the last two weeks of the strike opened up to larger debates about union rights, liberalism, the formation of public opinion, and American-ness more generally.

On January 10, for example, a self-identified "Pittsburgh teacher" rebutted a ten-day-old editorial in the *Press* that had criticized teachers for protesting in late December outside the City-County Building, where Judge Ziegler had been presiding over the injunction hearings. The editorial, according to Martha King, might lead "uninformed persons...[to] get the impression that the teachers were engaged in something improper or illegal." Not only was the press guilty of distorting what had happened, according to King, but the *Press* should "not need to be told" that "the Bill of Rights guarantees us freedom of speech and the right to assemble peacefully."

Robert Berkebile responded to the January 6 editorial from the *Press* and drew on the union culture of Pittsburgh's past in order to defend the teachers' right to strike. It is possible—perhaps even likely—that Berkebile was a teacher even though the letter did not identify him as one. In any event, what is instructive about his letter is how he drew on the strike crisis to make a larger point about labor unions. According to Berkebile, teachers, while influential, were no more influential to young people than "parents, grandparents, uncles, or aunts, or older brothers or sisters." Further, these family role models "sometimes strike, picket and defy injunctions." Perhaps some readers, who still remembered the agonizing efforts to organize the steel industry in the 1930s—or even the

116-day steel strike in 1959—could understand the teacher strike in the context of a broader labor movement.<sup>46</sup>

Also on January 10—though from a vastly different perspective—in a letter to *The Valley Independent*, J.W. Smith outlined both the role newspapers played in the formation of public discourse around the strike as well as the larger political implications of the strike to American identity itself. Smith first lauded the newspaper for its ability to create an ideal forum for the development of public opinion. Indeed, “the Valley Independent is a complete service and together with the reader’s column provides a town meeting place where individuals intent on serving the common good can express their views.” Smith wrote from Fayette City, a town about 30 miles south of Pittsburgh, and so while he was clearly not upset by potentially high taxes or the loss of his children’s education, for him the teachers’ disobedience of the injunction inspired him to make “the voices of reason heard.” In this instance, he argued that “when large unions including public employees such as our firemen, police and teachers refuse to obey injunctions of our judges and even so called decent elements of our society engage in disorder to gain their ends, this nation is indeed in a sorry state.”<sup>47</sup>

In the *Post-Gazette* editorial page of January 12, it was clear that for many public commentators, the teachers’ demands and the methods they used to attain them had become a synecdoche for the fears of American economic and moral decline that went

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<sup>46</sup> For an insightful treatment of memory and steelworkers, especially with regard to the 1959 strike, see Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> “People’s Forum,” *The Valley Independent*, Jan. 10, 1976.

hand-in-hand in the 1970s.<sup>48</sup> Hungerford’s cartoon that day showed a male dress shoe, two times larger than Judge Ziegler, in the process of stepping on the judge. The shoe was entitled, “Teachers’ Walkout,” and it seems likely that many readers would interpret this to mean that the teachers were figuratively crushing the representative of law and order. A letter to the editor on the same page, another from Hugh Young—see January 9—compared Albert Fondy’s statement that it was necessary to “defy” the injunction in order to maintain “quality education” to “the statements made during the Vietnam War about the necessity of destroying Vietnamese villages in order to ‘pacify’ them.” To Young and many other Pittsburghers, the tactics of the teachers, like the tortured logic of the Vietnam War (Saigon had fallen less than a year earlier), signified the nation’s loss of moral values.<sup>49</sup>

The paper’s editorial that day connected these fears of moral crisis to the larger economic crisis of the 1970s. In connecting “productivity and stability” the editorial lauded some of the neoliberal reforms undertaken by corporations, financial interests, and free-market enthusiasts in the decade.<sup>50</sup> The editorial, in particular, commended the building trades unions—at that time, as Kim Moody has pointed out, under intense pressure from anti-union policy advocacy groups like the Business Roundtable—for

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<sup>48</sup> Though this is outside the scope of the chapter, both primary evidence and secondary sources alike have framed the 70s as a moral and/or identity crisis. Christopher Lasch’s *A Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1978), famously consulted by President Carter, springs immediately to mind. It also seems fitting that Jürgen Habermas’s first English translation was that of the 1975 version of *Legitimation Crisis*. Finally, historian William Graebner has argued that America in the 1970s was “a nation in existential despair.” See “America’s *Poseidon Adventure*: A Nation in Existential Despair,” in Beth Bailey and David Farber, *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Hungerford, “The Strikers Kept Walking,” and “Fondy Recollection,” *PPG*, January 12, 1976.

<sup>50</sup> The term “neoliberalism” has been used in many different contexts, but I define it here as a political program that actively pushes for market solutions to social and economic problems and for the privatization of public goods such as education.

agreeing to “end costly work practices which impede productivity and drive up costs.” It further held up that example to the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, urging teachers to consider that “as employment costs rise, they must be offset by greater productivity and/or fewer workers.”<sup>51</sup> The implication here, when one considers just this one page in a Monday newspaper, seems clear. Economic and moral crises were linked, and the way out in each instance was halting both public expenditure and the power of unions—in both the private and the public sector.<sup>52</sup>

An editorial two days later, also in the *Post-Gazette*, framed the teacher strike in a larger discourse of anti-intellectualism. Calling the teachers the “new priesthood”, the unattributed editor argued that the teachers union had become too powerful because the citizens of Pittsburgh had let the teachers convince them that only teachers were qualified to teach. And, the piece pointed out, it was not only teachers in Pittsburgh who had done so: “Not just in Pittsburgh, of course, but throughout the nation the education establishment has fostered the absurd notion that teaching has become some arcane technology-cum-mysticism, the practitioners of which through specialized training have learned the secret of how to pass on knowledge.” The editor continued, “We as a community have let the educationists misplace the emphasis. It should be on how much someone knows about what he wishes to teach rather than on how many credits he’s accumulated in supposedly learning how to teach it.”<sup>53</sup> This editor’s logic clearly drew on the anti-intellectual strain in American culture going back at least to the McCarthy era

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<sup>51</sup> “Productivity and Stability,” *PPG*, Jan. 12, 1976.

<sup>52</sup> And, incidentally, as Dumenil and Levy have argued, as a result of attenuating workers’ salaries and high unemployment, American corporate profits rose in the late 1970s—at the expense of stagnating wages for middle- and working-class Americans.

<sup>53</sup> “Teachers: The New Priesthood,” *PPG*, Jan. 14, 1976.

and famously picking up steam in the late 1960s with the assault by Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew on “the nattering nabobs of negativity.” This “common sense” approach to education, a subset of which included numerous conspiracy theories about the NEA and the AFT would increasingly come to define the New Right assault on the left in the 1970s and beyond.<sup>54</sup>

In the next day’s paper, commentary had moved from criticism of the union toward calls to action. Jack De Girolamo, on January 15, composed a letter to the editor that vociferously separated the strike from the usable past of the labor movement in the Steel City. Girolamo admitted that “during President Roosevelt’s time in office when labor laws were being revolutionized, the public accepted unionism, compulsory collective bargaining, and the strike as countervailing forces to the power of industry.” The problem, however, was that with a public sector strike “there is no force within any public group that can set itself up as a counterforce” with the exception, according to Girolamo in a thinly veiled threat to the union, “the will of the people expressed at the ballot box.” In the same newspaper, D.K. Price offered another action, a property revolt: “since Al Fondy and the teachers have defied the law, I suggest all property owners paying school taxes do the same, refuse to pay school taxes for the time the teachers are

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<sup>54</sup> On anti-intellectualism, see the brilliant discussion of a young Nixon and the Alger Hiss case that made his political name in Perlstein’s *Nixonland*. Toledano’s *Let Our Cities Burn* of course provides one of the more famous of the teacher union conspiracy pieces in the 1970s. Also see Eugene Methvin’s “The NEA: A Washington Lobby Run Rampant,” *Readers’ Digest*, Nov. 1978, 97-101. Further, any quick contemporary literature search immediately brings up several teacher union conspiracy books of more recent vintage. For instance, Samuel Blumenthal, *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education* (The Paradigm Company, 1984) or Myron Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions: How the NEA and the AFT Sabotage Reform and Hold Students, Parents, Teachers, and Taxpayers Hostage to Bureaucracy* (Free Press, 1997).

out.”<sup>55</sup> The next day, E.W. Maslak asked “when are the city’s taxpayers going to realize that it is time for them to ‘come down hard’ on the teachers, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, and Albert Fondy?...Next to former President Nixon and his criminal cronies the PFT has done the most to undermine the values of the young people of our area.”<sup>56</sup> A few days later, Stephanie Herman, from the “North Side” of Pittsburgh “sincerely hoped the fines [by then the PFT had been fined \$10,000 for each day of not abiding by the injunction] will not be rescinded. If Mr. Fondy can tell the property owners how much our taxes should be increased, I am sure we taxpayers can tell him and his brood that they must...live within the city limits and let them help pay for the increased taxes!”<sup>57</sup> By the waning days of the strike, even letters to the editor from suburban papers exhibited a similar “taxpayer consciousness.” In a letter to the January 24-25 weekend edition of the *North Hills News Record*, David Wehner argued that the teachers strike showed the need for better “public organization.” Wehner further suggested that “taxpayers must have the legal right to contest any wage demands made by the teachers’ union which might result in an unjustified tax burden.”<sup>58</sup>

Teachers, for their part, defended themselves more vehemently in the press. Dennis LaRue, who described himself as a “holder of an expired teaching certificate” called the “New Priesthood” editorial of January 14 “anti-intellectual.” He asserted that “mastery of subject matter alone does not allow one to stand before a group of students, instantly the fount of all knowledge, and impart it to young people not especially

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<sup>55</sup> “Intolerable Strike,” “Taxpayers, Do It!” *PPG*, Jan. 15, 1976.

<sup>56</sup> “Crackdown Urged on PFT,” *PP*, Jan. 16, 1976.

<sup>57</sup> “Don’t Rescind Teachers’ Fines,” *PP*, Jan. 18, 1976.

<sup>58</sup> “Let the taxpayers have a say, too,” *North Hills News-Record*, Jan. 24-25, 1976.

interested in learning.” Richard Price, chair of the English Department at a Pittsburgh high school, justified the teachers’ breaking the law by arguing that “this nation was founded by breaking unjust laws...Great lawbreakers of the past,” he concluded, “include Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine. The list of Americans who have had to break unjust laws in the fields of labor, women’s rights and civil rights to achieve justice is long and honorable.”<sup>59</sup>

The lines between teachers and “the public” had been drawn quite starkly, however, and teacher protests only served to further inflame opposition. R.H. Stanley responded to the “New Priesthood” editorial with effusive praise, while showing that he or she had been paying attention to teacher strikes elsewhere: “anyone (teachers in particular) who missed seeing this should find a copy of the paper and read it carefully and thoughtfully. I would also hope that other papers in the state and across the nation would copy this fine editorial for, while you are writing specifically of the teachers strike in Pittsburgh, this also applies in many other areas.”<sup>60</sup> Teresa McNulty passionately responded to Richard Price’s letter to the editor: “How dare he place the Pittsburgh teachers’ demand for more money on a par with ‘...other lawbreakers?’” She asked Price to “stop painting pictures of teachers as latter day founding fathers. The public is not deceived.” In addition, C. Gaetano responded to Price by arguing that “the students in the City of Pittsburgh are suffering, have been, and will suffer from the teachers’ greed and unsound reasoning. There is only one place for teachers of Pittsburgh—not behind

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<sup>59</sup> “‘No More Leftovers’ For Teachers,” *PP*, Jan. 16, 1976.

<sup>60</sup> “Not an Inch, Judge!” *PPG*, Jan. 20, 1976.

the bargaining table but behind the desk.”<sup>61</sup>

In the January 25 edition of the *Press*, as the crisis lurched toward its conclusion, Pittsburgher Miriam Botkin connected the teacher strike to Super Bowl X, the NFL championship game played just a week earlier when the famous “Steel Curtain” defense led the Steelers to the title. Botkin pointed out that thousands of people had been willing to wait in long lines and shell out \$20 for a Super Bowl ticket while complaining about a 0.06 percent hike in school taxes to pay for a teacher salary increase. “What an ironic beginning to a Bicentennial year,” she continued, “a city takes more interest in its football team than in its schools. What a marvelous ranking of priorities!”<sup>62</sup> Here, in Botkin’s comments, lay one of the major contradictions of postwar liberalism. Much of “the public”—at least by the mid-1970s—seemed not to be interested in investing in the “social balance” that John Kenneth Galbraith had hoped to find from the vantage point of 1958, while at the same time, in a society that valued the private consumption of commodities, individual citizens would stand in line for the privilege of spending hard-earned money to witness a football game. In such a society, the teachers, whether worth it or not, could only force those expenditures by withholding their labor, not through rational debate, a point missed by many liberals like Galbraith.

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<sup>61</sup> “The Strike Debate Goes On And On,” *PP*, Jan. 21, 1976.

<sup>62</sup> “Public Hails Steelers But Not Teachers,” *PP*, Jan. 25, 1976.

## **The Strike Aftermath**

Mapping a sea-change in ideology or political culture is fraught with difficulty. Such changes are often glacial in nature, and like glaciers, observers typically can only understand the enormous impact of the change from a vantage point far removed from it. So it is with the crisis of labor-liberalism and the conservative turn in 1970s America. Clearly by the end of the 1975-76 teacher strike many observers—who defined themselves as part of the “amorphous” public—were frustrated with teacher strikes. And yet, the 1976 Presidential election, just some nine months removed from the end of the strike went—in Pennsylvania, and in Pittsburgh’s Allegheny County—to Jimmy Carter, who received a major endorsement from the National Education Association. There are numerous theories to explain Carter’s win in 1976—from Carter’s Washington “outsider” status to the stain of corruption due to the Watergate scandal still remaining with the Republicans to the fact that Carter had already embraced some of the major neoliberal initiatives touted by the right. It is true, of course, that for most labor unions, Carter had not been the first choice in the primaries because of his support for right-to-work laws as the Governor of Georgia. In any event, it would not be until 1980 that Pennsylvanians fundamentally embraced, and then only unevenly, the free-market conservatism espoused by what we in retrospect call the “Reagan Revolution.”

It would also be presumptuous to imply that the public discourse around the teacher strike represented the fulcrum that turned many in Pittsburgh toward an embrace of conservatism. But it was a major part of the story. As crises so often do, the teacher strike forced many Pittsburghers to confront their assumptions about the liberal state, labor unions, and American-ness. Though the vestiges of a decades-old union culture

periodically surfaced during the debate, the conversation between professional and amateur opinion-makers veered rightward during this crisis.

A series of summaries, as the strike wound down, by local newspapers told a story of restlessness, fear, and urgency. The headline of an editorial in the Kitanning *Leader-Times* on January 21 announced that “teacher strikes underscore growing public helplessness.”<sup>63</sup> Rich Sanderson’s editorial in the *North Hills News-Record* argued that the teacher strikes showed that “the labor strike is, or is fast becoming, a wornout tool....in today’s labor strikes the only one who benefits is the union chief.”<sup>64</sup> The *Pittsburgh Press* bemoaned the absolute failure of the Public Employee Act to prevent public sector strikes, perhaps anticipating President Reagan’s monumental decision—less than a year into his first term—to fire and replace striking air traffic controllers: “With the public-employee unions powerfully armed, and often heedless of anybody else’s interests, the public needs more adequate defenses. Clearly, the weapons now available to the public don’t have much more force than a popgun.”<sup>65</sup>

In addition, the public discussion of the Pittsburgh teacher strike highlights a problem with scholarly attempts to understand the conservative turn by working Americans in the 1970s. In his description of the 1972 Presidential election, for example, Jefferson Cowie’s book on the working-class in the 1970s argues that Nixon turned working Americans from the New Deal coalition by emphasizing cultural values—like support for the Vietnam War and “law and order”—at the expense of worker-friendly

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<sup>63</sup> Mason Denison, “Teacher Strikes Underscore Growing Public Helplessness,” *Leader Times*, Jan. 21, 1976.

<sup>64</sup> Rich Sanderson, “The new breed,” *North Hills News-Record*, Jan. 28, 1976.

<sup>65</sup> “Strike Lessons,” *PP*, Jan. 29, 1976.

economic policy.<sup>66</sup> This sort of assumption—still somewhat reminiscent of the Marxist notion of “false consciousness”—limits our understanding of what happened. To many white working-class and middle-class Americans, cultural values like respect for law and order and hard work were inseparable from the narrative many understood to be responsible for American economic success in the first place. As the Pittsburgh case makes clear, debates over teacher strikes seemed to indicate for many Americans—including some themselves likely to have come from union families—that disrespect for authority and excessive institutionalization of workplace relations were intimately entwined with economic concerns.

Just two weeks before the strike ended, a reporter from the *Press* asked I.W. Abel, President of the United Steel Workers, to predict what the labor movement might bring in the next century. Abel optimistically mused, “When you consider what we’ve gained during the past 40 years, it boggles the mind to think where organized labor will be in the year 2076.” He admitted, from the vantage point of a city in the midst of a two-month teacher strike, that “labor is experiencing some backlash from the public now...mostly because of strikes by...police and teachers.” And then, in what seems in retrospect either painfully naïve or in willful denial of reality, Abel argued that “after things settle down, there will be much broader acceptance of organized labor. After all, union-management relations are a way of life.”<sup>67</sup>

Indeed they had been. But after the eviscerations of the 1970s by the deindustrialization of the steel industry, the union “way of life” in Pittsburgh would

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<sup>66</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), Chapter 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ira Fine, “Labor’s Outlook ‘Boggles Mind,’” *PP*, Jan. 13, 1976.

become much less central to the city, just as it would in the nation at large. Abel's interview was published as the nation sat on the precipice of an era in which union membership would sharply erode, making his prediction for labor's next century telling in its failure to express what was actually happening. From a heuristic perspective, however, what is perhaps more useful to us as historians is the very way Abel framed the "public" backlash. Arguably what had made the union movement successful in the first place was its ability to argue that its interest *was* the public interest. By acceding to the idea that the interests of labor unions—whether steelworkers or teachers—were separate from the public interest, labor leaders like Abel helped conservatives—from William F. Buckley to Ronald Reagan—make the case that the public interest was best served by attacking labor unions, slashing public expenditures, and leaving corporate power unchecked.

In fact, the Pittsburgh strike also inspired, as had the 1968 strike, a series of legislative hearings. By 1977, the optimism of 1970 that the rational administration of a well-constructed law could create labor harmony in the public sector had all but dissipated, and the disappointment manifest in the public discussion of teacher strikes symbolized a growing challenge to the very legitimacy of public sector unions. These new tensions led, at the end of 1976, to the formation of a new Governor's Study Commission, this time called by Democratic Governor Milton Schapp, to assess the public employee act in light of the state's teacher strikes—especially the lengthy school shutdowns in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The new commission held public hearings in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Erie, Harrisburg, Allentown, and Scranton during the spring and summer of 1977, and deliberations continued into 1978. Though the hearings were

intended to investigate all public sector unions under the jurisdiction of Pennsylvania Act 195 they immediately revolved around the issue of how to prevent teacher strikes.

Though representatives from teacher unions helped to prevent the commission from recommending newly restrictive legislation, the battle lines that emerged in the commission hearings evidenced a growing suspicion and hostility toward public sector unions—and in some sense—the labor movement writ large in the United States. In particular, critics of the teacher strikes highlighted the failure of the union/state partnership to solve the labor problem and argued that the strikes were causing both economic stagnation as well as a degeneration of respect for law and order.

It is therefore fitting that one of the first to testify during the first day of the hearings was James Scott, President of Pennsylvanians for the Right to Work. The group, an affiliate of the National Right to Work Committee—a political action committee primarily concerned with halting “compulsory” union membership—was part of a larger effort to discredit labor unions in the 1970s.<sup>68</sup> At the time of Scott’s testimony, the national organization was working with local affiliates to try to pass new “right-to-work” laws in states like Missouri with large union populations and to defend right-to-work laws in those states—like Arkansas—that already had them. In his testimony, Scott pointed to the number of teacher strikes that had occurred in the state since the passage of the law in 1970. He framed these strikes, as the NRWC had done with both public and private sector strikes elsewhere, as violating the public interest, arguing that “particularly hard-hit by public employee strikes have been the students and

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<sup>68</sup> The National Right to Work Committee, in fact would be instrumental in the campaign in 1978 to filibuster labor law reform. See chapter 5.

taxpaying parents in our public school systems.” The solution, then, was to end all compulsory union shops, as this would weaken unions enough that strikes would be much more difficult.<sup>69</sup>

In the Philadelphia hearings, James Longstreth, President of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and Republican mayoral candidate for Philadelphia in 1972, described the full impact that teacher strikes had had on the city: “The disasters visited upon community after community by striking public employees is eating away at the very fabric of society and hurting everyone.” Though strikes might be OK in the private sector, testified Longstreth, because “we are talking about a strong union but no counterpart in strong management” strikes in the public sector should be outlawed.<sup>70</sup> Here Longstreth turned the Galbraithian notion that labor could maintain social peace by serving as “countervailing forces” for corporate interests on its head, arguing that the public could not serve as the counterweight needed to curtail the power of public sector labor unions. Further, his critique that public sector labor unions eroded the social fabric could easily be applied (and would be in the late 70s and 1980s) to private sector unions.

School district representatives, unsurprisingly, criticized teacher strikes that had occurred under Act 195, but what is significant is the character of their critiques. Though some of the attacks focused on unbalanced budgets and union attempts to control working conditions, a larger portion of the criticism of the strikes focused on the loss of American values that they purportedly brought on. Blackhawk (a school district about

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<sup>69</sup> James Scott testimony to Governor’s Study Commission, Harrisburg PA, April 5, 1977, PSA, RG-16, Carton 1.

<sup>70</sup> W. Thacher Longstreth testimony to Governor’s Study Commission, Philadelphia, PA, April 26, 1977. PSA, RG 16, Carton 3.

forty miles outside of Pittsburgh) Board of Education President Melvin Miller, in referring to a strike the previous winter, placed his experience with teacher pickets in a larger narrative of moral declension: “there were tears in my eyes, almost freezing on my face to think that our education system had come to such a point that teachers were trying to stop students from going to school.” Jerry Olsen, who had been the school superintendent for the Pittsburgh City Schools during the 1975-76 strike, argued that the biggest detriment to the city’s schoolchildren was not the instruction time lost. Rather, he claimed that “whenever teachers defy a return to work court order, their actions confuse students as to the need to respect the law and to heed the word of the court. This in fact is a far greater damage than school days lost....”<sup>71</sup>

Parents groups also criticized teacher strikes and advocated less power for labor unions through a more restrictive law. In her testimony at the Philadelphia hearings, Philadelphia Home and School Council President Edna Irving asserted that teacher strikes like the one in 1973 brought a “breakdown in respect” among the youth in the city. The Home and School Council, she said, believed that “people who are involved in public education are in the same categories as our policemen, our firemen, the people who provide our medical services. There should be no breakdown in services.”<sup>72</sup> Bob McCannon, president of a self-described “grassroots” group in suburban Philadelphia formed specifically to fight teacher unions, stated unequivocally that “Act 195 does not reflect the public interest.” He wanted the commission, first, to change the law to restrict teacher unions’ right to strike, and second, to force union votes to be cast by secret ballot.

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<sup>71</sup> Melvin Miller and Jerry Olsen testimony to Governor’s Study Commission, Pittsburgh, PA, May 12, 1977. Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Edna Irving testimony to Governor’s Study Commission, Philadelphia, PA, Apr. 26, 1977. Ibid.

McCannon believed that teachers should not see themselves as union members, but as “professionals.” He asserted that “mob rule” had been the main reason teachers struck in places like his home school district of Upper Dublin, Pennsylvania.<sup>73</sup>

The shift between the cultural and political discourse in Pennsylvania surrounding teacher strikes between 1970 and 1977, in a very fundamental way, signified two major developments. First, there was a growing discursive skepticism about the ability of rational policy to curb the sort of social and economic turmoil that resulted from teacher strikes. The 1977 commission—comprising several labor negotiators, attorneys, and an academic—did not radically change the public employee law, instead opting to recommend that the bargaining process begin sooner and school districts not be penalized for reaching 180 school days.<sup>74</sup> No one, however, in 1977 testified at the hearings (or wrote in a newspaper editorial) that Act 195 had been the “wondrous new thing” that the *Harrisburg Patriot* in 1970 had thought it would be. Second, it was clear that by 1977, a much stronger opposition to public sector unions—particularly teacher unions—had emerged. It was not, by any means, inevitable that this would occur. In his testimony to the commission, PFT President Fondy argued that the reason teacher strikes often lasted so long was because school boards could simply wait until the strike was enjoined. Without the “public welfare” clause in Act 195, he suggested, strikes might have ended earlier since school boards would have been less likely to drag their feet in the hope of sympathetic legal action.<sup>75</sup> If Fondy was correct that school boards would have been

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<sup>73</sup> Bob McCannon testimony to Governor’s Study Commission, Philadelphia, PA, Apr. 27, 1977. Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> See *Recommendations for Legislative and Administrative Change to the Public Sector Collective Bargaining Laws of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: The Commission, 1978).

<sup>75</sup> Albert Fondy testimony to Governor’s Study Commission, Harrisburg PA, April 5, 1977, PSA, RG-16,

unlikely to drag out strikes without time (and the force of the eventual injunction) on their side, then perhaps shorter teacher strikes would not have opened up the discursive arena for a “public” turn against teachers. We may view this claim skeptically, but his assertion does show that it was not an inevitable progression that teachers who struggled to see their salaries keep up with high inflation would be excoriated for the supposed greed of their actions. This result took effort on the part of many commentators—professional and amateur—who made this case in the media, and the length of the strike opened this opportunity in the first place.

The larger point here is not whether the position of the Board or the union was justified in Pittsburgh in 1975-76; rather, it is the larger phenomenon of public sector strikes—especially by teacher unions, and what they can tell us about larger changes in the decade. Because these strikes shut down such an integral part of peoples’ lives, garnered much media coverage, and served as empty vessels to be filled with critics’ ideas about everything from theories of pedagogy to property taxes to cultural values, they serve as important sites for historians to assess just how the larger political and cultural paradigms changed in the 1970s. Once the divergence between the interests of the “public” and public sector unions became the overwhelming characterization of those unions, it would become increasingly easy to do the same with unions in the private sector as well. Once liberal laws like Public Employee Act 195 that had placed union legitimacy at the center of the American political process became discredited, it was much easier to discredit other state interventions—from banking regulations to public

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financing of education. Thus we see here—in the many discussions of what to do about teacher strikes—a good portion of the discursive work necessary to pave the way for the neoliberal “reforms” in the late 1970s and the “Reagan Revolution” in the 1980s.

## Chapter 5: “The Public Be Damned”: Conservative Activism and the Eclipse of Labor-Liberalism

With a Democrat in the White House for the first time since Lyndon Johnson and large majorities in both houses of Congress, the AFL-CIO believed that the first two years of the Jimmy Carter administration brought them the opportunity to seriously strengthen the nation’s labor law to make it more difficult for corporations to resist unionization and collective bargaining. Organized labor had considered pushing for a full repeal of section 14 (b) of the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), which had allowed states to pass “right-to-work” laws that made union organizing difficult. President Carter’s support, however, proved to be ambivalent, and labor instead backed a more limited bill that attempted to streamline the enforcement procedures of the National Labor Relations Act (1935). Though this bill—the Labor Reform Act of 1977—sailed quickly through the House of Representatives, it ran into difficulty in the Senate, facing the threat of a filibuster from a handful of Republican senators. The bill’s proponents significantly watered down the Senate version—making it, in the words of labor historian Jefferson Cowie, “lean, moderate, and basically unchallenging to the corporate order.”<sup>1</sup> Though the weakened version of the bill reached the precipice of the supermajority necessary for it to pass, the final two votes needed to invoke cloture never emerged. The bill was shelved, never to be seriously resurrected.

This chapter seeks to understand how anti-union activists defeated a bill so moderate in nature that its only real intervention was to curb flagrant violations of what

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<sup>1</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 292.

had been the cornerstone of private-sector labor relations going back to the 1930s, and more importantly, what that defeat can tell us about the larger place of the labor movement and postwar liberalism. As scholars of the 1970s have noted, newly organized anti-labor activist networks went on the offensive against both the labor movement and the liberal state in the decade. Kim Phillips-Fein has argued, for instance, that the formation of the Business Roundtable—a group of powerful CEO’s from Fortune 500 companies—and the politicization of the Chamber of Commerce drove a conscious “business activist movement” in the decade.<sup>2</sup> Kim Moody has shown that as the labor reform bill was “labor’s major agenda point of the decade,” it faced major pushback from anti-labor corporate activism, in particular the Roundtable: “unlike previous policy groups, it mobilized its business constituents to carry through its more important lobbying efforts. The high point of this strategy came in 1978 when the Roundtable flew small businessmen from around the country to Washington in corporate jets to lobby Congress in the successful fight against labor law reform.”<sup>3</sup> Jefferson Cowie believes that the failed bill represented a last stand of sorts for organized labor in the face of such an onslaught. Cowie argues that “1978 was the last major attempt to leap the hurdles that had prevented the labor-liberal coalition beyond its postwar limits. The defeat of the bill’s calculated moderation was stunning.”<sup>4</sup>

Scholarly consensus on the bill, then, is that while the version that almost passed was far from revolutionary, the attack from the right decidedly was, particularly its success in upholding the Senate filibuster. Indeed, the failure of labor law reform both

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<sup>2</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands* 185-212.

<sup>3</sup> Moody, *An Injury to All*, 130, 134.

<sup>4</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 296.

signified the already weakened place of labor and further encouraged the forces on the right that would dominate the political mainstream in the 1980s. What is missing from this discussion in the historiography, however, is exactly why anti-labor forces succeeded in swaying public opinion against the bill. This chapter brings together the shift in the cultural position of public sector unions and the major national political developments of the 1970s. It argues that while direct lobbying on the part of the Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce were significant, the growing “class consciousness” of American business interests would not have succeeded without the mounting cultural legitimacy of the view that unions opposed the “public interest.” Indeed, by shifting the focus specifically toward those groups—like the National Right to Work Committee (NRWC)—interested in using the media to capitalize on these representations, we can better understand the defeat of the labor reform bill not as something unanticipated but instead as an event that made perfect sense considering the developments documented thus far in this study.

In other words, an equally important explanation for the failure of the bill that signaled a decisive defeat for organized labor should revolve around the discursive case made by other groups such as the National Chamber of Commerce and, especially, by the NRWC that unions had gained too much power—not at the expense of business, but at the expense of “the public.” Indeed, the NRWC had, for a decade, been using public sector unions—especially teachers—as a prime example of how labor leaders used their power to force workers to join unions against their will and the public to pay unfair costs. By the time 1978 came around, these characterizations of unions were already at the center of American political discourse and mobilizing them against the labor reform bill

represented a logical outgrowth. Ironically, critics' ability to get a law filibustered that only applied to private sector workers used representations of public sector workers in large part to do so.

### **The Labor Reform Act of 1977**

Jimmy Carter was not the first choice of the organized labor establishment to be the Democratic nominee in 1976, since during his tenure as Governor of Georgia he had supported the state's right-to-work law.<sup>5</sup> As a Presidential candidate, however, Carter tried to avoid alienating the AFL-CIO by expressing a more open mind toward the issue and was willing to offer increased support for labor initiatives when he became President with labor's help in the general election. In 1977, then, organized labor hoped that, even with a somewhat lukewarm Carter in the White House, the two-thirds majority of Democrats in the House and the 61 Democrats in the Senate (in addition to some liberal Republican allies who could offer support in place of Southern Democrats opposed to unions) would mean that the 95th Congress could bring major legislation favorable to the labor movement.

After realizing President Carter's tepid support for repeal of the right-to-work portion of the Taft-Hartley Act, labor strategists in the wake of Carter's inauguration in

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<sup>5</sup> After the passage of Taft-Hartley in 1947 (a revision of the National Labor Relations Act), states were free to pass their own "right to work laws." A law of this nature meant that unions could not compel either membership or any fees for union representation as a condition of employment. Thus, for states with right-to-work laws, every work site was an "open shop," and workers had to actively "opt-in" to union membership, even if the union represented them as a collective bargaining agent. Without a right-to-work law, states were governed by the default "union shop" of NLRA, meaning unions could compel workers at an organized workplace to pay for costs associated with collective bargaining.

1977 instead settled on two more modest goals: allowing unions to engage in so-called common situs picketing and a reform of the enforcement mechanisms of the Wagner Act to make it more difficult for anti-union employers to engage in unfair labor practices and to delay union drives.

The common situs bill—similar to one which had passed both houses of Congress in 1975 but had been vetoed by President Gerald Ford—was first on the agenda. The bill represented an effort of interest primarily to construction unions who viewed as an idiosyncratic problem Taft-Hartley's restriction on secondary boycotts by unions not directly involved in a strike. In construction, sub-contractors were legally viewed as separate employers, and since many construction sites featured a variety of sub-contractors, the building trades unions wanted to be able to picket an entire construction site, if say, electrical workers were striking against their employer. The potential legislation would allow workers to do this.

Shockingly, however, the bill went down to defeat in the House in March 1977 by a twelve vote margin after corporate interest groups—led primarily by the Business Roundtable—deluged representatives with a massive lobbying effort. Corporate interest groups like the BR had begun mobilizing—initially to combat what they viewed as the inflationary practices of labor organization, especially in construction (the BR's precursor had been the Construction Users Anti-Inflation Roundtable)—early in the 1970s. It was not until mid-decade, however, that their efforts began to seriously pay off. Business interests still viewed the US political mainstream as highly sympathetic to labor, and, in

the words of political scientists Sar Levitan and Martha Cooper, the defeat of the common situs bill was “almost as much of a surprise to the victors as it was to labor.”<sup>6</sup>

Corporate interest groups and free-market conservatives—the latter who had been relegated largely to the margins of US politics for much of the postwar period—were encouraged by the defeat of the common situs bill. The labor movement was obviously discouraged but chalked the failure up to a poor legislative strategy and a peculiar public animus toward construction unions, strikes, and inflation. The AFL-CIO believed its signal achievement in the Carter administration—a relatively potent piece of legislation designed to make workers’ rights under the Wagner Act easier to enforce—was still firmly in reach.

Labor wanted to reform the enforcement mechanism of the Wagner Act because in the 1960s and 70s companies had increasingly begun to fight union drives through dilatory tactics. One way corporations did this was by getting rid of employees who tried to organize. Though US labor law forbade employers to fire workers who fought for organization, the only penalty for a company that did so was that they had to re-hire the employee and provide back pay. Employees were forced to hire their own legal representatives and even after winning a costly legal battle, could not seek any further damages from the offending company. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, in fact, unfair labor practice complaints more than doubled while it typically took a year or more for the overburdened National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to issue a decision and another year for an appeals court to uphold it. Assuming that workers in a given facility

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<sup>6</sup> Sar Levitan and Martha Cooper, *Business Lobbies: The Public Good and the Bottom Line* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 122.

did request a representation election, corporations could inundate them with anti-union propaganda at work, while unions could not distribute materials at the work site. If workers won a representation election, a corporation's savvy attorneys could contest every aspect of the election through the NLRB, a process which could often take up to a year or more. Finally, if a union effort succeeded, companies could delay negotiating a collective bargaining agreement. Companies—in particular the notorious textile manufacturer J.P. Stevens—often delayed elections and then contracts for years at a time.<sup>7</sup>

The bill that passed the House of Representatives in 1977 and emerged from the Senate Human Resources Committee in January 1978 took several steps—intervening at each point of the unionization process—to make it more difficult for anti-union employers to circumvent the intention of the Wagner Act. First, it proposed to increase the members of the NLRB and their staff to expedite decisions on unfair labor practices. Second, it would curtail the motivation for committing unfair labor practices by forcing violators to provide double back pay to the aggrieved worker(s) and by barring the company from federal contracts for three years. Next, it would speed up representation elections by mandating that they take place no later than fifteen days after employees submitted the requisite signatures from workers to the Board, and would make the elections fairer by mandating that union representatives get an amount of time equal to that used by the employer to plead their case to the workers of a given job site. Finally,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 123-126; the best account of J.P. Stevens is Timothy Minchin's *Don't Sleep with Stevens: The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

the law proposed to mandate contracts when employers dragged their feet in bargaining after a union was established.

Unfortunately, the bill left committee at almost the exact time that the Panama Canal treaty went to the floor for debate. Since ratification of the treaty represented a higher priority for the Carter administration, the Senate delayed floor debate on the Labor Reform Act of 1977, giving anti-union ideologues and corporate interests alike plenty of time to mount a campaign to influence enough senators to filibuster the bill. Following a massive campaign from the National Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, and the NRWC, a group of Senators led by Republicans Orrin Hatch (UT) and Richard Lugar (IN) filibustered the bill for three weeks in May and June 1978.

After two failed efforts to invoke cloture, the bill's proponents watered it down in the hope of gaining sixty votes. The compromise bill extended significantly the deadline for representation elections, indexed the contract mandate for recalcitrant companies to national wage averages, lifted the loss of federal contracts once the offending company stopped violating labor law, and limited the proposed "equal access" for labor organizers. As it stood, the bill was seriously weakened, but it would have nonetheless given unions some additional tools to combat corporate resistance and still represented a symbolic achievement for organized labor. After four more attempts to invoke cloture, the bill, at its high water mark, fell two votes short of reaching President Carter's desk.

The vote did not break down totally along party lines: in the 58-41 vote that came closest to ending floor debate, 14 Republicans (including Jacob Javits [R-NY], the bill's co-sponsor) voted for the bill and 15 Democrats voted against it. Part of the bill's failure resulted from regional differences as most of the opposition to cloture came from

delegations in right-to-work states in the South and the West, such as Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), Jesse Helms (R-NC), Fritz Hollings (D-NC), and John Stennis (D-MS). Indeed, the public pressure exerted on fence-sitters in the Sunbelt like Pete Domenici (R-NM) and Russell Long (D-LA) made it impossible to vote for cloture without some political risk. Finally, perhaps a larger testament to the anti-union forces arrayed against the bill was that for liberal Northern Republicans like Charles Percy (R-IL) and John Heinz (R-PA), who represented heavily unionized constituencies, to swing their votes toward cloture (both voted against the original version of the bill), it had to be stripped of its more far-reaching provisions.

To better understand why even such a bill that hardly strayed from the assumptions of almost fifty years of New Deal labor law failed, it is necessary to consider how the tactics of anti-labor groups capitalized on changing cultural and political assumptions about labor unions. The National Right to Work Committee (NRWC), who had been trying to do change such assumptions for a decade before the fight over labor law reform, provides an instructive example. The NRWC—in the context of their larger strategy of pushing for the geographic expansion of right-to-work laws—helped to shift popular understandings of public sector unions by framing them as stifling workers' rights and inflicting malice on the public.

## **The National Right to Work Committee and the Fight against “Compulsory Unionism”**

The National Right to Work Committee (NRWC) was founded in 1955, but started to become a major player in national politics in the 1960s after Reed Larson became the Executive Director. Larson, a Kansan, took over the organization after successfully leading a legislative effort to make his home state a right-to-work state in 1958. As head of the NRWC, Larson lobbied assiduously for years to stop repeal of Section 14(b) of Taft-Hartley (which allowed individual states to mandate the open shop), most significantly securing a Senate filibuster in 1965. The group’s biggest strategic innovation, however, was the creation, in 1968, of its legal arm, the National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Foundation, which consciously modeled its tactics on the NAACP’s efforts to fight segregation in the courts. The NRWC used legal action to fight the “union shop” as well as the slightly modified “agency shop” in which union membership was not compulsory but workers who did not belong to the union still had to contribute agency fees to the union for representing them in bargaining efforts.<sup>8</sup>

Though Larson and other representatives of the group consistently argued that they were not “anti-union,” the fundamental core of the NRWC’s critique rested on the assertion that unions leveraged excessive power to stifle the freedom of employers, non-union employees, and consumers. Tactically, the NRWC focused on the latter two, since attempting to show that unions had too much power vis-à-vis corporations with infinitely more resources than “big labor” would have been a tough case to make in the late 1960s.

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<sup>8</sup> Jerry Flint, “Reed Larson Versus the Union Shop,” *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1977; “Stoking up a Drive for Right-to-Work,” *Business Week*, Mar. 14, 1970.

The first legal defense case taken on by the NRWC,<sup>9</sup> was an effort by several Detroit teachers to strike down the agency shop provision of Michigan's public sector bargaining law.

Detroit teachers had been organizing since the wake of the formation of the American Federation of Teachers in 1916, and Detroit local 231 was chartered in 1931. Detroit dealt with many of the same issues as other Northern cities during World War II—a large influx of migrants seeking jobs that would not be available after the war, and an infrastructure of basic urban services like education and housing pushed to a critical point by the inflow of people. Teachers in the school system, as they had in other deindustrializing areas like Newark and Philadelphia, faced an expanding student population—many of whose parents faced economic difficulties—and a level of education financing that was not keeping pace with the special problems of the city. As it had in other urban areas, these problems led Detroit teachers to organize for better pay, smaller classes, and more services for their students, as the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), in the words of one historian, “came of age” in the 1940s. After winning election as the sole bargaining agent of Detroit teachers, the DFT was further aided by Michigan's new Public Employee Relations Act, signed into law in 1965. Passed in the wake of public sector organizing drives across the nation and pushed by Detroit public employee unions, the new law allowed the state's public sector workers to form unions and collectively bargain. The same year, the DFT became the third major

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<sup>9</sup> Though the NRWC and the Legal Defense Foundation were separate entities, there was so much crossover in terms of both strategy and personnel that for simplicity's sake, I will simply refer to all activity—legal and political—as the effort of the NRWC.

AFT local (after New York City and Philadelphia) to win an exclusive bargaining contract.<sup>10</sup>

Though the new law did not specifically allow unions to institute an agency shop, it also did not forbid it. Thus, when the DFT and the Detroit Board of Education negotiated a contract in the summer of 1969 in which those teachers who did not join the union would need to pay an “agency” fee to the DFT for representing them in contract negotiations, both parties believed they were legally entitled to do so. Immediately after the contract was signed, two Detroit teachers—Christine Warczak and Ernest Smith—formed a group called Detroit Teachers Opposed to Compulsory Unionism (DTCU) and organized a legal challenge to the constitutionality of the agency shop. Whether the group was formed at the behest of the NRWC is unclear, but it seems highly unlikely that the legal challenge would have gone very far without the financial backing of the NRWC—over \$100,000 by early 1970<sup>11</sup>—and its affiliate Michigan Citizens for Right to Work. The NRWC, for its part, was eager to back DTCU—an organization that, as it was headed by two teachers (one of whom—Smith—was an African-American and a former union organizer for the United Packinghouse Workers) could stake a claim as a grassroots organization of individuals fighting a civil rights campaign against a repressive bureaucratic union/state apparatus.

Indeed, the initial organizing efforts of DTCU framed the issue in terms that fit within the strategic goals of the NRWC’s legal arm. In one of the first letters—sent to

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<sup>10</sup>Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-81* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 171-175 “History of the DFT,” <<http://dft231.mi.aft.org/about-us>> accessed 1/28/2013.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Ernest Smith, Mar. 20, 1970, Ernest C. Smith Papers, Walter Reuther Archive, Wayne State University, Box 2.

Detroit teachers—to attract more litigants for a class action lawsuit against the DFT and the Detroit Board of Education, Warczak attempted to place the effort within the mainstream of the 1960s social movements: “No teacher should be forced to pay a union as a condition of employment. You and I should have the right to join...or not join. That’s what America is all about. We believe in civil rights. Isn’t the right not to join a union a ‘civil right’?” She characterized the agency shop provision as the work of a “tiny group of union leaders” who overrode the “feeling of the union members themselves.” The school board, she argued in the DTOCU’s first newsletter, had only gone along with the contract because “a majority of the Board are union-sponsored, union-backed and union-financed as candidates. Now that they sit on the Board what other position would you expect? That’s one of the great abuses in unionism today, the power to use union money for politics.” A press release issued by Smith in early 1970 tied the issue more specifically to national politics and the unjust power of labor unions. “This case has national implications,” he asserted. “It is estimated that organized labor spent \$60,000,000 in the 1968 presidential campaign. Our question is this: should an individual be forced to contribute to such activities in order to hold a job—especially a government job such as teaching?”<sup>12</sup>

Some support came from donors who believed that metropolitan Detroit had been victimized by excessive union power. Ismelda Moore, a retired teacher who had moved outside the city believed that “all suburbs [are] completely dependent upon the city for our survival. Your fight, therefore, is very important to us as citizens of a Metropolitan

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<sup>12</sup> Letter from Christine Warczak, Aug. 22, 1969; undated DTOCU newsletter; Ernest Smith press release, Jan. 19, 1970. Ibid.

area which we love.” Edwin Harms, from upscale Grosse Pointe, returned Ernest Smith’s solicitation letter with margin notes. Where Smith had argued that DTOCU had “strong endorsements from AFT members, DEA [Detroit Education Association], non-affiliated teachers, some department heads and administrators and even from some retired teachers!” Harms added, “AND THE PUBLIC.” Then, after offering a \$5.00 donation, he told Smith that “I am opposed to compulsory unionism of any kind.”<sup>13</sup>

It is doubtful, however, that most Detroit teachers believed they were victims of a unionization effort that had substantially raised teachers’ wages and brought them more workplace rights. Responses to the entreaties of the DCOTU in 1969 and 1970 that remain in the archive seem to indicate the opposite. Clearly some teachers opposed the agency shop, since some 300 (albeit out of a workforce of 12,000 teachers) signed on to the class action suit. Nonetheless, most likely did not oppose the union, as pro-union teachers sent Smith a scathing series of messages opposing the lawsuit.

A “DFT member for over twenty years” responded to the effort by admitting that while “forced unionism may not be the correct way of getting financial aid from the free loaders, how else can the burden be shared equally among those who share the profits?” Susan Kemp suggested that the organization “could help the Detroit schools more by putting your time and money to purpose other than fighting a union that is working to improve education. The gains the union has made are worth many times the amount you are being asked to give to support their operations.” Steve Dobkowski, Jr. asserted that “your drive to stop the agency shop is a complete waste of time and money. Not a single

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Ismelda Moore, letter from Edwin Harms. Ibid.

child is being helped...period.” An anonymous response written on a form to join the class action lawsuit offered, “The Supreme Court has already rule on this issue. What kind of dumb lawyers do you have?” Another simply called the activists “Cheapskates” while yet another offered a resounding “Hell no!” Finally, another anonymous response implored the DTOCU to “read the history of American unionism! You are so wrong and wasting your time!”<sup>14</sup>

The fact that most teachers did not feel oppressed by union dues or agency fees did not deter the DTOCU leaders from pressing their case further. After the case was defeated in Wayne County court, the group took the case to the Michigan state court in 1970. As the case worked its way through the Michigan court system from 1970-1975, the NRWC and its Michigan affiliate used the effort as the centerpiece of its fundraising and public relations campaigns. The November-December 1969 newsletter—published by the NRWC and entitled *Free Choice: Monthly Round-Up of Labor News for Employees Who Think for Themselves*—for example, reported on the lawsuit, prominently pointing out that DTOCU sought to overturn the public employee law because “teachers are being deprived of their civil rights....” The piece quoted Smith, who framed the court strategy as one to determine whether “Michigan teachers—or any other public employee for that matter—should be forced to underwrite the wide-ranging economic, political and social schemes hatched by union professionals.” The next issue, while specifically pointing to Smith’s working-class *bona fides* as a former union official, published similar rhetoric from the DTOCU Vice-President. Smith asked his audience,

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from [Name illegible in document], Dec. 20, 1969; letter from Susan Kemp, Dec. 23, 1969; letter from Steve Dobkowski, Jr., Jan. 21, 1970; unsigned, undated response cards. Ibid.

“from one teacher to another...to join with us in fighting this raw grab for power. Stand up with us and help restore freedom of choice—not only to Detroit teachers but to teachers throughout the entire state of Michigan.”<sup>15</sup>

In the March-April 1970 issue, Smith graced the cover as the featured “Worker of the Issue,” posing in front of a world map in which he pointed to the Middle East as he presumably taught his students. The story began by asserting that Smith “knows the value of a labor union; he also knows the threat the compulsory union shop poses to freedom. He advocates freedom for each individual to choose whether or not he wishes to join a particular union.” Smith’s view of “compulsory unionism,” the feature asserted, was one in which union “bosses” were in the “driver’s seat” instead of the members of the union. Drawing on the phrase reputedly first uttered by nineteenth century railroad magnate William Henry Vanderbilt, Smith argued that those union leaders ruled with a “public be damned” attitude. Then, after describing Smith’s leadership of the DTOCU and the court battle, it concluded by showing how his ability to teach—as well as that of other teachers—was jeopardized by the Detroit teacher union’s excessive power: “Ernie Smith has been teaching for more than seven years. Many other dedicated teachers in the Detroit school system have equal, or longer, service time. There are signs that many of these teachers will resign rather than be forced to live with compulsory unionism. They

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<sup>15</sup> “Teachers Mount Legal Challenge to Compulsory Agency Shop Contract,” *Free Choice*, Nov.-Dec. 1969; “Over 300 Detroit Teachers Join in Legal Battle against Compulsory Agency Shop,” *Free Choice*, Jan.-Feb. 1970, ESP, Box 3.

cannot be blamed for asserting their individual rights. No man likes to be forced to join or finance any organization against his will.”<sup>16</sup>

A 1973 NRWC publication entitled *Right to Work Profiles*—a glossy, attractive magazine targeted toward working people—perhaps best shows the organization’s strategy to put public sector unions—especially those of teachers—at the center of its political and legal efforts. Two of the “profiles” were those of Michigan teachers. The first was of Ernest Smith, which was little more than a reprise of his 1970 feature in *Free Choice*, and the second was of Carol Applegate, a teacher in Grand Blanc, Michigan, who was fired “because I was not able to go along with the tactics” of the National Education Association (NEA) affiliate responsible for bargaining in the school district. Specifically, she was fired for not paying agency fees to the Grand Blanc Education Association, thus becoming a symbolic “pound of flesh” given to her local NEA affiliate. Applegate, though, was a “fighter,” and the piece portrayed her as undertaking a heroic stand against the “power hungry NEA union bosses.” Perhaps more significantly, however, Applegate was not simply fighting for workplace rights; she was also fighting for the very freedom of posterity. “The only way we can be sure of a free America,” claimed the former teacher, “is by having students who are taught to think by teachers who are allowed to think. That’s why the compulsory agency shop—or compulsory unionism in any form—has no place in our school system.”<sup>17</sup>

Not only did *Right to Work Profiles* attempt to show teachers fighting the excessive power of unions—hence trying to undercut unions’ claims to workplace

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<sup>16</sup> “How Can Any of Us Defend Compulsory Unionism Asks Former Union Official Ernie Smith,” *Free Choice*, Mar.-Apr. 1970. Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Right to Work Profiles* (NRWC, 1973). Ibid.

democracy—it also attempted to claim for the right-to-work movement the legacy of civil rights. In addition to Smith and Applegate, the publication featured Jim Nixon, a board member of Michigan Citizens for the Right to Work. Nixon was, according to his profile, not only a former member of AFSCME, but also a civil rights activist. The profile lauded Nixon for “preserver[ing]” to get an education while admitting that it “may have been harder” for him as “a black man.” “But then,” the feature continued, “someone stepped on his civil rights.” Was the perpetrator one of the typical antagonists of the civil rights movement, a states’ rights ideologue or a racist Southern sheriff? Hardly. Rather, it was Democratic Mayor of Detroit Jerome Cavanagh who had signed an agreement in 1969 with the local AFSCME affiliate requiring city employees to pay an agency fee to their bargaining representatives. Opposed to union dues, Nixon took his “rebellion” to the courts. The piece concluded that his efforts to have the agency shop declared unconstitutional in Michigan represented the logical extension of the civil rights movement: “As someone who for years has been greatly concerned with civil rights, Jim makes it plain that he ‘not only speaks as a black man but as a human being, an American, who is very interested in rights and freedoms for all Americans.’”<sup>18</sup>

These publications from the early 1970s are significant not so much because of how many working people they reached—indeed, one can imagine that many Detroit teachers, happy with salary increases and improved working conditions, upon being presented with a copy of *Free Choice* simply threw it away without really reading it. One can also see that some of the strategies—such as attempting to gain African-

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

American adherents by tying the Detroit agency shop case to the civil rights movement—plainly went nowhere. These efforts by the NRWC, however, are significant for two reasons. First, the material was aimed specifically at working people, and second, it actively attempted to reconfigure the very historical narrative of the labor movement. When the anonymous responder to Smith’s entreaty to join the lawsuit told him instead to “read the history of American unionism” he understood that without some form of organization—and indeed some limited degree of compulsion—most American workers (teachers included) would have continued to toil for low wages, limited job security, and few workplace protections. The NRWC profiles of anti-union workers like Smith, Nixon, and Applegate highlight the emergence in the 1970s of a wide-scale political strategy on the right of forging the interests of beleaguered working people with economic conservatives against a union and government bureaucracy supposedly intent on suppressing the freedom of the individual. Though the NRWC had not added the additional coda to the narrative in which those bureaucrats then redistributed the hard-won earnings of the wealthy and the white working-class alike to undeserving African-American welfare recipients, the NRWC narrative of “compulsory unionism” nonetheless evidenced an inchoate version which would grow louder and more persuasive as the decade wore on.

Arch-conservative entertainment magazine *Readers’ Digest* did its best to popularize this narrative in the mid-1970s. In the November 1975 issue of the magazine, Kenneth Tomlinson contributed an article featuring another Detroit teacher who was part of the class action suit which was soon to be heard by the US Supreme Court. Anne Parks had been a teacher for thirty years in the Detroit public school system but had

received a termination notice in 1970 (which, the article only pointed out several paragraphs later, had been almost immediately rescinded) for refusing to pay agency fees. This injustice, according to Tomlinson, was of the utmost consequence for “everyone concerned with preserving basic freedoms in America.” In terms starkly similar to the NRWC’s portrait of Smith and Applegate, the article skewered the Detroit Federation of Teachers for forcing Parks to pay “dues” to the union for bargaining. Parks’ effort was not framed as a refusal to contribute for the drastic salary increases she had received as a result collective bargaining. Instead, the article attempted to explain her courage in joining the legal challenge by referencing her “hard work and self-reliance” and the “mountain spirit” she took away from a childhood spent in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. The piece concluded by leaving the courts with a stark choice: “Now it’s up to our judiciary to decide whether Anne Parks...and uncounted others must join and finance teachers’ associations and unions in order to continue teaching.”<sup>19</sup>

That such a narrative articulated in *Readers’ Digest* represented an important political intervention seems evident as a result of the fact that the magazine was the second highest circulating periodical in the 1970s (after only *TV Guide*). Albert Shanker, having taken over the AFT Presidency in 1974, clearly understood the ramifications as he wrote personally to the magazine’s managing editor. Shanker argued first that the union had never pushed for Parks to be fired, and if the school board had done so, it acted in violation of the contract. More importantly, however, he took issue with the piece’s “calculated misrepresentation” that Parks had been “forced” to pay “dues” to the union.

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, “A Tale of Two Teachers,” *RD*, Nov. 1975, 29-35.

Rather, “an agency service fee,” according to Shanker, was “a kind of tax levied for services rendered whether the employee requests the services or not. In this case, I am sure Anne Parks would not deny that the services of the Detroit Federation of Teachers have produced substantial material gains and improved working conditions for her in the years since 1964.” Shanker went on to point out that Tomlinson had disingenuously used “dues” and “fees” interchangeably and had consciously tried to further the agenda of the NRWC: “These attempts to portray the agency shop as a threat to civil liberties are so transparently biased as to suggest an ulterior motive, and indeed, the author’s mention of the National Right-to Work Committee’s role in this affair suggest what this motive is.”<sup>20</sup>

Both Tomlinson and his editor at *Readers’ Digest* defended the conflation of “dues” and “fees” and disavowed any affiliation with the NRWC.<sup>21</sup> Still, the magazine—whether its staff affiliated with the NRWC or not—did much in the upcoming months to popularize the anti-union organization’s characterization of public sector unions as a menace to society. The January 1976 issue, for instance, included a piece condensed from the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “The Undoing of Great Britain: A Textbook Case of How to Ruin a Once-Vigorous Economy.” It argued—in a cautionary tale—that generous public services and “militant trade union leaders” together were responsible for the inflation, decline of productivity, and “want of capital” plaguing the U.K. The next month, *Readers’ Digest* published an article by Paul Friggins called “Teachers on the March.” It chronicled the major salary gains made by teachers since the 1960s, but indicated that teacher unions had become too powerful and too much like traditional

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from Albert Shanker to Kenneth O. Gilmore, Nov. 11, 1975, “Office of the President’s Records,” AFT Collection, WRA, Box 16.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Gilmore to Shanker, Dec. 10, 1975. Ibid.

labor unions. “The NEA,” asserted Friggins, “will soon pass the Teamsters as the nation’s largest single union, and in time it may merge with the AFT....if these groups get together, they’ll form one of the world’s biggest, most powerful unions.” Why did this represent such a problem? Because teachers had used the strike tactic, the piece continued, they may “have won some impressive gains, [but] often they have done so as the expense of their professional image and their students’ welfare.” Interposing himself as a mouthpiece for the “public,” Friggins concluded that “the public fears what teacher power could do to citizen control of our schools.”<sup>22</sup>

In the next month’s issue, a piece by Trevor Armbrister claimed to uncover the “nationwide scandal” of public pension plans. Pension plans for public sector workers had become precarious, according to the article, because officials had “capitulat[ed] to public-employee union demands.” This shortsightedness on the part of local politicians, combined with the greed of public sector unions, meant that many of the pensions themselves were likely to go bankrupt. Again, *Readers’ Digest* pointed to the catastrophe of New York as a negative example: “Why are benefits so generous? Organized public employees are a potent political force. A 1960 report by New York City’s Citizens Budget Commission warned the then mayor, Robert Wagner, that unless New York cut back on its pension promises, chaos would result. Fearful of union opposition, Wagner and his successors ignored the advice. The rest is history.”<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Tomlinson contributed another piece in the December 1976 issue that was little more than a mouthpiece for the NRWC. Though the piece chronicled a group of

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<sup>22</sup> Vermont Royster, “The Undoing of Great Britain,” *RD*, Jan. 1976; Paul Friggins, “Teachers on the March,” Feb. 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Trevor Armbrister, “Public Pension Plans—A Nationwide Scandal,” *RD*, Mar. 1976.

private sector workers—this time employees for Western Airlines—the characterization of a small group of anti-union workers led by a San Diego ticket agent named Howard Ellis was remarkably similar to the story of Anne Parks. As the teaser above the story’s title described it, “The case seemed hopeless for those who resisted the tyrannical union. But their grit and determination led to a stunning victory.” The article went on to show how Ellis and “his colleagues”—we never learn how many other workers supported him—contacted the NRWC and, through legal action, forced the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks to rebate agency fees that had been used to pay for contributions to political candidates.<sup>24</sup>

By March 1975, the DCOTU court case—backed by the NWRC—reached the end of the road in Michigan when the state court of appeals largely upheld the agency shop contract between the DFT and the Detroit Board of Education. In their brief for the court, the DCOTU’s legal representatives had tried to argue specifically that agency dues went against the “public interest.” Whereas the Wagner Act had protected the rights of private sector workers to strike, the reasoning went, the Michigan public employee law “was not adopted to strengthen the collective economic power of public employees. It was passed to give them, through their chosen representatives, a voice in the terms and conditions of employment, up to and including the presentation of their views and arguments to a fact-finding agency. This is consistent with the public interest. More than that was not provided.” In particular, the agency shop represented not only a violation of the rights of employees but also violated the public interest by making it

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<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Tomlinson, “Workers’ Rights and Union Wrongs,” *RD*, Dec. 1976.

easier for teachers to strike: "...the American Federation of Teachers and the Detroit Federation support strikes and do not hesitate to resort to strikes to gain their ends. Under the agency shop clause, teachers who do not approve of strikes in violation of law are forced to contribute financially to the support of an organization which openly espouses illegal strikes."<sup>25</sup> The Michigan appellate court did not find this argument persuasive, however, upholding the constitutionality of agency fees for collective bargaining purposes while asserting that in principle some portion of agency fees could be returned if workers could show that they were used for political purposes other than bargaining.<sup>26</sup>

The next step was the US Supreme Court. In its appeal for a writ of certiorari, attorneys for the DCOTU pointed to the growth of public sector power, arguing that "with the recent advent of militant public sector unionism and the passage of state statutes providing for collective bargaining through exclusive representatives in the public sector" the question of agency fees was "of great public importance."<sup>27</sup> The Court agreed, hearing oral arguments in November 1976 and issuing its judgment in May 1977. The Court did not agree, however, that the agency shop violated the rights of Detroit teachers: it unanimously upheld the Michigan decision in an opinion written by Justice Potter Stewart. Building on case law for private sector unions, the court asserted that an exclusive bargaining agent was just as important for public sector unions as "the

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<sup>25</sup> Keller, Thomas, McManus, and Keller, "Brief in support of Claim of Appeal," Christine Warczak et. al., and Robert J. Johnson, et. al., v. Detroit Board of Education, Detroit Federation of Teachers, et. al., (1975).

<sup>26</sup> State of Michigan Court of Appeals decision, D. Louis Abood, et. al. v. Detroit Board of Education, et. al., Christine Warczak, et. al., v. Detroit Board of Education, et. al. (1975)

<sup>27</sup> John L. Kilcullen, "Jurisdictional Statement," Abood, et. al. v. Board, et. al.; Warczak, et. al v. Board, et. al., Feb. 13, 1976.

desirability of labor peace is no less important in the public sector, nor is the risk of ‘free riders’ any smaller.” Further, while the goals of public sector work (i.e., providing services to citizens) may have differed from that of the private sector (i.e., making a profit), “public employees are not basically different from private employees; on the whole, they have the same sort of skills, the same needs, and seek the same advantages.” Thus while the court did rule, in contrast to the state appeals court, that Michigan teachers enjoyed a more concrete right to challenge fees spent outside of collective bargaining efforts, it upheld the constitutionality of Michigan’s agency shop.<sup>28</sup>

While the DCOTU and the NWRC thus saw their challenge defeated after almost eight years of legal wrangling, the effort was not fruitless. The groups had brought to the national consciousness—not only through its legal case but also through the NWRC’s fund-raising efforts as well as efforts in *Readers’ Digest* to popularize it—the narrative that labor unions, especially in the public sector, were not there to protect workers and promote democracy but rather served as stifling bureaucracies that trampled workers’ rights and threatened the public interest. The real freedom fighters in this narrative were not union “bosses” but lonely pioneering activists like Ernest Smith and Anne Parks toiling against an oppressive system. This narrative could be used to explain all sorts of crises unique to the 1970s—the New York fiscal crisis, double digit inflation, and fears exacerbated by the oil shocks in 1973 and 1979 that the US was losing its preeminent place in the world. Quite simply, if unions were allowed to have their way, the US would

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<sup>28</sup> Majority Opinion, *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education* (1977).

follow the same “textbook case” of a ruined nation like Great Britain and trample the Jim Nixons and the Carol Applegates along the way.

### **The Labor Reform Bill: Debate and Defeat**

Though the labor reform bill sailed through the House of Representatives, the Senate deliberations were much more highly charged, and the committee hearings in particular presaged the way anti-labor forces would use the kinds of arguments pioneered by the NRWC to attack reform. The hearings of the Human Resources Committee—the Senate committee to which the bill had been assigned—were ominously contentious. The committee not only comprised the bill’s two co-sponsors (one of whom, Harrison Williams [D-NJ] was the chair) but also featured liberal Democrats Ted Kennedy (MA), Richard Schweiker (PA), Thomas Eagleton (MO), and Alan Cranston (CA). Thus there was little danger of the bill not reaching the Senate floor, but the opposition testimony in the hearings—spurred on by the bill’s chief Senate opponent Orrin Hatch (R-UT)—quickly turned the debate about labor reform from a discussion of the adequacy of existing federal labor law to a heated discussion about the appropriateness of labor unions themselves as well as the governmental framework that buttressed them.

For those witnesses who supported the law, the goal was clear: show how employers intentionally circumvented the spirit of the Wagner Act and the procedures in place to allow the National Labor Relations Board to enforce it. The Carter Administration, represented by Secretary of Labor Frank Marshall, for instance, began by

establishing the benefits government intervention in industrial relations had brought to American society:

Besides maximizing opportunities for worker self-expression, I believe that the NLRA has proven to be of considerable benefit to the public as a whole. The Act lays down fair rules for the conduct of organizational and recognition activities. This has served to bring order and stability to the conduct of labor management relations. Before the NLRA, such matters were too often settled by protracted, bitter and sometimes violent industrial strife. Such disputes not only hurt the people involved, but also undermine the fabric of our society.

It was only “in recent years” that “certain defects have become apparent. These problem areas must be dealt with if the law is to continue to function effectively as a substitute for industrial strife.”<sup>29</sup>

Central to the overarching strategy of showing how the law no longer functioned properly was to spotlight the J.P. Stevens Company—a textile manufacturer with over eighty plants, mostly in Southern right-to-work states—which had been found guilty by the NLRB of numerous unfair labor practices. The House Committee hearings had focused particularly on employer abuses, even holding hearings in Roanoke Rapids, NC, one of the sites where Stevens’ abuse of the law had been most egregious. In those proceedings, officials from the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) testified to the fact that Stevens had been found guilty of not only illegally firing almost 300 workers but then delaying for years the “back pay” mandated by the NLRA. Testimony also showed that Stevens forced workers as “captive audiences” to hear anti-union propaganda before potential representation elections, objected dozens of

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<sup>29</sup> *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Labor of the Committee on Human Resources of the United States Senate Part I* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978), 30-31.

times to every aspect of elections that unions had won, and then simply refused to bargain. The company's tactics at the two plants in Roanoke Rapids represented some of the worst violations—workers had won a bargaining election in 1974, and Stevens was still dragging out negotiations at the time of the Congressional hearings, even after receiving contempt citations from federal courts.<sup>30</sup> Individual workers testified to the company's intimidation on the shop floor—giving pro-union workers extra duties and threatening to fire those workers who signed union cards. They also relayed, among other abuses, how the company ignored workers' safety concerns, refused to assist those who had been made sick by toxic dust in the mills, and fired workers for handing out pro-union leaflets on their own time outside the plant.<sup>31</sup>

As the chair of the Senate committee, Williams attempted to build on the momentum of the House hearings by also featuring prominently an examination of the textile industry. Sol Stetin, Executive Vice-President of the ACTWU, testified to the “variety of employers who have demonstrated an absolute determination to deny to their workers the rights guaranteed them by the [Wagner Act]. I know of no better way to sum this history of lawlessness in labor-management relations than by introducing you, as briefly as I can, to a firm that has won the reputation of America's number one law breaker. The firm, whose notoriety is no doubt known to many of you, is the J.P. Stevens Co., Inc.” Stetin went on, submitting a seven-pound, two volume legal history of the company, to chronicle some of the “thousands of violations of the National Labor

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<sup>30</sup> Testimony of Jacob Scheinkman and William DuChessi, *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Labor-Management Relations of the Committee on Education and Labor of the House of Representatives Part 2* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978), 1-57.

<sup>31</sup> Testimony of Jerry Davis, Paul Hoffman, Carolyn Brown, Louis Harrell, *ibid.*, 57-58, 61-68.

Relations Act” perpetrated by Stevens. Individual workers—fired by the company—also testified in the Senate committee about the long history of workplace intimidation and outright termination of workers for organizing.<sup>32</sup>

The Senate hearings also showed, however, that the reform of the law would be bigger than just reining in the abuses of one company. Bayard Rustin, the civil rights and union rights activist who headed the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, testified to the larger impact of the law for African-Americans. Since many worked in Southern industries like textiles where employers more readily violated labor law, it was especially important for economic equality that the Wagner Act be enforced. “Blacks who work in unionized plants make an average of 22 percent more than those who are not organized,” Rustin argued. “I urge the Senate to make these reforms fundamentally in the interest of all workers, but particularly to help black women and other minorities in our country rise.”<sup>33</sup>

William Winpisinger, outspoken President of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), pointed out that workplace intimidation was not just a Southern phenomenon. He argued that in the late 1960s and 70s, even Northern shops had begun to use the same tactics:

.... We can no longer assure workers that [the law] will protect them against intimidation, coercion, or loss of their job for union activity. We can read them their rights, but also have to warn them that the law is no longer sufficient to protect them. We have to warn them that in all likelihood that at least some of those suspected of union sympathy will be fired on some pretext or another. We have to inform them that though they may eventually get their job back, it may take two or three years to do so.

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<sup>32</sup> *Senate Hearings*, Part I, 144-145; 162-267.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 603-604.

He then went on to provide specific examples—of auto dealers in West Virginia who intimidated mechanics so severely that workers attended unions in wigs and false mustaches to avoid being identified by a union “spy,” of a manufacturer in Illinois who spent years challenging every aspect of a collective bargaining election, and another employer in Long Island who followed Stevens’ tactic of not bargaining after a victorious representation election, finally forcing the IAM to withdraw its effort because of the expense involved.<sup>34</sup>

While some of this testimony was contested by senators on the committee opposed to the legislation, what was mostly remarkable about the opposition manifested in the hearings was the way in which it shifted the very conversation. Testimony by Senator Hatch and other senators from outside the committee, as well as from outside groups, worked to craft an argument that asserted that union power was already excessive, and the Labor Reform Act would only further the violation of both workers and consumers at the hands of the labor-liberal apparatus.

Senator Hatch laid the groundwork for this strategy by introducing to the Senate a competing bill—The Employee Bill of Rights Act—to “reform” labor law. The proposed bill would protect the “free speech” of workers who testified to the NLRB against union malfeasance or attempted a union decertification proceeding by making all union votes secret ballot and by ending automatic dues deductions for political action committees. It was clear that such a law had no chance of getting out of committee much less winning a floor vote, but the assumption of such a proposal was that labor unions already had too

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<sup>34</sup> *Senate Hearings*, Part 2, 1827-1841.

much power, and thus the reform act sponsored by Sen. Javits and Sen. Williams represented an even more egregious over-reach of both union and state power. Sen. Hatch stated in the committee hearings that he was “suspicious” of the Labor Reform Act, offering that organized labor only sought the law because “it is losing old members and having difficulty finding new ones.” Sen. Strom Thurmond’s (R-SC) testimony went even further: “As the unions have lost support with the rank and file workers, labor bosses have exerted ever-increasing pressure on Congress to enact legislation favorable to union organizing attempts.” He then pointed to the regional focus of the bill, adding that “in the South, where unions have met their most significant resistance, their need is particularly great.” Sen. Thurmond, of course, was accurate in terms of the bill’s southern focus, though union efforts there had faced hostility mostly from employers like Stevens, not from unorganized workers. In his testimony supporting the counter-proposal, Sen. John Tower (R-TX) linked organized labor with an oppressive state: “Texans—and I believe all other Americans, are tired of ‘bigness’; tired of regulation and regimentation, and they abhor the feeling that they no longer control conditions which affect the quality of their own lives. The provisions of our bill seek to restore some measure of independence to millions of working men and women.”<sup>35</sup>

Opponents from outside Congress highlighted similar themes. Dr. Richard Leshner, President of the United States Chamber of Commerce (in Leshner’s words, “the principal spokesman for the American business community”) began by affirming, at least in principle, the underlying assumption of the Wagner Act that “sound national labor law

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<sup>35</sup> *Senate Hearings, Part I*, 100-101, 110-112; *Senate Hearings, Part II*, 1804.

is essential for preserving the stable labor-management relations climate necessary for continued national growth.” Nonetheless, Leshner argued that the “acrimonious relationship” evidenced by some workers who had testified to the committee did not represent the norm. He believed that the bill would “destroy...what is now, on the whole, a balanced framework for labor-management relations.” Pivoting away from the workplace abuses of employers, he asserted that the “true impact” of the Labor Reform Act “would be to arm union organizers with potent new organizing tools to foist unions on employees.” He argued that declining union membership in the 1970s arose neither from an inefficient NLRB nor employers’ violations of labor law, but instead because the labor movement “has failed to persuade significant numbers of workers that unionism is in their best interests.” Prompted by questioning from Hatch, Leshner then turned to the “public.” “This legislation,” he argued, “defies the public interest....The careful balance of power that exists in this country, which is unmatched in most countries of the civilized world, should not be disrupted....”<sup>36</sup>

R. Heath Larry, President of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) made a similar argument, returning to the history of the labor movement in the process. During the 1930s, he admitted, “some of us did make mistakes in our management. We earned unions; we got them; and despite what was referred to here earlier, particularly in respect to the auto workers’ effort [referring to the bloody efforts by Ford in 1937 to prevent unions at its Detroit plants], management did do quite a lot, which you may not be proud of today, but when the need was there for organization, the workers were able to

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<sup>36</sup> *Senate Hearings, Part I*, 729-730, 947, 991.

do it.” But the Labor Reform Act, if enacted, would “tilt the balance” toward unions and “to do so with painful consequences both to employees and the nation.” Bridging the narrative with the distinct problems of the 1970s, Larry asserted that “no one who is even reasonably concerned with inflation and economic efficiency should want to turn a fair balance into one which would tend to expand union representation beyond the point where free expression of employee choice demonstrates that it is wanted.” With regard to the unfair practices of employers like Stevens, Larry argued that the law went too far, calling it “steam-rolled justice,” and believed that it was unfair to those employers who had not violated the NLRA.<sup>37</sup>

The NWRC’s Reed Larson also testified to the committee and he went further in opposing the law than either Larry or Leshner, using the hearing as an opportunity to point to the abuses of unions under the current law. While the bill represented a “very major encroachment” on “human rights,” it was little worse than existing labor law. Larson’s testimony drew from the economist Friedrich von Hayek, who had argued in *The Constitution of Liberty* that “labor unions have become the only important instance in which governments signally fail in their prime function, the prevention of coercion and violence. It cannot be stressed enough that the coercion which unions have been permitted to exercise contrary to all principles of freedom under the law is primarily the coercion of fellow workers.” Larson buttressed Hayek’s contention by pointing to some examples of “how the coercive power given the unions under the law work against the interest of employees.” He highlighted Joe Hooper, “shot down in cold blood in a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 638-644.

dispute in Lake Charles, Louisiana.” Then there was Sammy Kirkland “who had steel shavings rubbed into his eyes” by a “union mob simply because he did not belong to a union.” By the conclusion of his statement, he had pivoted far from the original point of the hearings—to discuss the reforms designed to curb abuses of employers—to support Hatch’s “Employee Bill of Rights.” “Unless you act to put an end to compulsory unionism promoted by the NLRA,” he argued, “all of the pious pronouncements of human rights will echo with hypocrisy. We will be no better than the Soviets, mouthing lofty platitudes about human rights, while denying their own people exit visas to freedom.”<sup>38</sup>

In spite of the contentious hearings, the bill easily left the committee and went to the floor in January 1978. The four month lay-over, however, between the committee vote and the floor vote while the Senate was preoccupied with the Panama Canal Treaty gave anti-union interests—led principally by the Chamber of Commerce and the NWRC, but also supported by conservative voices in the media—plenty of time to nurture the narrative put forth in the Senate hearings.

Emboldened by the defeat of labor’s common situs bill in 1977, business interests and anti-union ideologues viewed a filibuster of labor law reform as a potential sea change in American labor relations. In the words of one lobbyist for the Chamber of Commerce, the four-month effort in early 1978 to filibuster the Labor Reform Act represented a “holy war.” To coordinate lobbying and publicity efforts, the Chamber formed the National Action Committee (NAC), bringing together dozens of groups

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 433-447.; Original Hayek quote is in *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

opposed to the law such as the Business Roundtable, the NRWC, the National Federation of Independent Businessmen (NFIB), the American Bankers Association (ABA), and the National Small Business Association (NSBA). These groups acted both independently and in concert to galvanize public opposition and to sway senators uncommitted to the bill. The NRWC, for example, estimated that from December 1977 to May 1978 it had sent out twelve million postcards through direct mailing lists, focusing heavily on the home states of swing Senators. The AFL-CIO engaged in a substantial amount of lobbying itself, but of the estimated \$8 million spent by all parties (a gargantuan amount at the time considering that the two major candidates together in the 1976 Presidential Election spent less than \$70 million) to influence the trajectory of the bill, the amount spent by labor was only around \$1 million.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from lobbying senators directly and trying to foment “grassroots” opposition to the bill through direct mail, a publicity campaign—waged mostly through newspapers—was fundamental for the NAC’s effort to filibuster the law. In March 1978, the NAC compiled a volume entitled *The Press against Labor Law “Reform”*: *What the News Media is Saying about the So-Called Labor Law Reform Bill* to distribute both to lobbyists and directly to legislators. The 700-page volume included over 300 editorials from across the United States that opposed the bill and serves as stunning evidence of the force with which its opponents rallied against it. As Mark Green and Andrew Buchsbaum’s study of the Business Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce have pointed out, almost half of these were written and distributed directly by the NAC and its

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Green and Andrew Buchsbaum, *The Corporate Lobbies: Political Profiles of the Business Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce* (Washington, DC: Public Citizen, 1980), 118-119; Helen Dewar Jackson, “Grassroots Lobbying in Full Flower,” *Washington Post*, May 28, 1978.

members.<sup>40</sup> Still, direct NAC editorials were typically identified as written by a “small businessman” or local Chamber member. Thus for those Americans who relied on local newspapers to form opinions on a fairly complex piece of legislation like the Labor Reform Act, whether the editorial was directly distributed by the Chamber or not was immaterial. What mattered was the way most of the pieces spoke more to the excessive power of unions instead of the merits (or lack thereof) of the bill. Further, in framing the volume as “representative of public opinion at the national and grassroots level” the NAC made a case compelling enough to convince at least 41 senators that Americans had rejected a law as modest as the reform bill and thus to vote against ending floor debate.

Indeed, what stands out in the numerous editorials across the United States opposing the bill in the NAC collection is that most of them went much further than had Richard Leshner of the Chamber of Commerce or Heath Larry of NAM in their Congressional testimony. The case against the bill went beyond simply an assertion that it excessively punished all businesses for the poor behavior of willful violators of labor law like J.P. Stevens to one in which—similar to the NWRC’s decades-old message—the labor movement writ large *already* wielded too much power. During the last four months of the fight over the labor law, then, the very parameters of the battle shifted from one in which unions and sympathetic legislators had been on the offensive against corporations who violated the spirit of the law to one in which the labor movement was forced to defend its very legitimacy.

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<sup>40</sup> Green and Buchsbaum, *The Corporate Lobbies*, 123.

The *Harrisburg Patriot*, for example, argued that the reform bill was nothing but a “Presidential Payoff” from Jimmy Carter to the unions that had supported his candidacy: “It should be entitled the ‘Unions Enhancement Act.’” There was nothing about the act, according to the editorial, that protected workers; rather, “it further threatens many employers to whom they must look for jobs.” The real way to protect workers would be to pass the Employee Bill of Rights Act introduced by Sen. Hatch. Wally Hudson of the *Reading Eagle* (Pennsylvania) was pessimistic that the Labor Reform Act could be stopped as “the unions have learned how to wield power in government, while business has been concerned with providing those jobs for union members.” The *Valley News Dispatch* (New Kensington, PA) called the bill a “fraud. It is no labor reform at all, unless you happen to think the labor bosses are downtrodden and need more power to combat employers....It is a bad bill that should be defeated in the Senate. Union officials have excessive power already.” Lest its readers think that the newspaper was merely ahead of its time, the editorial pointed out that their view was in line with public opinion. The “prevailing view in this country,” according to the newspaper, was that “most people feel union bosses have too much power as it is.”<sup>41</sup>

Many commentators explained the bill as the result of a declining union movement attempting to artificially regain new members. Patrick Buchanan, a newspaper columnist who had gained national political prominence as one of President Nixon’s major speechwriters, called the bill a “thoroughly rotten piece of legislation.” It had been an “insistent demand” by “Big Labor,” he argued, “made upon [its] debtors on

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<sup>41</sup> “Labor Reform Bill a Presidential Payoff,” *Harrisburg Patriot*, Feb. 19, 1978; Wally Hudson, “Business Claims Unexpected Support,” *Reading Eagle*, Feb. 12, 1978; “‘Labor Reform’ is a Fraud,” *Valley News Dispatch*, Feb. 1, 1978.

the hill, that they give back to the labor bosses, by legislation, the power, influence and authority lost by attrition over the past quarter century.” The *Tucson Citizen*—smaller of the Arizona city’s two dailies—called the bill a “sop to organized labor, which had seen its campaign to repeal the federal Right to Work law peter out amid overwhelming public opposition.” A Meriden, Connecticut newspaper, *The Morning Record and Journal*, called the bill a “tilt toward the big unions.” Labor law reform would not bring “a necessary protection for workers, or a step toward a fairer balance between unionism and management.” It represented instead “an attempt to give a break not to workers but to union organizers.”<sup>42</sup>

This view was promulgated not just by far-right columnists like Buchanan or by small-distribution newspapers. Major newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune*, in more nuanced ways, contributed to the notion that labor unions were out of touch with their members and that the bill was meant to address the concerns of labor leaders more than union rank-and-file. The *Post* called the legislation “one-sided” and asked the Senate to amend it. “It became quite clear as the arguments over this legislation went forward that the people the labor laws were originally written to protect are being increasingly forgotten,” the newspaper began. “Business leaders talk about their problems in opposing or bargaining with labor unions. Union leaders talk about their problems with employers or trying to organize plants over management opposition. No one seems to talk in the workers’ behalf.” Although the editorial cast a plague on both houses, it nonetheless reserved more criticism for the detachment of labor leaders:

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<sup>42</sup> Patrick Buchanan, “Labor Sends Its Bill to the Hill,” *New York Daily News*, Feb. 28, 1978; “Do Labor Unions Need More Muscle?” *Tucson Citizen*, Feb. 3, 1978; “Tilt for Big Unions,” *The Morning Record and Journal*, Feb. 6, 1978.

“The rhetoric of this debate underlines the degree to which much of organized labor now acts as an independent force, deeply concerned about its own internal and external needs, which sometimes are—but sometimes are not—the same as the needs of the people it is supposed to be representing.” The *Tribune* urged the Senate to change the Labor Reform Act “from a bill for the aid of union organizers to a bill for the discouragement of abuses by either side.” It pointed out that unions would face the dissolution of their political influence in Congress unless they “can reverse the trend. The trouble is that they are going about it the wrong way. Instead of trying to refurbish their image and regain public support, they have turned to the familiar bullying tactics which have done so much to bring on the trouble the unions are in.”<sup>43</sup>

Other newspaper editors who opposed the bill pointed directly to the behavior of public sector unions in order to show that the “excessive power” of the labor movement did not just harm union members or business but that it had also directly harmed a “public” who consumed government services. The *News and Journal*, a small newspaper in Mansfield, Ohio (about eighty miles south of Cleveland), argued that “public support for organized labor is slipping. The way some unions have been treating the public, it’s a miracle they have any support at all.” The editor believed that “strikes by public employees have been particularly galling to the public. Even in union families...most people oppose strikes by policemen and firemen. Resentment against municipal workers has been observed in many cities.” In Mansfield, “strikes by teachers have hardened public resistance to the passage of school levies.” Because of its “disregard for the

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<sup>43</sup> “The Labor Bill,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 12, 1977; “Reforming the Labor Reform Bill,” *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 20, 1978.

public” stemming largely from public sector unions, “labor’s influence in Congress...is slipping....The public doesn’t appear to be in any mood to make it easier for unions to do anything. They have caused enough inflation, unemployment, and disorder without being permitted to grow larger and more powerful.” A similar editorial in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Virginia), also argued that “labor bosses suffer from a terrible—and self-inflicted—public image.” Specifically, the editorial offered up as evidence the Teamsters’ embezzlement of pension funds and “unionized firefighters [who] stood by as buildings burned in Ohio this year.”<sup>44</sup>

Another key piece of the contention that labor unions already had too much power was the harm caused by so-called “compulsory unionism.” Not only, to most opponents of the bill, did unions violate the public and their “bosses” violate their very memberships through anything less than the open shop, but they also violated the very notion of freedom itself. It is not hard to see the influence of the NWRC in these views of the labor reform bill. Indeed, it is striking to see the many instances in which a variety of critics mouthed the very arguments made for so many years by the NWRC from the New Deal-era’s anti-union wilderness.

The bill, it should be remembered, did not institute the closed shop anywhere, nor did it interfere with states’ rights to institute right to work laws. In terms of unionizing workplaces, all it did was speed up the election process and force employers to allow union organizers equal time to make their case before an election. Still, opponents of the bill framed its impact in much starker terms. The *Pittsburgh Press*, for instance, believed

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<sup>44</sup> “Labor’s Decline,” *News Journal*, Feb. 14, 1978; “Labor’s Christmas,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Dec. 23, 1977.

that the law went way too far in trying to punish violators of the Wagner Act: “reacting against the hard-line, anti-union policies of a few large employers like the J.P. Stevens company, Congress is about to enact some unduly punitive changes in the nation’s labor law.” Specifically, it would coerce both employers and non-union employees. “Workers do have the right to unionize, and that right should be protected,” the editor allowed. “But the right of employers to resist unions and the right of non-union workers to remain organized should also be protected.” The *Utica Observer Dispatch* (New York) cautioned that “unless the public speaks up and demands the defeat [of the bill], the American worker soon may find that he no longer is free to choose whether to join a union or not. He will have no right to work unless the union says so.” A small-town Ohio newspaper asserted that the “real issue here is freedom of choice—namely, the rights of employees to make up their own minds in a free, unhurried manner. Congress...should be worried about protecting the American workers from further coercion—whether it comes from big labor, big business, or, for that matter, big government.” The *Palm Beach Times* (Florida) dramatically called the bill “essentially a rape of employers and of employees not interested in joining unions. It is incomprehensible that a President who has made such an issue of human rights in other countries should espouse a plan which would give union leaders such power to dominate workers.” Finally, a 75,000 circulation newspaper from San Gabriel Valley, California spoke directly to the concerns of the NRWC, calling them by name: “One must be cautious in assessing the position of any special interest group, but the NRWC makes a strong point in opposition to the so-called ‘labor law reform’ legislation as passed by the

House last fall.” Real labor reform, the piece argued, would offer workers the “same protection” to “assert their right to work free of compulsory union membership.”<sup>45</sup>

Other critics believed that the bill went too far in pushing employers to bargain, further exacerbating the unfair power unions already wielded in the collective bargaining process. Arch conservative William F. Buckley, for example, made “lagging Labor” the subject of his syndicated column on Feb. 15, 1978. Referring to the bill’s debarment of labor violators from government contracts, Buckley ignored the notion that such a measure might deter those violators (like Stevens, who had sizable federal deals in place) who disregarded the law. Instead, he sneered that “...if a firm is caught violating a provision of the NLRA (and such a judgment is often discretionary, and sometimes arbitrary), that firm would be forbidden to bid for government work for a period of three years. Some way to help the working man! Some way to reduce unemployment! Some way to advance human freedom!” The *Arkansas Democrat*, published in the home state of swing vote Dale Bumpers (D), explained why “Arkansans should be letting their senators know they oppose this bill.” If the “make whole” provision of the bill, (which would have made recalcitrant employers bargain by enforcing contracts under prevailing wage rates), “is what the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the NRWC says it is, it could end free collective bargaining in this country.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Labor Law Revision,” *Pittsburgh Press*, Jan. 4, 1978; “The Right to Work is in Trouble,” *Utica Observer-Dispatch*, Feb. 2, 1978; “‘Labor Reform’ More Coercion,” *The Lima News*, Jan. 7, 1978; “Labor Law Proposals Ignore Human Rights,” *Palm Beach Times*, Sep. 21, 1977; Andrew Tully, “Labor Reform Bill Weighted One Way,” *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1978.

<sup>46</sup> William F. Buckley, “Lagging Labor Looks to Congress for Help,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 15, 1978; “An End to Bargaining?” *Arkansas Democrat*, Feb. 8, 1978.

Many critics represented the labor reform bill as a referendum on the economic and social future of the nation. For some, this took the form of a future built on the right-to-work political economy of the Sunbelt versus the stagnant, pro-union industrial core of the Northeast and Midwest. Kevin Phillips, G.O.P. strategist and author of *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1968), which had successfully predicted the realignment of American electoral politics, was perhaps the leading proponent of this view. Phillips rightly pointed out that the bill was targeted at industries in right-to-work states, but rather than attack the bill's efforts to rein in unfair labor practices by the employers (mostly) concentrated in such states, he instead attacked the assumptions about the more unionized workforces of the North: "Advocates of the act point out the 15-40 percent wage differential between Northern industrial states and Southern states....But when one takes a look at the comparative economic levels, adjusting Dixie per capita income for (lower) local prices and tax burdens, the North-South differential so belabored by union officials picks itself up and all but vanishes." Those "jurisdictions with high nominal wages" he argued, "are also those most troubled by high taxes, public employee strikes, overgenerous public employee pensions, huge welfare burdens, and near-bankrupt cities." Phillips understood why legislators from "Massachusetts, New York, or Michigan" would vote for the bill: to "placate powerful local unions and to reduce the lure of the Sunbelt for runaway Northern industries....But why would those in the Sunbelt once they look at the numbers?"<sup>47</sup> It is significant to point out here that Phillips, like many other critics of the policy, ascribed a much larger importance to the bill than it actually

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<sup>47</sup> Kevin Phillips, "Labor and Reform," *San Francisco Examiner*, Feb. 10, 1978, reprinted in *Baltimore News-American*, Feb. 11, 1978.

warranted. The Labor Reform Act only applied to private sector unions, and yet, like several of the other editorials above, used public sector unions—and the presumably higher taxes necessitated by higher salaries for government workers—to attack labor unions as a whole.

Other voices—directly from the Sunbelt—made similar claims that the economic trajectory of the nation hinged on the bill. The *Phoenix Gazette* (one of Phoenix’s two major newspapers), for example, drew specifically on the NRWC to make a case against the bill. An editorial from January 18, 1978, pointed out that the NRWC “opposes the bill because: it would force hundreds of thousands of workers to support unwanted unions; it is special privilege legislation intended to grant enormous political power to a segment of our society that already wields too much power, and its passage would lead to an all-out campaign by labor bosses for repeal of section 14(b), enabling Arizona and 19 other states to have a right to work law.” The *Gazette* explained that it supported the NRWC’s opposition to the bill because the Sunbelt states, “definitely including Arizona” had been “thriving” specifically because they had outlawed the closed shop. “The best labor law reform,” the piece concluded, “might be to nationalize the right to work law.” As one might expect, the Columbia, South Carolina newspaper *The State* concurred with such a view, in the process resuscitating the sectional conflict of the Civil War and Reconstruction. “Labor leaders are upset,” an editorial explained, “because so many manufacturers have fled the North because of union trouble. Now they want to conquer the South with the help of a bill which strips away many industry defenses against organization attempts.” The state’s Senate delegation already included two votes against the Labor Reform Act in staunch opponent Thurmond as well as Democrat Fritz

Hollings. But Hollings's mere opposition, the piece argued, was not enough: "We would like to see Sen. Hollings, with his strong ties to the Democratic majority, lead the fight to kill this anti-South bill altogether. A smaller bill attacking real employer abuses can be introduced later."<sup>48</sup>

Another set of critics of the bill used the United Kingdom—just as *Reader's Digest* had—as a nightmarish example of what the American economy might look like should the bill pass. Although just a precursor to the "Winter of Discontent" in late 1978 and early 1979, Great Britain by early 1978 was in the midst of a serious wave of strikes—many by public sector workers such as firemen, coal miners (in the U.K., the coal industry had been permanently nationalized after World War II), and hospital workers—as the economy stagnated and the Labour government struggled to find a means to curtail rampant inflation. Labor stoppages had become so prominent across the Atlantic that British writer Anthony Burgess (best known for his novel *A Clockwork Orange*) published in 1978 his dystopian vision of a Great Britain in which the nation's de facto political leadership is the Trades Union Council. The main character of the story, in fact, is a worker in a candy factory whose wife is killed when striking firefighters refuse to put out a hospital fire. As ham-fisted as the story was, Burgess tapped into a discourse of disorder in which—whether the fault of labor unions, international economics, ineffective government policy, or some combination thereof—

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<sup>48</sup> "Labor Law Showdown," *Phoenix Gazette*, Jan. 18, 1978; "Hollings Should Lead Fight to Kill Labor Bill," *The State*, Jan. 22, 1978.

Britain's failure to find a solution to its labor struggles seemed to have reached a crisis point.<sup>49</sup>

Critics of the Labor Reform Act drew on the example as a cautionary tale. A column by Johnny Morrow, published in a small-town North Carolina newspaper, warned that "Big Labor is inconspicuously trying to subjugate America's working people to compulsory unionism." In case the negative ramifications of such an action were not immediately obvious, Morrow pointed to the example of the UK: "We could learn a valuable lesson from our 'Mother Country' Britain. Firemen are demanding a 32 percent pay increase while the government strives to hold inflation in check with a minimum hike of 10 percent. The firemen's demands obviously set the pattern for other unions and other future strikes and disruptions. Britain's plight is well known and documented." The columnist then explained how right-to-work states like North Carolina would resemble Great Britain if the labor reform bill became law. "New industry," Morrow argued, "would avoid this particular area. Strikes and slowdowns would become commonplace, unemployment would remain dangerously high, inflation would run rampant, and the markets and services would be taken over." Similarly, Victor Reisel of the *Muncie Star* (Indiana), characterized the bill as "American labor's most massive offensive to break all corporate opposition to unions. And to create American business in the image and posture of industry in Labor-controlled Britain....." He then laid out the massive stakes of the legislative fight: "...if they can't push the law across, even with full White House pressure behind it, the 'movement' and its political allies will fade and

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<sup>49</sup> On the strikes in late 1977 and early 1978, see Sheila Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get It Back* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), Ch. 2; Anthony Burgess, *1985* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978).

those British correspondents who have been filing American labor's obituaries will be clairvoyant. And if labor succeeds all of the U.S. will be one big union town." Patrick Buchanan also warned of the dire consequences of passing the law: "With this law on the books...the fight for the allegiance of workers would no longer be fair. It would be fixed, and the power of the union hierarchy in America would approach that of its counterpart in the British Isles, with fateful consequences for the republic."<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most meticulous comparison of the respective US and British labor systems can be found in a newspaper from small-town Hatboro, Pennsylvania. The editor began by referencing a "sheep rancher in New Zealand" who complained to an American friend that he could not send his lambs for slaughter because the "freeze plant workers have gone on strike." He wondered if it mattered anyway since the dock workers in Britain were on strike, too. "Strikes are going to kill us all," he bemoaned, "you included." Speaking in his own voice now, the editor admitted that

the plight of the New Zealand rancher...may seem far removed from the American housewife's concern over prices and the American businessman's concern over staying in business. But the desperate worry about what to do about union power and union strikes are doing to their countries is actually relevant to this nation—the more so because of legislation under consideration in Washington which, it is widely feared, would tilt the law in favor of forced unionism.

In countries where "labor problems are minimal," the columnist asserted, like West Germany and Japan, "national economies are booming." Conversely, "where unions are strongest—such as in England and Australia—the economy is staggering. That is the way we are heading. And that is the reason we do not need 'reform.'" Though the

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<sup>50</sup> Johnny Morrow, "From Where I Sit," *The Mooresville Tribune*, Feb. 2, 1978; Victor Reisel, "Showdown Nearing on New Labor Law," *Muncie Star*, Feb. 7, 1978; Buchanan, "Labor Sends Its Bill to the Hill."

piece's author misrepresented the relative weakness of unions in West Germany and Japan (one could have made an equally plausible argument that a struggling economy led workers to strike in Britain, for instance), it was clear that, as for several other critics, Great Britain and its antipodean colonies represented the failed Other that Americans needed to avoid by turning back the tide of union power.<sup>51</sup>

Editorials also pressured uncommitted senators—especially in Sunbelt states—by letting them know that their vote would not go unnoticed. In the weeks after the bill left the Senate Human Resources Committee, *The Reading Eagle* and the *Bucks County Courier-Times* each appealed directly to Pennsylvania's Senators Richard Schweiker (D) and John Heinz (R), in particular the latter who would vote against cloture until the bill had been substantially watered down. The *Shreveport Times* called on swing Senator Russell Long (D-LA) to oppose the bill as it was against the "best interests" of both the state of Louisiana and "workers in general." In February 1978 the *Tucson Citizen* pointed out that "Sen. Dennis DeConcini of Arizona is among those lawmakers uncertain about how he will vote on the measure." The newspaper wondered why he was "miffed over newspaper advertisements sponsored by the Right to Work Committee," inquiring why DeConcini (D) had not yet come out against "forcing unionism on Arizona voters." The *Tampa Tribune* also referenced the NRWC's advertisements, seconding their call that "Senators Lawton Chiles [R] and Richard Stone [R] take a stand on Senate Bill 1883." The *Polk County Democrat*, a 4,000-circulation weekly in Bartow, Florida, went

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<sup>51</sup> "Tilting the Labor Law...", *Today's Spirit*, Jan. 18, 1978.

even further, printing cards addressed to Senator Chiles, urging its readers to sign them and send them.<sup>52</sup>

If the pressure of the anti-union “public opinion” compiled by the NAC was not enough, the deluge of mail received by swing Senators also painted the bill in similarly stark terms. Surveying the correspondence of Senator Heinz is instructive in this regard. Representatives from labor unions continued their strategy of pointing out that the bill would not fundamentally change existing labor relations but would merely enforce the laws already in place. ACTWU Secretary-Treasurer Jacob Scheinkman, for instance, wrote Heinz that “the machinery of the current Act has proved inadequate to check the chronic subversion of worker’s...rights by an unconscionably large number of the nation’s employers.....While [the labor reform bill] would not change the basic do’s and don’ts of the Act, it would make meaningful the rule of law.” Similarly, a Media, Pennsylvania, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) local representative reminded Sen. Heinz that “as you know this bill only rights wrongs that have prevailed for years, it makes no major changes.”<sup>53</sup>

Opponents who wrote to Heinz vehemently disagreed, pointing out how extreme they believed were the changes in the bill. M.E. Truebenbach of the Pennsylvania company Cooper Energy Services wrote Heinz to tell him that “I believe that S. 1883...grant[s] inordinate organizational and protective powers to unions at the expense

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<sup>52</sup>“Wrong Kind of Reform,” *Bucks County Courier-Times*, Jan. 27, 1978; “Business Claims Unexpected Support,” *The Reading Eagle*; “Labor Law Reform,” *Shreveport Times*, Jan. 29, 1978; “Do Labor Unions...” *Tucson Citizen*, Feb. 3, 1978; “How Say You, Senators?” *Tampa Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1978; “Let Your Voice Be Heard,” *Polk County Democrat*, Feb. 2, 1978. In addition to Heinz, Schweiker and DeConcini would vote for cloture, while Long and the two Florida Republicans all voted against it.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Jacob Scheinkman to Sen. John Heinz, Apr. 13, 1978; Letter from Hugh Snow, Sr. to Heinz, *Senator John Heinz III Collection*, Carnegie Mellon University, Legislative Assistants’ Files, Box 319.

of the rights of employees and employers and a fair collective bargaining process.” The Stauffer Chemical Company of Connecticut hoped that “we have been able to... persuade you that labor and the Administration have very artfully crafted a bill that on its face may appear to be only a ‘moderate’ and ‘technical’ revision of the law.” On the contrary, however, the bill “lays the foundation for future growth of the law to one which coerces and intimidates management to abandon its lawful use of free speech and property rights and thereby facilitates union organization of what will be either a misled or less informed employee workplace.” Just before the bill went to the floor for a cloture vote, a representative of a Pennsylvania construction company urged Heinz to “vote against cloture and to allow this worthless piece of legislation to die in filibuster. If the filibuster is broken I urge you to vote against it when it comes to the Senate floor. I will be watching very closely how you vote.”<sup>54</sup>

Heinz seems to have paid attention to the political ramifications of his vote. An internal document from his office outlining his potential position on the bill before the first cloture votes were taken shows that while his staff was concerned with several aspects of the bill, most of these were relatively minor, and they believed that the bill itself was not—legislatively speaking—ground-breaking. Most significantly, Heinz should be concerned, his advisor believed, with the equal access of union officials during representation elections, especially as it concerned small businesses, and the fact that corporations could be debarred without an ability to appeal the NLRB decision.<sup>55</sup> It is difficult to know for sure exactly how Heinz decided to cast his vote. He had been

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<sup>54</sup> Letter from M.E. Treubenbach to Sen. Heinz, Jan 23, 1978; Letter from Frank Czajkowski to Sen. John Heinz, May 12, 1978, Letter from Samuel Slokam V to Heinz, JHC, LAF, Box 319.

<sup>55</sup> “Summary of Provisions of S. 2467, Labor Law Reform Act,” undated, in *ibid*.

elected to the Senate in 1976, so he did not need to worry about the vote hurting him in an immediate election, and his office did have some minor qualms about the bill as it stood in early 1978. Still, the Heinz camp's objections were minor and could have been dealt with as amendments to the bill during floor debate, but the Pennsylvania Senator initially voted against cloture in the bill's proponents' first three attempts in June 1978. That Heinz could not vote to invoke cloture before the bill was significantly weakened can likely be chalked up to the fear of a "public" backlash.

### **Conclusion**

On May 4, 1978, the AFL-CIO purchased an advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal*. Entitled "An Open Letter to American Business Leaders," from President George Meany, the epistle outlined the "bitter and often slanderous attacks on the American trade union movement" by the "Business Roundtable, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the so-called National Right-to-Work-Committee and others." He asked the nation's business leaders "Why? What is your motivation? What do you expect to gain? Where is the moral basis for your attacks? Is not the real intent of this attack the destruction of the uniqueness of the American system of collective bargaining which business leaders have hailed for four decades?" Pointing to the "high standard of living" and the "buying power" the labor movement had brought to working people, he asked individual businesspeople to support the Labor Reform bill as a "symbol of good faith": "What happens to that symbol, in the Senate of the United States, will

have a profound impact on the kind of labor-management relations that America will have in the years ahead.”<sup>56</sup>

Meany was right about the stakes of the Labor Reform Act. He underestimated, however, the corporate and ideological opposition to workers’ rights to organize; it was unlikely indeed that his letter would convert much of the opposition to change their mind about the bill. That opposition—on the fringes of mainstream politics for much of the postwar era—had grown much stronger during the 1970s. Groups like the NRWC had mounted both grassroots and legal campaigns to attack the closed shop, the Business Roundtable had corralled corporate opposition into one unified voice, and the Chamber of Commerce had turned vehemently anti-union and anti-regulation during the decade. More importantly, however, Meany mistakenly assumed that corporations had ever had a “moral basis” for upholding the American system of collective bargaining. American businesses had simply been working within the constraints of a system that most Americans believed was both necessary and legitimate during the Great Depression and the quarter century after World War II. By 1978, however, a decade of contentious ideological warfare over the place of teacher unions and the efficacy of the liberal state had helped to erode the notion that a strong labor movement served the American “public.” Indeed, the reception of the message espoused by those opposed to the Labor Reform Act—that collective organization by workers was, at best, no longer relevant and, at worst, economically and socially disastrous—hinged on the open ideological space brought on by labor crises in the public sector earlier in the decade.

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<sup>56</sup> George Meany, “An Open Letter to American Business Leaders,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 1978.

Examine, for example, a national newspaper campaign, run by the NRWC in the weeks leading up to the bill's final failed cloture vote, which brought cultural notions of public sector unions squarely into the debate over labor law reform. The advertisement, framed by the unsubtle headline "The Public Be Damned!" showed a brawny working-class tough wearing a hat branding him with the term "Union Boss." The "Union Boss" smiles as he drives a steamroller over a prone, bespectacled (presumably middle-class) man named "Public Interest."<sup>57</sup> While this advertisement to some extent hearkened back to a long-standing narrative of the union head who became corrupted by power (symbolized most prominently by the Teamsters' President Jimmy Hoffa), it also spoke directly to a key discursive understanding of public sector strikes—especially teacher strikes—that the labor union directly violated the helpless public. The work done by the public discussions over these strikes—on a local and national level—had made such an understanding of the labor movement writ large much more plausible than it otherwise would have been.

Indeed, the defeat of a moderate bill at the hands of a Senate filibuster not only struck an enormously symbolic blow against labor unions and the liberal state that buttressed them, but it also inspired those on the right to push for further action. Conservative commentators rejoiced at what they saw as the decline of labor-liberalism in June 1978. Referencing the labor reform bill's struggles in the Senate, James Kilpatrick argued that "something is happening out there in the political world. Conservative fortunes may have plumbed the ultimate sub-basement; their elevator may

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<sup>57</sup> "The Public Be Damned," *Washington Post*, May 17, 1978.

be about to rise again.” In conjunction with the passage of California’s landmark Proposition 13 referendum—colloquially known as the “Tax Revolt”—it seemed that a new era was dawning in which the power of labor unions and the power of the government might be curtailed in tandem. Former California Governor Ronald Reagan, for example, spoke of the new “political wind” brought on by the “tax revolt fires” lit by the Howard Jarvis campaign, while Kilpatrick was even more sanguine: “In Washington, politicians are nervous. They hear the tom-toms beating and they know the natives are restless out there. What Mr. Jarvis did in California, some national leader might yet do for Washington. It’s a heady thought, and it won’t go away.”<sup>58</sup>

In retrospect, we may explain the views of Kilpatrick and Reagan as willfully optimistic rather than skillfully predictive. After all, neither could have foreseen Reagan’s Presidential victory in November 1980 and the major cuts to social programs and steep tax cuts for the wealthy intended to starve the welfare state, or the wave of union concession bargaining initiated by the federal bailout of Chrysler in 1979 and intensified by President Reagan’s replacement of striking air traffic controllers in the summer of 1981. Part of their very predictive power stemmed from their own efforts—particularly on the part of Reagan—to make the case that the political center of the nation needed to move toward an embrace of the free market. In any event, the era after 1978 would be one in which policy options increasingly revolved around private, market-based solutions, and as we will see in Chapter Six, this era would bring new constraints on the political and economic power of labor unions.

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<sup>58</sup> James Kilpatrick, “Sun Shining on Gloomy Conservatives,” *Pittsburgh Press*, Jun. 18, 1978; Ronald Reagan, “Tax Cuts Promise Economic Growth,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Jun 14, 1978; Kilpatrick, “California Earthquake Continues,” Jun. 21, 1978.

## **Chapter 6: The “Fed-up Taxpayer”: St. Louis, Philadelphia, and the Neoliberal Turn**

The events of 1978, compiled in highlight, serve to crystallize many of the big ruptures of the 1970s. In April, the US Senate ratified a treaty to return the Panama Canal to Panamanian sovereignty, symbolizing many Americans’ fears about the waning of the nation’s power. In early June, the labor reform bill fell two votes short in the Senate, underscoring the waning power of the labor movement, and days later, California voters passed Proposition 13, apotheosizing a decade of anti-tax animus in the state and igniting similar efforts elsewhere. The Supreme Court then limited the scope of affirmative action programs in its decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, coming on the heels of a virulent reaction among many whites against the historical understanding of the connection between race and economic opportunity in the US.

While the events may have been highly dramatic, the trends—fear of American decline, backlash against structural understandings of inequality, conservative resurgence against taxation and organized labor—had begun earlier, at least as early as 1968. Still, these big events that had made James Kilpatrick and Ronald Reagan so enthusiastic in the summer of 1978 symbolized the new trajectory of the nation’s political center: skepticism about what the state could accomplish—particularly with regard to equality of opportunity—and a less vital place for labor unions in fostering economic and social democracy.

This chapter returns to the cities of the two case studies from 1972-73, Philadelphia and St. Louis. In simultaneous strikes in early 1973, the discourse in each

city had moved from a robust discussion about urban political economy to one in which, after teacher protest had been criminalized, a new pessimism about the state's ability to control its labor force became dominant. In 1979, St. Louis teachers struck again, and in 1980 and 1981, respectively, Philadelphia teachers struck. The national context, however, had shifted dramatically, and this chapter demonstrates the difficulty public sector unions faced in acting in this new era. In St. Louis, it took a bare-knuckle two-month strike for teachers to gain a very small wage increase and no significant change in what they viewed as extremely large class sizes, while in Philadelphia, the teachers had to face the reality of concession bargaining as a Democratic mayor attempted to put the city on a path to austerity. The public conversations in each instance are telling, particularly in contrast to the discussions of 1972-73. First, the phenomenon of teacher strikes had become so commonplace that by the end of the 1970s the two-month St. Louis strike barely registered as national news, and the second Philadelphia strike only gained national attention as it came on the immediate heels of President Reagan's firing of PATCO workers and straddled the first Labor Day with Reagan in office. Second, there were virtually no voices in the media aside from teachers themselves—in either St. Louis or Philadelphia—who defended the right of teachers to strike either to improve the schools, to fight off austerity measures, or simply to maintain their wage levels. Instead, these conversations revolved around whether there was any virtue in even attempting to salvage the inner-city public school system in any capacity whatsoever.

As Paul Johnston has pointed out, public sector strikes by nature revolve around public policy, since the very wages and working conditions of government workers such

as teachers are by definition policy problems.<sup>1</sup> This was particularly so in the brutally bitter Philadelphia strike in 1981. Indeed, the emergence of arguments favoring market-based privatization—from everything to just allowing the public school system to die outright to school voucher programs—would symbolize the new degree of public pessimism toward the efficacy of the state and the appropriateness of labor unions that would increasingly come to mark the dominant political culture of the United States.

### **The St. Louis strike**

January 1979 was not a propitious time for the St. Louis Teachers Union's (STLTU) – Local 420 of the AFT—contract to expire. The problems that faced the city of St. Louis in 1973—a declining tax base and a reluctance on the part of the state of Missouri to offer much additional help to the school system—had not diminished in the four years after the STLTU had won an election to be the exclusive bargaining agent of St. Louis teachers in 1974. In fact, the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education had downgraded the city schools' AAA rating (the highest possible) in 1975 as a result of what it defined as excessively large class sizes and not enough preparation periods for elementary school teachers.

The teachers also had to contend with the timing of California's Proposition 13, an amendment to that state's constitution that capped local property tax assessments and set future limits to tax increases. The ballot initiative, which had passed by almost thirty

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1994), 4.

percentage points, symbolized to politicians in many other states a bellwether for a larger national concern with property taxes—taxes that were often directly linked to school budgets and hence teacher salaries. Legislators, political pundits, and activists in many other states—including Missouri and Pennsylvania—immediately considered similar tax limitation proposals, either through the legislative process or through ballot initiative. Indeed, Prop 13’s overwhelming passage put taxes at the center of political debate.<sup>2</sup>

Further, on the heels of the filibuster of labor law reform the previous summer, Missourians for the Right to Work had succeeded in placing an initiative on the ballot to make Missouri a right-to-work state in November 1978. Buttressed by a strong union turnout, the measure failed by about twenty points, but the fact that it was even on the ballot evidenced the belief on the right that further attacks on union rights could succeed. Next, in late November, a strike by several newspaper workers’ unions shut down both of the city’s two major newspapers for almost two months, leaving citizens with a print news blackout. The strike ended only after pressmen for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* company (the *Post-Dispatch* provided printing services for the *Globe-Democrat* as well) agreed to give up overtime shifts and to allow the newspaper to cut jobs through attrition—steps the newspaper argued were necessary to compete in a climate increasingly dominated by television news. Then, in January, the teachers’ contract expired as Great Britain faced the most critical moments in the 1978-79 Winter of Discontent that would ultimately take down the Labour government and bring neo-liberal Margaret Thatcher to power. The very day after the newspapers returned to production in

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, James Roper, “California Tax Vote Sends Shock Waves,” *Pittsburgh Press*, Jun 4, 1978; Louise Cook, “California Vote Expected to Fuel Taxpayer Revolt,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Jun 8, 1978.

St. Louis, those reading the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* could see coverage of a U.K. that was going “deeper into chaos” as “millions of workers faced layoffs” and stores were bereft of basic food and other necessities because of transportation strikes.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the teachers’ contract expired as the inflation numbers for 1978 were officially announced. The inflation rate for that year was 9 %—highest since the double digit inflation of the recession year of 1974—and Jimmy Carter’s new 1979 “austerity” budget, announced just as the teachers’ strike began, offered substantial cuts to federal government spending on social programs like Medicare, Social Security, public service jobs, funds for higher education, and school lunches, ratifying the belief that public sector spending was tied hand-in-glove to high inflation rates.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this context that 4,400 teachers and other public school employees represented by Local 420 voted to strike on January 15, 1979.<sup>5</sup> The teachers struck with three goals in mind—significant wage increases to keep pace with inflation, and, with the stated purpose of regaining the city schools’ AAA status, both smaller class sizes and daily preparation periods for the district’s elementary school teachers. The Board of Education, citing a minimal budget surplus, had offered a \$200 a year across-the-board raise (from a first year teacher’s salary of \$9,650) and the promise of hiring enough elementary school teachers to give each teacher two “prep” periods a week. Negotiators for the teachers union argued that the Board had been underestimating budget surpluses for years (a position confirmed by analysis from local newspapers), and that they could

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Mink, “53-Day Strike Is Over, Papers Are Back,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 14, 1979; UPI, “Millions Face Layoffs in Britain as Result of Work Stoppages,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 15, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Ottenad, “President’s Austerity Budget Augurs Bitter Struggle,” *P-D*, Jan. 22, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> This figure includes about 4,000 teachers and 400 additional employees.

afford a \$1,000 a year teacher increase in addition to hiring enough additional teachers to give every elementary school teacher one prep period a day as well as lower class sizes in all grades.<sup>6</sup> In effect, each side had drawn a major line in the sand, and the lines were far apart: the school system wanted to maintain conditions more or less as they were and the teachers wanted to be on par with teachers in bigger cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Thus, both the city schools and the teachers settled in for what each thought would be a lengthy stalemate.

The unsettled legal status of public sector unions in Missouri complicated the negotiations. The reigning judicial interpretation of the rights of public sector workers to bargain in Missouri—in a case from 1947—had stated that public sector workers did not enjoy the same rights as private sector workers under the state’s 1945 constitution.<sup>7</sup> Though the decision did not mean that local governments couldn’t bargain, it meant that, unlike in many other highly unionized states like Pennsylvania and New York, judges did not have to recognize the reality of collective bargaining. Further, strikes by public employees *were* explicitly forbidden by Missouri law. Local circuit court judge Ivan Lee Holt, Jr., at the behest of the school board, issued a temporary restraining order the day the strike began to prohibit union leaders from encouraging the strike any further, an order that was immediately defied by union president Evelyn Battle. After the Board began seeking contempt citations, union leaders believed that they might face a serious

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<sup>6</sup> James Ellis, “Teachers’ Strike Boils Down to One Issue: Money,” *P-D*, Jan. 21, 1979; Ellis, “St. Louis Teachers Reject Wage Offer, Vote to Strike,” *P-D*, Jan. 15, 1979. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, hardly an advocate for the striking teachers, pointed out that in the 1977-78 school year, the Board had underestimated its revenues by \$5 million. See “A Strike against History,” Feb. 18, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> *City of Springfield v. Clouse* (1947).

crackdown by local authorities, with Battle stating that “everyone must be willing to go to jail and stay there to show the board we cannot be forced to go back to work.”<sup>8</sup>

Still, Judge Holt was not willing to issue arrest warrants. Missouri—particularly St. Louis—had a long history of union culture, and pushing too far could have had political consequences, particularly when the union had the strong backing of the St. Louis Labor Council, whose leaders argued that the teachers union “is justified in its concerns for the quality of education our young people are receiving. We believe further that the economic demands made by the Teachers are also justified by comparison with other school systems of similar size.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as strikes in Newark and Philadelphia earlier in the decade had shown, mass arrests elsewhere had only served to heighten the resolve of strikers.

Even the Board backed off two weeks into the strike, dropping its restraining order and the back-to-work injunction under the court’s consideration. The Board saw this move as a conciliatory gesture and hoped the teachers would return to work. The striking teachers, who derived no practical benefit from the removal of legal barriers they would defy anyway, saw no reason to go back to teaching short of a contract.<sup>10</sup> The Board’s “concession,” however, represented a major public relations victory since many opinion-makers—from newspaper editors to individual citizens—believed that the

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<sup>8</sup>“Board of Education of the City of St. Louis vs. Evelyn Battle, President, et. al, St. Louis Teachers Union,” Jan. 15, 1979, St. Louis Teachers Union Collection, Walter Reuther Archive, Box 18. James Ellis, “Teachers Defy Order on Strike,” *P-D*, Jan. 16, 1979; Geoff Dubson, “Union Tells Teachers to Expect No Mercy from Judges,” *P-D*, Jan. 22, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> St. Louis Labor Council Press Release, Jan. 26, 1979, STL TU Collection, WRA, Box 18.

<sup>10</sup> James Ellis, “Board Drops Suit against Teachers,” *P-D*, Jan. 29, 1979.

teachers were being unreasonable after the Board had dropped its strategy of using the law to force teachers to end the strike.

About a month after the teachers walked out, the strike began to attract some interest outside the city, bringing in several important players. Jesse Jackson, then director of People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), visited the city and met with local officials after a group of students contacted him. Democratic Governor Joseph Teasdale also took an interest in the strike (in contrast to Republican Gov. Kit Bond during the 1973 strike), stating on February 24 that “I am prepared to use my full power as governor to assist in resolving this matter.”<sup>11</sup> On February 26, AFT President Albert Shanker came to town for a rally.<sup>12</sup>

The strike would end, in fact, after Gov. Teasdale made almost \$ 1.5 million available to improve the Board’s offer in early May and the school board, in conjunction with parents’ groups, re-initiated injunction proceedings against the STLTU.<sup>13</sup> The resulting agreement, reached two days after Judge Holt issued a new injunction, was hardly an overwhelming victory for the union. Teachers received a \$1,250 across the board increase over the life of the two year contract, which was marginally closer to the union figure than the Board’s original offer, with \$1.4 million coming from the state of Missouri and about \$600,000 coming from local businesses. Still, after a 56-day strike, many teachers had hoped for a reduction in class sizes and more than two prep periods a week for elementary school teachers, neither of which had received any traction in the

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<sup>11</sup> Ellis, “Teasdale to Meet with Teachers, School Board,” *P-D*, Feb. 24, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> J. Pulitzer and Linda Lockhart, “Judge Lifts Order against Teachers,” *P-D*, Feb. 26, 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, “Teasdale Sees ‘Ray of Hope’ in \$1.4 Million School Offer,” *P-D*, Mar. 3, 1979; Pulitzer and Ellis, “Deputies Barge in on Teacher Talks with Order to End Strike,” Mar. 10, 1979.

new contract.<sup>14</sup> It was a victory of sorts for the teachers, but one in which neither their working conditions had changed nor had the city's ability to pay desirable salaries through any new source of permanent funding. And, the public perception of the teachers and the school system would shift, as the public discourse on the strike re-centered the very identity of the public stakeholder from a civic recipient of education to the "taxpayer" who stood in direct contraposition to those he or she paid for the teachers' services.

### **From "Public" to "Taxpayer"**

The major archival material that we possess for interrogating the 1979 teachers' strike in St. Louis is the editorial pages of the city's two major newspapers.<sup>15</sup> As I have articulated above, the editors of major newspapers in the 1970s reaped their "symbolic capital" from their ability to present a forum that offered the appearance of openness—that is to say, a forum through which a careful consideration of a multiplicity of viewpoints in theory allowed a reader to make an informed decision on a current topic. Newspapers were commodities in their own right, but part of their selling point was their supposed higher purpose—to serve the community by providing an information and opinion clearinghouse. The *Post-Dispatch* framed this perspective as follows in its return following the January pressman strike:

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<sup>14</sup> Ellis and Pulitzer, "Union Head Urges Teachers to Ratify Pact," *P-D*, Mar. 12, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the records on the 1979 strike of the STLTU are sparse, and there are also no extant records of letters written to public officials or to the union. This could be the consequence of the relative recentness of the event or perhaps that such letters were either not written or not saved because teacher strikes no longer represented a novel occurrence.

...a community long without [a daily newspaper] is a community that becomes half blind, that loses touch with itself and that finds its sensitivities dulled. Throughout the strike, those of us whom circumstance found in this building, daily passed in the lobby the engraved words of the founding Pulitzer: “An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus while the city’s two major newspapers—each of which opposed the strike for different reasons—certainly had their own interests, each also attempted to provide evidence of the paper’s fairness in providing a diversity of viewpoints in the copious letters to the editor they published. Teachers, therefore, were able to defend themselves in print; nonetheless, as the conversation developed during the strike, “public” views of the strike increasingly characterized the teachers as employees and asked whether or not they provided “value” to the “taxpayers” rather than viewing them as providers of a necessary public service to the city’s youth (as had been the case in 1973).

When the strike began, the *Post-Dispatch* and *Globe-Democrat* had very different views of the teachers’ position. The *Post-Dispatch*’s view was basically the same as it had been in 1973: teachers should be able to collectively bargain, but they should not strike, and the current action, though illegal, should be solved through compromise on both sides. In its first comment following the beginning of the strike, the *Post-Dispatch* asserted that “teachers deserve not only the recognized legal right to bargain but also legal provisions that can aid them when talks break down.” Still, in spite of the fact that

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<sup>16</sup> “The Newspaper Strike,” *P-D*, Jan. 14, 1979.

these changes were nowhere near the horizon, the editor believed that “until such changes are made, the teachers ought to rely on gaining public support to pressure the board.”<sup>17</sup>

The *Globe-Democrat*, on the other hand, had moved even further to the right in the six year interregnum between strikes. Reflecting the mobilization of conservative political networks in the decade, the editorial pages of the paper were increasingly filled with syndicated columns from conservatives—by late 1978 they included weekly pieces by George Will, Phyllis Schlafly, Patrick Buchanan, Ronald Reagan, and James Kilpatrick. The *Globe-Democrat* had also jubilantly celebrated the victory of anti-tax forces when Proposition 13 passed the previous summer by running—among other pieces—an editorial on June 8, 1978 declaring that “Californians Kill ‘the Monster’” and a cartoon several days later entitled “It’s the Aftermath of the California Earthquake” which showed the Washington Monument collapsing onto two fleeing men branded “Liberal Spending.”<sup>18</sup>

It was no surprise, then, that the *Globe-Democrat*’s immediate opinion on the strike was to call the STLTU strike “unconscionable” and to assert that in the future the Board of Education should insist on a “no-strike pledge as a condition of employment.” The editorial went on to denigrate the seriousness of the teachers’ concerns about lagging salaries and the state of the schools by comparing the teachers to silly, impudent undergraduates: “the striking St. Louis teachers need to learn that they are not engaging in a fraternity prank or sorority stunt by being on the picket line. They are breaking the law and seriously disturbing the peace of the entire city.” It then advised the school

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<sup>17</sup> “Teach Again, Talk Again,” *P-D*, Jan. 17, 1979.

<sup>18</sup> “Californians Kill the Monster,” *G-D*, Jun 8, 1978; Don Herse, “It’s the Aftermath from the California Earthquake,” *G-D*, Jun 10-11, 1978.

board to “begin replacing the strikers immediately and reopen the classrooms as quickly as possible.” This interpretation of the strike—a strike which it should be remembered consisted of a union of mostly female white collar professionals who walked off the job and lost wages at the risk of jail time—as a fraternity prank was buttressed by Don Herse’s cartoon which sat astride the editorial. In the drawing, a male picketing teacher stuck out his tongue at a young child, bundled up against the winter cold.<sup>19</sup>

This was the backdrop against which the public discussion took place. Teachers immediately criticized the positions of both newspapers, justifying the strike in the context of the post-Tax Revolt era that had chastened public employees. Sue Pratt, a teacher from the St. Louis suburb of Des Peres, Missouri, lashed out at the *Globe-Democrat’s* view of the strike in a letter printed in that newspaper. She argued that the teachers were only breaking a law that was “unjust, discriminatory, and morally wrong. Other workers are allowed to strike and achieve cost of living raises which they would otherwise never receive.” Pratt also criticized the *Post-Dispatch’s* view that teachers should try to change the law instead of striking: “Privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily, taxpayers seldom pay more taxes voluntarily. When all else fails, an issue must be dramatized through crisis and nonviolent action so that it can no longer be ignored. Teachers who strike are perhaps following the example of such great men as Socrates, Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.”<sup>20</sup> Thomas Thavorides, a teacher from a St. Louis school, argued that “if the board cannot serve [St. Louis] children to the highest of the state’s expectations and can support its teachers only to the degree that

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<sup>19</sup> “Striking Teachers Flunk Test,” Jan. 17, 1979, *G-D*; Don Herse, “Setting an Example,” *G-D*, Jan. 17, 1979.

<sup>20</sup> “Supports Teachers’ Strike,” *G-D*, Jan. 22, 1979.

leaves them demoralized or even bitter, then their efforts would be better spent confronting the problem of increasing their share of public funds rather than confronting their students and teachers with sacrifice after sacrifice.” The decision to strike, according to Thavorides, represented a “very painful” choice, and teachers wanted to return to their classrooms. “Before we do,” he continued, “we ask only that those schools be made worthy of the state’s AAA rating and that we receive a salary commensurate with our education, responsibilities, experience, and efforts.” Resting his case on the Board of Education’s practice of unilaterally adding extra “steps” to the salary scale, Wayne Gower pointed out that teachers were “not only the victims of inflation, but they are victimized and exploited economically by the same Board of Education to which they have dedicated their service.”<sup>21</sup>

Commentary from the non-teaching public was sparse during the first two weeks of the strike. After the Board dropped its restraining order and its back-to-work injunction effort and the teachers did not immediately return to work, both newspapers offered a more negative view of the teachers, but more importantly, helped to re-define the central issue of the strike as one of the rights of taxpayers, not the ultimate outcome for education in the city. On January 30, for instance, the *Post-Dispatch* argued that the school board had been the “first of the two sides to make a conciliatory move.” It continued its assertion from its view of two weeks earlier that “public bargaining with public employees....ought to be welcomed here” but the more important consideration of the strike now was that taxpayers had the right to more information about the negotiations

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<sup>21</sup> “Letters on the Teachers’ Strike,” *P-D*, Feb. 9, 1979.

since “the School Board, after all, is but the agent of the taxpayers....”<sup>22</sup> Such a framing directly pitted the “taxpayers” against the teachers as adversaries.

As might be expected, the *Globe-Democrat* criticized the Board’s “conciliatory” gesture: “The strike, being illegal, is indefensible, but the school board backed away from seeking a permanent injunction on the ground that it had never intended to ‘punish’ the teachers for walking out.” More importantly, however, the editorial asserted that “the schools are not the private property of the school board or the teachers. The schools belong to the taxpaying people of St. Louis.”<sup>23</sup> These two views of the strike, while obviously housing ample ideological distance between the two, reflected the new climate that had emerged by the late 1970s—the disaggregated “taxpayer” had emerged as the most important subject in the dispute—not the students, the teachers, or those who set fiscal policy.

“Public” commentators exhibited their own form of “consciousness” as taxpayers. In a letter to the *Post-Dispatch* on February 8, “A Reader” argued that parents of school age children were not the only ones who had a stake in the outcome of the strike: “Those of us who do not have children in school, but still do our duty supporting schools through our tax payments, are getting tired of providing teachers for baby sitting each day. We are also getting tired of wasting tax money for labor relations specialists, labor attorneys, and the use of federal mediators.” An “Unsympathetic Taxpayer” criticized Wayne Gower’s assessment of the teachers’ salary schedule and argued for a more market-based salary structure. The letter writer, who identified himself as a “practicing accountant for

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<sup>22</sup> “The Teachers’ Turn,” *P-D*, Jan. 30, 1979.

<sup>23</sup> “School Strike Questions,” *G-D*, Feb. 1, 1979.

the past thirty years” believed that “teachers have to be the only professional group that I know of who have the privilege of knowing in advance what their earnings will be. Other professionals, such as my group, must rely on the employer’s yearly decision to measure the job we have done over the past year; at which time he decides whether or not he will give us a raise and in what amount.”<sup>24</sup>

Teachers were forced to defend themselves, as one did in response to the “Unsympathetic Taxpayer,” in the very terms of the new taxpayer consciousness. She told “Mr. Accountant” that his comparison of public and private sector jobs highlighted “misplaced” priorities. Attacking the notion that “taxpayers” could pay teachers niggardly salaries while criticizing them for a sub-par school system, she placed the responsibility on taxpayers themselves, asking “How many times in the past has a school bond issue been rejected? The answer to that query would indicate to me that there is a profound lack of interest and concern for the children, the teachers, and the whole school system.”<sup>25</sup>

Though not directly in response, “A Reader” from St. Louis seemed to have an answer. This critic of the teacher strike took issue with the union’s contention that the strike had been undertaken in the interests of the city’s school students: “Keeping schools closed with an illegal strike is not an effective way to educate the system’s 73,000 pupils. I can see why the citizens of St. Louis do not support tax levies for the schools. What

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<sup>24</sup> “Strike Costs,” *P-D*, Feb. 8, 1979; “City Teachers’ Strike,” *P-D*, Feb. 15, 1979.

<sup>25</sup> “More Letters on the School Strike,” *P-D*, Feb. 23, 1979.

kind of excellent school system is on strike when it should be providing the children of the city with quality education?”<sup>26</sup>

As the strike dragged on, reaching six weeks of closed schools by the end of February, “taxpayer” critiques of the teachers became more pointed, focusing on the teachers’ supposed lack of accountability. A “Fed-up Taxpayer” wrote a scathing letter to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on Feb. 28, criticizing what he or she viewed as excessive salaries. After an hourly break-down of teachers wages (based strictly on the amount of time teachers were in the classroom), the letter-writer suggested that the newspapers’ readers “compare their own hourly rate with these, and decide themselves if these teachers are really underpaid....And yet the union even says ‘no’ to a suggested performance audit to gauge how well the teachers...are doing their jobs; are they unwilling to face these facts also?” The letter concluded by arguing that “it is time to stop the self-serving rhetoric, and to get the children back into school!”<sup>27</sup>

Kendall Wentz questioned if taxpayers were getting value from their expenditures. While admitting that teachers made less money than New York City garbage collectors, he asked the *Globe-Democrat* if teachers were worth their salaries to begin with, much less a raise: “Is the laborer worth of his hire? How is St. Louis ranking on the Student Achievement Test Scores that are administered by the colleges?” He also invoked a recent study by the *Phi Delta Kappan* to question the value of lower class sizes, asking if the “gain in achievement [is] worth the expenditure of additional funds

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “More on the City’s Striking Teachers,” *P-D*, Feb. 28, 1979.

just for the sake of smaller classes”?<sup>28</sup> Aside from questioning the validity of the teachers’ contract demands, Wentz’s questions represented just the tip of a burgeoning movement that would emerge in the next thirty years to more forcefully make teachers accountable for the performance of their students and to try to directly measure the value of the “inputs” brought by teachers into the education “marketplace.”

Teachers’ rhetoric became more defensive in the face of these criticisms. Roger Faber offered a sharp rebuke to those who criticized the teachers by invoking the larger picture of labor politics in the US: “Now don’t remind me that I knew what I was getting into when I became a teacher. Take that philosophy and apply it to any wage earner who strikes for higher wages. Why weren’t the paper handlers told that during their recent strike? Or, just try telling the teamsters, ‘You knew what you were getting into when you became a trucker.’” With regard to the teachers’ lack of consideration for their students, Faber admitted that “I like to see [teenagers] grow and develop into intelligent, well-equipped adults because I was their teacher. But my banker still wants money when my house payment is due and there are no grocers who will accept a pound of dedication for a pound of beef.” He assailed the public, who he characterized as not wanting to pay for good teachers, and assented to the market logic of taxpayer consciousness. “Believe me parents,” Faber concluded, “I like my job and I like your kids but I’ll be darned if I will continually sacrifice the welfare of my own family for either of them.”<sup>29</sup>

Robert Naumann responded directly to the “fed-up taxpayer’s” assertion that teachers were overpaid:

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<sup>28</sup> “Two Sides,” *G-D*, Mar. 9, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> “The School Strike: How Much Do Parents Care?” *P-D*, Mar. 7, 1979.

The fed-up taxpayer who decided that teachers make as high as \$19.40 per hour pointed out one of our biggest problems. The public simply doesn't understand the teacher's job. No teacher can get by on a six-hour day. Lesson plans must be prepared. Tests must be administered and corrected. The results must be checked to see what the next step should be. This cannot be done, along with instructing the student, discussing materials and dealing with the many distractions that occur during the six hours the children are at school.

Naumann also put the value of student learning in the terms of taxpayer consciousness, asking parents “if you are going to allow me, as a teacher, to spend six hours a day working on your child’s mind, what value do you as a parent place on the healthy development of that mind? Remember, in this as in most other things, you generally get what you pay for.”<sup>30</sup> Finally, Maureen Raucher reminded readers of the *Post-Dispatch* about the structural impediments to teaching at-risk students—an issue that had been front-and-center in the 1973 strike but which was virtually absent in 1979. “It seems as if all of society’s ills,” she argued, “are being placed on the shoulders of the teacher.... We’re constantly waging the war on poverty, ignorance, and parental neglect. Is it any wonder that several recent studies have shown that inner city teachers are displaying some of the same symptoms displayed by soldiers returning from war?”<sup>31</sup>

By the time the strike ended, teachers were bitter, and so were many members of the “public.” What is most marked, however, as discussion of the strike concluded in the days after teachers went back to work, is that those who opposed the strike viewed their political agency primarily as that of a taxpayer. E. M. Lessingham wrote to the *Globe-Democrat* that the teachers “joined a union organization and in the name of that

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<sup>30</sup> “Not in Six Hours,” *P-D*, Mar. 8, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> “Schools and Strikes,” *P-D*, Mar. 9, 1979.

organization held hostage for two months public school property....I am outraged as a citizen, and I will never vote for a school levy tax again.” Criticizing both the Board and the union, John Smith pointed out that without an infusion of extra money in the next contract there would have to be “a power play to extract a school tax increase from the voters next year....If the taxpayers figure this is even a remote possibility there will never be a ‘majority’ found again for a school levy!” Finally, M. Harris was “still burned up about the St. Louis teachers’ strike....If you ask me, St. Louisans should refuse to pay their property taxes for an amount of time equivalent to the teachers’ strike.”<sup>32</sup> There was nothing pre-ordained about these political responses. There are many ways that outraged citizens can respond politically. The three commentators above could have asserted that a new Board of Education should be elected or that stronger collective bargaining laws were needed or even that striking teachers should be fired and put in jail. These responses, however, indicated that after a decade in which contentious strikes had placed teacher salaries at the center of the debate, criticism of high taxes had moved toward the center of American politics, and the state’s policies had seemed less efficacious, threatening to veto tax increases or to simply withhold taxes made sense as a political strategy.

A wide chasm between the two positions had been solved by a temporary infusion of outside money, and thus the immediate strike had been settled after almost two months of negotiations between the teachers union and the Board. The gulf between what teachers thought they were doing and how the “public” viewed them, however, had

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<sup>32</sup> “Outraged,” *G-D*, Mar. 16, 1979; “More Backlash against Teachers’ Strike,” *G-D*, Mar. 17-18, 1979.

continued to widen. Indeed, by the end of the 1970s, the basic axis of political debate during teacher strikes was fiscal—how much would “taxpayers” be forced to pay for teachers’ salaries, and was it worth it? 1980 and 1981 would bring teacher strikes in Philadelphia, and these strikes would revolve even more around the cost—in taxes—of teachers’ salaries in addition to the possibility of privatized models of public education.

### **Two strikes: Philadelphia in the autumns of 1980 and 1981**

As in St. Louis, Philadelphia’s fiscal situation had not changed for the better between 1973 and 1980, and Philadelphia teachers also had to contend with the post-Tax Revolt era. In addition, the Philadelphia schools were burdened with a more difficult fiscal climate after the state of Pennsylvania underwent a seven-week financial crisis in 1977. Republicans refused to pass a budget with a tax increase in it, and the crisis exacerbated the Philadelphia school district’s long standing revenue problem. To stay afloat, the schools needed a major loan from Philadelphia banks, which the banks only agreed to with the stipulation that the school system pass a balanced budget for the next five school years. At the end of the 1980 school year, Superintendent Michael Marcuse laid off almost 2,000 school employees (including 1,600 teachers) in order to stay under budget for the 1979-1980 school year, in addition to proposing to close a dozen schools. He also raised the maximum class size from 33 to 35 and cut teacher preparation periods.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Williams, “Board Ready to Discuss Closing of 15 Schools,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1980; Steve Twomey, “School Strike: A Quiet First Day,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sep. 2, 1980.

The laid off teachers would prove to be the major point of contention between the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the Board of Education when the teachers' contract expired in the summer of 1980. With no agreement, 23,000 teachers went on strike at the beginning of September. Negotiators for the union were willing to go along with a two-year contract with no raise in the first year and a ten percent raise in the second year (a similar contract to that signed by city police and firefighters that summer), but in exchange union president John Murray wanted all 2,000 employees re-hired. For Murray, this was partially personal, as the PFT's chief negotiator—John Ryan—had openly criticized him and was jockeying to unseat him in the next election. Consequently, Murray believed he needed to prove that he could deliver at the bargaining table. More than this, however, Murray—like many of the rank-and-file teachers—believed that a capitulation would open the door to further layoffs. The Board for its part offered to re-hire most of the laid-off teachers but wanted to keep 300-400 off the payroll since enrollment in Philadelphia schools was expected to decline by about 10,000 students (from 1968 to 1979, student enrollments had declined from 284,000 to around 233,000 mainly due to suburbanization). The PFT argued that the decline in student enrollments allowed the district to lower class sizes below the new maximum of 35 students.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; Ray Holton and Steve Twomey, "School Talks Resume," *PI*, Sep. 3, 1980; Twomey, "Stalemate on a Principle Means School-Strike Standoff," *PI*, Sep. 13, 1980. On the rank-and-file, see for instance, Thaddeus Jones, a striking teacher who put it as follows: "It's enough to disillusion us. After we go to four years of college, you look forward to some kind of security in the teaching profession. They you find out that you can't work because the administration puts these laws on you." Jan Pogue, "On the Teachers' Picket Line," *PI*, Sep. 3, 1980.

Five days into the strike the Board and the union had reached an agreement: the schools would rehire all of the laid off workers in exchange for contract language that would allow the district to "adjust" the number of teachers if enrollment continued to decline. It was at this juncture that Mayor William Green intervened to stop the agreement. Since the school board did not have the power to unilaterally raise revenues in Philadelphia, either the mayor or city council could nix a municipal labor contract, and Green exercised this prerogative, arguing for stronger language in the contract that specifically allowed the school district to "lay off" teachers if enrollments declined. "It is wrong," the mayor argued, "To saddle the taxpayers with another bill to pay for the services of personnel who are no longer needed due to declining enrollments."<sup>35</sup>

A mayor intervening in a municipal labor dispute had precedent. Mayor Kenneth Gibson's intervention had been instrumental in ending the long and bitter Newark strike in 1971. As Joseph McCartin has shown, mayors such as Atlanta's Maynard Jackson had, in 1973, pioneered the striker replacement practice during difficult labor negotiations that President Reagan would soon exercise in the 1981 PATCO strike.<sup>36</sup> In this case, however, Mayor Green did depart from precedent by exercising his authority as mayor to veto the agreement and thus intentionally prolonging the strike.

Green was a Democrat and had been a US representative from 1965-1976, and he was elected mayor of Philadelphia in 1977. As a congressman, he had been favorable to organized labor, but as mayor he faced an enormous budget deficit from the outgoing

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<sup>35</sup> Holton and Twomey, "Why the Plan to End the School Strike Died," *PI*, Sep. 6, 1980; "Mayor's Statement," *PI*, Sep. 9, 1980.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph McCartin, "Fire the Hell Out of Them: Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2 (Fall 2005), 67-92.

Rizzo administration. Firmly committed to balancing the budget during the first two years of his term, he had forced the city on a path to austerity similar to that in New York City. During the September 1980 strike, Green held firm and after three weeks without salaries, the teachers relented, signing a contract that assented to the layoff provision in exchange for rehiring all of the previously laid off teachers, no wage increase in the first year of the contract, and a 10% wage increase in the 1981-82 school year. Ominously for the teachers, while the contract would only cost the school district an extra \$20 million in the first year, the wage increases in the second year projected a budget increase of over \$90 million.<sup>37</sup> By the time the second year of the contract came around, a new labor conflict would emerge that would make the city all but forget the three week strike in September 1980.

A year later, much had changed. To begin with, Ronald Reagan had been elected President by an electoral college landslide. Though Reagan was the only President to have headed a union (President of the Screen Actors Guild from 1947-1952 and 1959-1960), he emphatically fired and replaced 11,000 striking air traffic controllers—members of a union that had endorsed him during his election campaign—on August 5, 1981. That Reagan would so decisively break a union as conservative as PATCO signified to employers—both public and private—that a new era of labor relations had dawned in the US.<sup>38</sup>

Further, just days before the teachers would strike that fall, President Reagan's Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, citing his concern about "the widespread public

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<sup>37</sup> "Teachers and \$\$\$," *The Bulletin*, Sep. 24, 1980.

<sup>38</sup> On the PATCO strike, see Joseph McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

perception that something is seriously remiss in our public school system” commissioned a panel to study the state of education in the United States.<sup>39</sup> This commission would end up publishing the report *A Nation at Risk*, which would paint a bleak picture of the American education system, in 1983. In 1981, however, the significance of the study lay in the fact that a growing consensus was emerging that the nation’s school system was dysfunctional. In fact, public opinion polls bear out such a trend. When the Roper Organization asked Americans “Would you say the local schools (the ones you are familiar with) are doing an excellent, good, fair, or poor job?” in 1959, 64% had answered “excellent” or “good,” while only 26% had answered “fair” or “poor.” By 1972, these numbers had shifted to 50% and 35%, respectively. By 1980, only 47% of Americans answered “excellent” or “good,” while 38% answered “fair” or “poor.”<sup>40</sup>

In Philadelphia, this emerging narrative gained additional traction in the local media. Indeed, both of the city’s major newspapers ran a series of investigative articles about the state of Philadelphia schools just as the strike began. These series were not inspired by the strike itself: each required extensive research, and the larger *Philadelphia Inquirer’s* eight part series “The Shame of the Schools” began running before the strike started, while *The Bulletin’s* “Public Education: A Birthright in Jeopardy” ran shortly after the strike began.

The two series painted a picture of a failed public school system, and at the core of the explanations for the failure was the unionization of teachers. The third part in the

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<sup>39</sup> US Department of Education, *A Nation at Risk: A Report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education*, April 26, 1982, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Public Attitudes toward Television and Other Media in a Time of Change: The Fourteenth Report in a Series by the Roper Organization Inc.* (New York: Television Information Office, 1985), 13.

*Inquirer* series, for instance, was entitled “The Real Power in the District: The Teachers.” It highlighted a poor teacher who continued to teach because “firing a teacher is nearly impossible in the Philadelphia school system.” The authors’ assertion relied on the fact that teachers needed unsatisfactory ratings two consecutive years and then had to the right to an appeals process before they could be dismissed, as well as interviews with “many principals” who said “they would never bother with such a cumbersome process except in extreme cases.” Pointing to the average teacher salary that outstripped those of other major cities like New York City, the piece charged that while “thousands of Philadelphia teachers are dedicated, hard-working individuals...collectively, their union’s power has hamstrung the district.”<sup>41</sup> Another piece “exposed” the “costly presence” of “epidemic” levels of sick leave taken by teachers.<sup>42</sup>

One of the articles in the five part *Bulletin* series pointed out that “parents, teachers, pupils find school’s not what it once was,” asserting that many viewed “today’s public schools [as] the dumping ground for society’s problems, tarnishing the image of the schools and compounding their primary task of educating.” The second part of the *Bulletin*’s series focused pointedly on the unionization of teachers, headlining the question “Have Union Pacts for Teachers Gotten Out of Control?” The piece attempted to balance the gains made by teachers since the 1960s—when teachers were underpaid, according to one education activist, because they “were thought of as maiden ladies, the

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Bishop, Thomas Ferrick, Jr., and Donald Kimelman, “The Real Power in the District: The Teachers,” *PI*, Sep. 1, 1981; Bishop, Ferrick, and Kimelman, “How Inept Teachers Thrive in the District,” *PI*, Sep. 1, 1981.

<sup>42</sup> Bishop, Ferrick, and Kimelman, “Absent Teachers: A Costly Presence in the District,” *PI*, Sep. 2, 1981.

unmarried daughters”—against the fact that teachers struck in Philadelphia more times in the 1970s than in any other city in the US.<sup>43</sup>

It was in this milieu that at the beginning of September 1981, Mayor Green told the teachers the city could not afford to give them a ten percent salary increase and asked them to totally forego the raise in their contract to help close a \$223 million shortfall in the school district budget. The superintendent had already used the language of the last contract to lay off 3,500 school employees in June, an effort over which the union had almost immediately threatened a strike. But Mayor Green asked for even more concessions when the new school year began. “The fact is,” he argued, “that 10 years of political cave-ins, bad management, constant and continual concessions and repeated failures to heed the warning signals have brought Philadelphia’s school system to the brink of complete bankruptcy.” He wanted to renegotiate the union’s contract and to initiate more lay-offs of school district personnel.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, Green was asking for concessions in a signed contract—the public sector equivalent of what many labor historians view as the seminal moment in private sector labor relations a little less than two years earlier when the federal government’s bailout of the Chrysler corporation was tied to a wage freeze, pension deferrals, and a give back of paid holidays on the part of the automaker’s unionized employees. These “concessions” strengthened the bargaining position of the other major automakers and initiated a process of whipsawing in which employer after employer asked unionized workers to forego wage and benefit increases

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<sup>43</sup> Carol Innerst, “Pupils’ Emotional Grievs Can Make Teaching Tough,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 16, 1981; Dan Freedman, “Have Union Pacts for Teachers Gotten Out of Control?” *Bulletin*, Sep. 14, 1981.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Ferrick, Jr, “Green Wants a 10% Tax Hike,” *PI*, Sep. 1, 1981.

or to agree to outright concessions.<sup>45</sup> Mayor Green, in fact, had referenced Chrysler in asking the teachers to voluntarily forego the conditions of their contracts, asserting that

it is difficult but certainly not unusual—under extraordinary circumstances such as these—for a contract to be modified and reconsidered.... We saw [this] across the country in Chrysler plants. Management and labor have frequently adjusted contract provisions when it became apparent that the survival of the system, the interests of the whole and the job security of the majority were in jeopardy and that is precisely what we face today in Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond asking the teachers for concessions, however, Green also proposed a ten percent increase in the city's property tax. Asking for a tax increase equal to the wage increase to be given up by the PFT was an ingenious political maneuver on the part of the mayor. It allowed him to make the argument—echoed by major newspapers and many citizens as well—that the teachers and city residents should equally share the burden to solve the fiscal crisis (Of course, losing a ten percent salary increase was a much larger amount of money for teachers than a ten percent hike in the property tax represented for the overwhelming majority of property owners in the city). Tellingly, in the new era of municipal political economy that had dawned after the New York City austerity program and the California Tax Revolt, Mayor Green did not even bother to publicly ask for more funds from the state of Pennsylvania—where Republican Governor Richard Thornburgh was currently holding back around \$75 million over a dispute over special education mandates—or the federal government—where the Reagan administration's new budget was projected to take away \$17 million a year from Philadelphia schools.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988), 165-192.

<sup>46</sup> "Excerpts from the Mayor's Speech on the Schools," *PI*, Sep. 1, 1981.

<sup>47</sup> Rick Nichols, "High-level Talks Held on Schools," *PI*, Sep. 3, 1981; Dan Freedman, "City Schools and Union Agree: Shift in U.S. Aid a 'Disaster'," *Bulletin*, Sep. 2, 1981.

The teachers were not willing to rip up their contract—which had been hard won in 1980 with three weeks off the job—and forego their raises. So, on September 8, the 22,000 members of the PFT were once again on strike, and only about 200 of the school system’s almost 10,000 teachers showed up for work that day.<sup>48</sup> The strike immediately ushered in a welter of acrimony. The sides were so far apart on the bargaining issues that formal negotiations did not begin until early October, nearly a month into the strike. When they did begin negotiating, the teachers were put in a virtually impossible position as Mayor Green was pressing the Board to ask for a new three year contract with a total wage freeze. On the second day of the strike, police arrested over 200 teachers for violating a court order that set limits on how many strikers could picket each school.<sup>49</sup> Superintendent Marcuse took an aggressive stance against the teachers, almost immediately seeking a back-to-work injunction though judges had rarely enjoined a strike in Pennsylvania until it impinged on the completion of a full school year. Two weeks into the strike, the superintendent opened an elementary school and seven high schools (using non-striking teachers and administrators) to teach Philadelphia’s high school seniors. Striking teachers massed at the schools to prevent non-striking teachers from entering the schools, and parents and striking teachers screamed and cursed at each other.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Nichols and Mary Bishop, “Opening of Schools in Doubt,” *PI*, Sep. 9, 1981; Maurice Lewis, Jr. and Craig McCoy, “Phila. Teachers Strike: Pickets Posted, Bitterness Seen,” Sep. 6, 1981

<sup>49</sup> (Unattributed), “206 Teachers Seized,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 9, 1981.

<sup>50</sup> Bishop and Terry E. Johnson, “A School Opens, Bitterly,” *PI*, Sep. 19, 1981; Craig McCoy and Elmer Smith, “End Strike: Schools Take Teachers to Court,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 17, 1981; McCoy, “Phila. School Chief’s Stand on Strike Comes as Shock to Teachers’ Union,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 20, 1981; Kevin Goldman, Joyce Gemperlein, and Marc Schogol, “Most Seniors Register: 11,600 Make Way through Strikers,” *PI*, Sep. 24, 1981.

Efforts to open the schools also renewed long-standing conflicts over the racial make-up of the city's teachers and its students. Reports of mostly white teachers "harass[ing] black parents leading their children across PFT picket lines" led some African-Americans to fiercely criticize the union in similar terms to activists who criticized white teachers a decade earlier in Ocean-Hill Brownsville and Newark. "If the Philadelphia school district was 70 percent white, we wouldn't have this," asserted former mayoral candidate Charles Bowser. "Nobody has a right to come into the black community who don't live in it and don't care about it." Similarly, a group of sixteen members of the "Black community," as they described themselves, sent an open letter to both the teachers union and Mayor Green, asking for a "permanent solution" to the school crisis. They argued that "members of the PFT are among the best paid urban teachers in America; but they work a shorter day than most teachers in America... They work in a city with high unemployment, rampant poverty, a heavy tax burden and an economy which is hemorrhaging jobs. Philadelphia and its citizens have less and less money—but the PFT screams for more and more."<sup>51</sup>

On October 7, 1981, two county judges—Edward Bradley and Harry Takiff—ordered the teachers to return to work (the two judges had dual jurisdiction as Takiff had had to unexpectedly leave the city for several days early in the strike). The two judges ruled that since the unionized teachers already had a signed contract, they legally could not strike under the Pennsylvania's Act 195 but instead had to pursue a grievance procedure through the state department of labor. Compounded with a decision by Judge

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<sup>51</sup> Bishop, "Black Groups Push to End School Strike," *PI*, Oct. 1, 1981; Open Letter to William Green from Joseph Watlington, Jr., et. al., Oct. 26, 1981, City of Philadelphia, Department of Records, City Archives, RG60-2.7, Mayor William Green Papers, 1981, Box A-5576

Takiff when the strike began that the teachers' salaries stipulated by the contract signed in September 1980 could not be enforced since the city did not have the ability to pay for the increased salaries, the limited recourse available to the union seemed particularly unfair to many teachers. In effect, the county court had told the teachers that they could not strike because they had signed a contract that could not be enforced!

In any event, the injunction had been delayed for several days once the two sides had begun negotiating in early October, but now that the full 180 day school year was threatened, the judges had decided to act and order the teachers back to work. Just as the injunction had in 1973, this back-to-work order instantly criminalized the teachers' protest.<sup>52</sup> Teachers responded with a 1,000 strong demonstration at a North Philadelphia school and a march to City Hall, blocking traffic and demanding to see Mayor Green. The march attracted the support of several local labor leaders, as executives from the Philadelphia AFL-CIO, the Teamsters local, the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Workers local, AFSCME local, and the post office workers local attended.<sup>53</sup> PFT President John Murray told the teachers to stay out on strike, saying that he was prepared to go to prison for as long as it took to restore the old contract. Judge Bradley responded by fining the union \$10,000 a day.<sup>54</sup>

On October 15, President Murray upped the ante by calling on the other unions in Philadelphia to join with the teachers for a citywide general strike on October 28, an action that, though individual unions were free to decide whether to uphold the strike, the

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<sup>52</sup> Gemperlein, Lucinda Fleeson, and Bishop, "Court Orders Teachers Back," *PI*, Oct. 8, 1981; McCoy, "Teachers Ordered to Work," *Bulletin*, Oct. 8, 1981.

<sup>53</sup> Bishop and Ferrick, "Teachers Mass at N. Phila. School," *PI*, Oct. 10, 1981.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Salisbury and Bishop, "Stay Out, Murray Tells Teachers," *PI*, Oct. 12, 1981; Gemperlein, Fleeson, and Bishop, "PFT Found Guilty of Contempt," *PI*, Oct. 14, 1981.

Philadelphia region AFL-CIO voted to endorse.<sup>55</sup> It was here that Murray’s call for the general strike—coeval with national television news coverage of picketing teachers screaming at “scabs” and arrested after clashing with the police—intersected with the national trajectory of the labor movement.<sup>56</sup>

President Reagan had been pretty quiet toward organized labor in the first six months of his Presidency, but his summary termination of 12,000 PATCO workers just two days into their August strike signified a once unthinkable course for American labor politics. The major precedent to the PATCO walkout in the federal labor sector had been the 1970 postal employees wildcat strike. President Nixon had not even seriously considered firing and replacing the nation’s striking postal employees, instead engaging in serious collective bargaining negotiations that led to major gains by the postal workers. Even PATCO, as Joseph McCartin has pointed out, staged several job actions—such as slowdowns and sickouts—during the 1970s that the federal government met not with retribution but with negotiation. Though 1978 brought a major defeat to organized labor with the filibustered labor reform bill, Reagan’s hard line against the PATCO union shook up the organized labor establishment.<sup>57</sup>

In retrospect, we know that the PATCO workers were never re-hired, but in September 1981, the air traffic controllers still captured a good deal of media coverage as they sought avenues to get their jobs back, and the broader labor movement fought back against the PATCO firing as well as Reagan’s new budget which had proposed large cuts

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<sup>55</sup> Bishop, Fleeson, and Gemperlein, “Citywide Strike Urged for PFT,” *PI*, Oct. 15, 1981.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, *CBS Evening News*, Oct. 13, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); McCartin, *Collision Course*.

in social services. On September 19, 1981, while the teacher strike reached its third week, between 250,000 and 500,000 union members converged on Washington, DC for a Solidarity Day protest to demonstrate that organized labor had not lost its political importance. Around 10,000 of the protesters rode buses, formed carpools, and caught trains to the National Mall from the Philadelphia area.<sup>58</sup>

In this context, Philadelphia labor leaders publicly supported President Murray's call for a general strike in late October. On October 27, around 100 union leaders of the Philadelphia Council of the AFL-CIO forged "unanimous agreement" to instruct their members to walk out in a show of support the next day.<sup>59</sup> Behind the scenes, however, there were doubts by the city's labor leaders—particularly from the city's blue-collar dockworkers, Teamsters, and sanitation workers unions who would have been necessary to really shut down the city—about how many workers would actually walk off their jobs.<sup>60</sup> Philadelphia's teachers and blue collar workers may have all belonged to unions, but that did not mean that all blue collar workers believed their interests were the same. Better educated and better paid, teachers and air traffic controllers did not always arouse the sympathy of those who worked with their hands. In fact, it is possible that teachers—as white collar workers—might have faced some of the same resentment that the PATCO workers had faced. As one union leader put it, "Our members would be giving up an \$80 day for a teacher who earns \$28,000? I don't know what it would be worth to us."<sup>61</sup>

Particularly with regard to teachers, as David Halle's sociological research on chemical

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<sup>58</sup> Lucinda Fleeson, "Phila. Labor in Step with the March," *PI*, Sep. 20, 1981; AP, "Labor sees Public Ire as Answer," *Bulletin*, Sep. 21, 1981;

<sup>59</sup> Fleeson, Linda Loyd, and Thomas Ferrick, Jr., "Union Heads Vote to Back Mass Strike," Oct. 27, 1981.

<sup>60</sup> Fleeson, "Labor Hesitates at PFT's Call to Shut the City," *PI*, Oct. 18, 1981.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

workers in New Jersey in the early 1980s has shown, male blue collar workers in a similar region in a similar era often resented the (predominantly female) teachers who had some times made them feel unintelligent when they were going to school as teenagers.<sup>62</sup>

The extent of the support on the part of the city's unionized work force for the teachers was never determined, however, since the general strike did not take place. On the night before the strike, the teachers ended their holdout when a three-judge commonwealth court (a state appellate court) panel amended the county court's injunction. The higher court opinion, authored by Judge James Crumlish, argued that the second year of the contract was invalid because both sides had signed it under the "mistaken fact" that more revenues would be forthcoming. He ordered the teachers back to work under the terms of the first year of the contract, the "last valid agreement between the parties"; thus while the new injunction did not enforce the ten percent raise to come in the second year of the contract, it did immediately reinstate the 3,500 employees who had been laid off.<sup>63</sup> This was a face-saving compromise that the PFT could accept, particularly since there was so much uncertainty over how many other Philadelphia workers would honor the general strike.<sup>64</sup> The city would save the \$90 million it would have cost to give the teachers a raise in addition to the teachers' lost salaries during the 50 day strike. Still, as teachers returned to work, the school district was left contemplating ways to find new sources of revenues to keep the schools open for the entire school year.

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<sup>62</sup> David Halle, *America's Working Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>63</sup> "Excerpts from the Court Ruling that Resulted in the End of the Strike," *PI*, Oct. 29, 1981.

<sup>64</sup> Fleeson, Russell Cooke, and Gemperlein, *PI*, Oct. 28, 1981.

### **Letting the Public School System Die**

Our major archival sources for understanding the public discussion of the strikes are a collection of letters sent to Mayor Green (particularly important in 1981 since the concession bargaining had been his initiative) and the Philadelphia newspapers. The understanding of the strike derived from a similar context as that in St. Louis in 1978; this was an era after the Tax Revolt, and Philadelphians exhibited a similar tax consciousness almost as soon as the three-week 1980 strike began. Maria Louisa Pepper, for instance, wrote to the *Philadelphia Bulletin* on September 21 to ask “What procedure must I follow to ask for a school tax rebate? ...If Mr. Murray and the teachers paid their tuition at college and their professors went on strike, they would be the first to yell and demand a rebate. I feel that my school tax was my children’s tuition, so I demand my rebate.”<sup>65</sup> Bob Bridgeman, from across the Delaware River in Camden, New Jersey, pointed out that “municipal treasuries are no longer golden nests for public employees to feed upon. Teachers take the taxpayers’ money; the least they can do is meet the obligation to educate the child whose parents are paying the bill.”<sup>66</sup> B. DeFere identified himself as at the vanguard of a tax-paying class: “I think I speak for many Philadelphia taxpayers when I say the schoolteachers should not get another dime.”

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<sup>65</sup> “A Demand for School Tax Rebate,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 21, 1980.

<sup>66</sup> “Strike Views,” *PI*, Sep. 11, 1980.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* assessment of the 1980 strike also placed the taxpayers at the center of the controversy, asserting that “Mayor Green deserves the support of every Philadelphia taxpayer, if not the teachers union, in holding the line for a fiscally responsible contract.” The newspaper’s editor was Edwin Guthman, a liberal Democrat who had served as Robert F. Kennedy’s Press Secretary when Kennedy was a US Senator from New York. After working for Senator Kennedy, Guthman had moved on to be the chief editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, coming to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1977. So when the editorial page asserted that of the utmost importance was a “financially responsible contract” on the third day of the strike, this was not the opinion of a conservative anti-union ideologue. The newspaper’s view—which had become almost cultural common sense in American urban politics by the aftermath of the New York city fiscal crisis in 1975—was that “overly generous contract settlements and unbalanced budgets are what have put the school system in its present financial chaos, with money still owed to banks and to the state to pay off loans resulting from past excesses.” What was tellingly missing from such a view was anything at all about the American metropolitan structure or the special expenditures urban school systems faced in the 1970s.<sup>67</sup> Just five days later, the same editorial page implored teachers to “face reality” on the issue of school personnel layoffs, asking “if public school enrollment continues to decline, as seems likely at least in the short term, should the taxpayers be

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<sup>67</sup> “Mr. Green Must Insist on Sound School Contract,” *PI*, Sep. 3, 1980.

required to keep on paying teachers to teach non-existent pupils? That's featherbedding and can't be defended responsibly."<sup>68</sup>

Philadelphia's second major newspaper—the *Bulletin*—also focused its assessment of the strike on the city's taxpayers, arguing in the strike's second week that the Mayor was “correct in insisting that the schools—and more fundamentally, the city's taxpayers—simply can't afford to carry teachers who have no students to teach. We urge Philadelphia's public school parents, as parents *and* taxpayers, to stand with Bill Green on the layoff issue [italics in original].”<sup>69</sup> As the strike concluded, the newspaper lauded Mayor Green for “toughing it out on the issue....In reality,” the newspaper concluded, Green could have done even more to bring the school district toward financial stability, but he successfully held out “for the only deal that should be acceptable to the people who pay the taxes.”<sup>70</sup>

As views of the strike continued to place the “taxpayers” at the center of the discussion, it was inevitable that questions would emerge regarding how teachers spent their time and whether or not their pay was justified. In other words, to use a market metaphor, were the taxpayers getting their money's worth? Acel Moore, in an opinion piece for the *Inquirer* admitted that “teachers deserve” a good salary, health insurance, and summers off. However, he asked, “What assurance do parents have that teachers are using their prep time to prepare for their lessons? Do they leave early or go shopping or do other things? Apparently there are no controls or assurances under the current

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<sup>68</sup> “Teachers Should Face Reality on Layoffs Issue,” *PI*, Sep. 8, 1980; see also “Untenable Contract Demand,” *PI*, Sep. 18, 1980, which argued that “it would be preposterous for taxpayers to pay for unneeded teachers.”

<sup>69</sup> “Waiting Out the Teachers,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 16, 1980.

<sup>70</sup> “School Strike: A Way Out,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 22, 1980.

contract provision for that time and none are being negotiated.”<sup>71</sup> William Z. McGuire, from suburban Ambler, proclaimed that teachers were riding on a “gravy train”: “Average pay \$23,000 for nine months work. Efficient or non-efficient workers all the same as long as they pay union dues. Oodles and oodles of fringe benefits. Wake up, America!”<sup>72</sup> Betsy Dubb, from Philadelphia, argued that while teaching was a demanding job, the fact that teachers were only responsible for just over four hours of instructional time meant that they were not underpaid: “[if] teaching more than four hours a day is [too much], perhaps [teachers] should use their prep times to seek employment in another field.”<sup>73</sup> Cecile Wright, from Philadelphia, suggested that teachers were not worth their salaries when she argued that if they wanted a raise, “they [should] put in an extra 50 days a year giving remedial classes to the children they have failed to educate properly during the normal school year.”<sup>74</sup>

Teachers lashed out at the critics who purported that they were not worth their tax dollars, arguing that they did not understand what it took to be a teacher. Johnnie Wiedmann responded directly to Betsy Dubb by pointing out the difficulty of the job. “Teachers,” he argued, “are called on to be alert and attentive every moment of their working day. From the moment they catch sight of the building, they must maintain a working posture....In addition to being knowledgeable in their field, teachers know the name of every student they’ve had as well as the 150 they have now....Teachers deal daily with a system insensitive to their needs, insulting to their intelligence, and

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<sup>71</sup> Acel Moore, “Both Sides are Ignoring the Bottom Line,” *PI*, Sep. 4, 1980.

<sup>72</sup> “Speak Now,” *PI*, Sep. 19, 1980

<sup>73</sup> “Not convinced on Teacher Prep Time,” *PI*, Sep. 7, 1980.

<sup>74</sup> “Ignored Facts,” *PI*, Sep. 19, 1980.

insistently ignorant of their humanity.” What was most difficult, however, is that they were misunderstood: “They withstand patently ignorant assaults such as Betsy Dubb’s Sept. 7 letter and try once again to explain the situation to a wondering public.

Obviously, a teacher’s job is an exceptional one....If teaching is such a marshmallow job, why aren’t the Betsy Dubbs teachers?”<sup>75</sup>

Pearl Gladstone, a teacher from the contiguous suburb of Bensalem, argued that attacks on teacher prep time evidenced a “blind disregard for the educational process and the needs of a professional. A teacher needs time to create a visually educational room, to prepare materials, to counsel students, and to confer with parents. All of this is in addition to endless hours at home marking, researching, planning, etc.”<sup>76</sup> In response to Acel Moore’s question of whether the city’s parents were getting their money’s worth from its teachers, Philadelphia teacher Antoinette Higman told him to “visit their children’s school on any given day. They are getting their money’s worth.”<sup>77</sup> A “laid off teacher” from Philadelphia pointed out that teachers cared about their students and often bought their own supplies: “I spend about \$600 a year on materials for my classroom. Last school year I received one roll of Scotch tape—that’s it. The more I needed, the more I bought.”<sup>78</sup> Finally, Myra Kane pointed directly to the large class sizes she believed would result from the 1980 layoffs: “Saving money by firing teachers is very shortsighted. I have kept order in a class of 47, I have taught in classes of 33, but I could really teach all the children to the best of their ability in a class of 25....If the school

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<sup>75</sup> “Reactions to the Teachers’ Strike,” *PI*, Sep. 11, 1980.

<sup>76</sup> “Teachers Must Prepare,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 22, 1980.

<sup>77</sup> “We All Should Care about Education,” *PI*, Sep. 15, 1980.

<sup>78</sup> “Comparisons,” *PI*, Sep. 18, 1980.

district kept its teachers, who are the key ingredient in education, and because of lower enrollments, reduced the class sizes, Philadelphia would have a fantastic educational system....”<sup>79</sup>

In 1981, the gap between “taxpayers” and teachers was even wider, particularly because Mayor Green tied the ten percent increase in the property tax to the teachers’ foregoing the ten percent raise in their contract. The Greater Philadelphia Area Chamber of Commerce, for instance, wanted to ensure that no new business taxes ended up as part of a solution to the crisis. In 1973, the same body had publicly called for more taxes on Philadelphia businesses because of the public importance of education. Now, however, the Chamber asserted in a letter from Chairman-Elect Harold Sorgenti to Green that “this community has reached its limit. The law of diminishing returns, so far as taxes are concerned, is now firmly entrenched in this city’s economy.” Sorgenti concluded that “based on declining enrollment, significant cuts can be made.”

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, as it had in 1980, rallied to Mayor Green’s side and argued for a long-term fiscal solution to the city’s public schools problem. On September 3, for example, the newspaper’s editorial page argued that the only “possible source” to solve Philadelphia’s long-term problems were the city’s “taxpayers.” It pointed to the taxpayers’ average obligation—around \$4,000 per student enrolled in the system—and argued that they were getting very little for their money: “they are getting an unmanaged, unprofessional out-of-control, tragic burlesque of what they deserve and have every right to demand. Was it irresponsible for the men and women who represent Philadelphia’s

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<sup>79</sup> “No Savings in Firing Teachers,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 14, 1980.

taxpayers to negotiate the series of teachers' contract that created those staggering deficit figures? Without the slimmest doubt, yes." Mayor Green, the *Inquirer* argued, represented the last hope for the city school system, and "for him to step back from it would be to behave as irresponsibly as did those who created the crisis."<sup>80</sup>

Individuals wrote to both the *Inquirer* and the *Bulletin* identifying themselves as disgruntled taxpayers and siding with the Mayor. Philadelphian Stephen Lawrence characterized himself as an "overtaxed citizen" who "resent[s] an additional increase in my taxes." Showing how well had worked Mayor Green's attempt to define the breach of the teachers' contract as part of a shared sacrifice, Lawrence admitted that he would nonetheless be willing to go along with the tax increase if the teachers were also willing to forego the raise and accept layoffs. He argued that PFT President John Murray's refusal to give up the raises "shows absolutely no concern or consideration for the overall situation. Labor leaders like Mr. Murray are one of the reasons that the labor movement in America is losing credibility and, it would seem, strength." Similarly, Donna Greenberg offered the view that the "taxpayers of this city" represent a "rapidly shrinking population....Eventually there will be almost no one left to pay for the schools....I recommend that we put our collective foot down. The time is ripe: public sympathy is turning against unions. We could use some of President Reagan's hang-tough philosophy here in Philadelphia." Joseph Springer simply pointed out after hearing the mayor's tax

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<sup>80</sup> "Is the School Dispute Politics—Or Survival?" *PI*, Sep., 3, 1981; letter from Harold Sorgenti to Green, Aug. 28, 1981, MWGP, Box A-5576.

proposal that he was “outraged.” Out of the school board, the teachers, and the taxpayers, he argued, “up to this point, only the taxpayer has done his job.”<sup>81</sup>

Homeowner C. J. Swartz invoked the California Tax Revolt when he compared his own property taxes to that of his son, who lived in the Golden State in the post-Prop 13 era. In a letter mailed in an envelope featuring a sticker that read “Cut Taxes,” Swartz pointed out that his yearly property tax had increased from \$257 in 1974 to \$501 in 1981. He urged Mayor Green to “resist this assault on the people of Phila. by the teacher’s union....My son lives in California. His house has more than 4 times the sales valuation as mine, his tax \$350. If he was taxed at my rate he would be taxed over \$2000.”<sup>82</sup>

Other commentators, like O.M. Monroe, criticized both teachers and the Mayor. He believed that Green’s solution was “disgusting and most unfair to the average taxpayer, who is now over-burdened with taxes and higher utility costs, to be hit by yet another increase.” Further, to Monroe, school financing should more closely resemble a pay for services structure, as “most people who have purchased real estate in the last 20 or 25 years have no children in the schools.” Julie Crognale wrote to the *Bulletin* that while she supported Mayor Green’s “strong stand in protecting the interests of Philadelphia taxpayers” she pointed out that according to a study by the Pennsylvania Economy League public sector employees already made more money in comparison to similar private sector employees. “It would seem to me,” she concluded, “that if the

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<sup>81</sup> “The Crisis in Philadelphia’s Schools” and “Hang Tough,” *PI*, Sep. 6, 1981;

<sup>82</sup> Letter from C.J. Swartz to Mayor Green, Sep. 2, 1981, MWGP, Box A-5576.

salaries of such employees were frozen at present level, the ‘union’ would not be assuming 100 percent of the burden.”<sup>83</sup>

In a lengthy letter to Green, Carol Aff, writing from the white working-class area of Northeast Philadelphia, turned the assumptions about education in the city on their head. “Everyone is so concerned about paying lip service to the ‘children’ in this city,” she pointed out, “that it seems repugnant to mention that there are elements in our city who are more important than the children.” In thinly-coded racial language, Aff starkly separated the interests of taxpayers and the city’s public school students:

Those of us who pay taxes are more important! We’re more important than the kids who don’t want to go to school and don’t learn anything anyway. We’re more important than the 70% of the parents who are on welfare and provide nothing to further their children’s education not even the discipline that is lacking and which bears a lot of responsibility for making the system the mess that it is. We foot the bills for too much waste and too many unnecessary programs and by and large we either don’t have children or wouldn’t send them to public schools if we did.

She suggested that Mayor Green “cut out everything, and I mean everything [in the education system] that is not required by law...No one would like you for it, except for the taxpayer who would smile to themselves and applaud your efforts.” Finally, connecting the education system to the market, she admonished the mayor to “get educators off the school board. Education is a business and people with business backgrounds should be running the show. Don’t give in too much to the teachers—they’re way out of line.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> “No Tax Hike,” *PI*, Sep. 8, 1981; “Open the Schools,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 11, 1981.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Carol Aff to Mayor Green, Sep, 2, 1981, *MWGP*, Box A-5576.

Beyond just rebuking the teachers and tax increases, however, some critics advocated direct action in the mold of both Prop 13 and Reagan's firing of the PATCO workers. Two weeks into the 1981 strike, for example, Philadelphian Penny Brodie proclaimed to the readers of the *Inquirer* that "it's time to withhold your school taxes; it's time we had enough with the teachers' union; it's time for the school board officials to say to the teachers, 'Show up tomorrow or you're fired.' It's definitely time for action." Others directly threatened Mayor Green's political career if he followed through with his proposed tax increase. An "irate taxpayer" from Northeastern Philadelphia, for example, asserted that "if a tax increase is put into effect, we the Tax Payers who put you into office, will vote you out."<sup>85</sup><sup>86</sup>

The occasional "taxpayer" did believe that it was their duty to pay higher taxes. Philadelphians William and Gloria Powers wrote to the *Inquirer* on October 4, 1981, that "if it takes higher taxes to support [the school] system and insure its viability then we are prepared to pay them. To do otherwise is irresponsible. Others paid so we could benefit, now it's our turn." Edith English, from Bryn Mawr went even further, sending Mayor Green a check for the not insubstantial sum of \$236 on October 20 (this represented one-millionth of the estimated budget shortfall). "If citizens would think only of what this [strike] is doing to pupils ...and think of ridding 'our' City of this most sad, sad situation I hope most all who are able would give freely and promptly."<sup>87</sup> Such views, however, were the exceptions that proved the rule, as the taxpayer anger that flooded the country

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<sup>85</sup> "Time for Action," *PI*, Sep. 19, 1981.

<sup>86</sup> Letter to Mayor Green, name illegible, address listed as 3029 Cottman Avenue, Phila., PA, Sep. 15, 1981, MWGP, Box A-5576.

<sup>87</sup> "Willing to Pay," *PI*, Oct. 4, 1981; letter from Edith English to Mayor Green, Oct. 20, 1981, MWGP, 1981, Box A-5576. Green returned the check.

and had been validated by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* meant that most of those citizens who weighed in on the strike did so as disgruntled taxpayers.

Thus, most of the public voices defending the strike were teachers themselves, and in contrast to the 1980 strike when teachers had defended their worth as successful teachers, now they predominantly defended the strike by pointing to the city's renegeing on a signed contract. PFT President Murray, for instance, reminded the city that "our members voted overwhelmingly, in good faith, for this contract knowing full well that the wage and benefit package was to be deferred for one year....In plain language, the mayor wants to change the rules in the middle of the game to the mutual detriment of school employees and school children." George Schulman, a striking teacher, echoed the sentiment, pointing out that "the contract, as any other legal document, is binding." Another striking Philadelphia teacher more pointedly criticized the *Inquirer's* support for Mayor Green, asking "why after having been on strike for 21 days last September to settle a contract that got me no raise last year, I should not be looking forward to and fully expecting this year the raise that I have already suffered for?" He also explicitly compared the teachers to the fired air traffic controllers, expecting the newspaper "to be sympathetic towards me because this time it is not the union trying to gain something additional; rather, we just want what has already been fought for and promised." Jane Schreiber also criticized the *Inquirer's* view of the strike by comparing its coverage to that of the PATCO workers: "On the one hand, you criticize the air traffic controllers' strike, because the controllers failed to honor signed agreements with the federal

government....On the other hand, you condone the city government's failure to honor a signed agreement with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers."<sup>88</sup>

Other teachers placed the fight to enforce the contract in the context of the larger trajectory of American labor relations. Julius Rosenberg argued that if the Board "is permitted to break this contract it will have set a precedent which will threaten the entire process of collective bargaining all over the country." Similarly, Jane Henderson asserted that "if the words *binding* and *contract* still have any meaning, then this request [to forego the teachers' raise] is utterly unreasonable. Why waste time and energy and school days negotiating a meaningless contract? Backing down now would only mean more of the same, not only for the teachers, but also for workers in other unions."<sup>89</sup>

Though teachers, their union leadership, and the blue-collar union leaders that had expressed support for Sullivan's call for the October 28 general strike had taken up the mantle for all working-people, there is evidence that many blue-collar workers did not believe their interests were identical. Betsy Dubb discursively separated teachers from other workers when she argued that "the average American puts in an eight-hour work day with an hour for lunch. He enjoys two weeks' vacation a year. His pay and benefits lag far behind those of [teachers]." In addition to the amount of time on the job, by employing the pronoun "he" Dubb was also signaling that the normative worker was a man, as opposed to those in the teaching profession, which was comprised mostly of women. In a similar vein, Steven Klotz pointed out that "most people I know work far

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<sup>88</sup> John Murray, "Union Position: Teachers Don't Want a Strike," *PI*, Sep. 6, 1981; "In Search of a Solution," *Bulletin*, Oct. 9, 1981; "Why Go Back on the Contract?" *PI*, Sep. 3, 1981; "Anti-Labor" *PI*, Sep. 10, 1981.

<sup>89</sup> "A Precedent," *PI*, Sep. 10, 1981; "Meaning," *PI*, Oct. 1, 1981.

longer hours than do teachers, not because they are paid overtime, but because there are not enough hours between nine and five to accomplish their tasks in a satisfactory fashion. Pride in one's work—a characteristic most teachers claim to possess—commands one to labor until the job is done right and done well.”<sup>90</sup>

B. Defere framed the space between teachers and other workers more starkly: Teachers “should understand that the handsome wages and fine fringe benefits they receive come right out of the hides of those who do not get them—senior citizens and low-paid workers.” Matti Goodsett implored the teachers to consider the economic context of the time, asking them to take “a look at the real world around them, where thousands of workers are being laid off and thousands more are accepting wage cuts in order to preserve their jobs. Times are tough—for every one of us.” Mary Rogrove, a teacher from Kempton (a town seventy miles from Philadelphia), excoriated the Philadelphia teachers for “misunderstanding...the difficult position of the rest of the taxpayers who support them.” She believed that “we should sympathize with these other taxpayers who are suffering more from our floundering economy because their salaries are not guaranteed as ours are.” Also defining the normative worker as male and blue collar (she gave the example of a carpenter), she asserted that he “now suffers the anxiety of building his trade when money is tight, and...working extra hours for less money when market demand for his skill drops off. He has the same bills we have, but none of the job assurances guaranteed to us in the teaching profession.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Not Convinced on Teacher Prep Time,” *PI*, Sep. 7, 1980; “Teacher Prep,” *PI*, Sep. 10, 1981.

<sup>91</sup> “Striking Teachers Have Become ‘Greed.’” *Bulletin*, Sep. 10, 1981; “Take a Look,” *PI*, Sep. 21, 1981.

By early 1981, then, it was clear that the support of other workers—even unionized workers—for striking teachers was far from certain. In this context, it is a highly interesting counterfactual to wonder what might have happened if the state court had not made a face-saving ruling before the general strike. Certainly, the PFT and the Philadelphia AFL-CIO were as worried as anyone in Philadelphia about what might have happened if October 28 had arrived with the teachers still out on strike.

In addition to widening the gap between teachers, other workers, and taxpayers, the strike—even more importantly—opened up a significant space in which commentators began to imagine viable alternatives to the public school system. Indeed, the lengthy, intractable financial problems coupled with the print exposés in both major newspapers about the failure of the Philadelphia schools led many to question whether the schools should even re-open when the strike ended. Dan Rottenberg’s op-ed in the *Inquirer*, for instance, compared the Philadelphia schools to the seventeenth century Dutch tulip trade and Major League Baseball (which had experienced a players’ strike for half of June and all of July in 1981), as all three relied on “maintaining a public illusion that your commodity is worth taking seriously.” Though education, according to Rottenberg, did possess “intrinsic” value, the school administrators and teachers had been squabbling with the fallacious assumption that students would return no matter what they did. “Yet each successive strike,” he concluded, “adds fuel to the notion that Philadelphia’s public school system is nothing more than a gargantuan tulip collection. This summer many Philadelphians discovered that they can get along just fine without baseball, this fall many Philadelphians are discovering that they can get along just fine without the public schools.” Similarly, Robert Kay, from suburban Paoli, pointed out

that “in our anxiety to get the schools going again it’s a pity that few seem to be asking the really important questions.” He asked the readers of the *Inquirer*, “Are the schools, in their present form, really worth salvaging? Are they cost-effective systems?”

Philadelphian Charles Hewins had an answer. While admitting that “the public needs educating,” he asserted that “if we can’t beat the system, let’s learn how to establish a new one.” Just a week before the planned general strike, a Philadelphia parent believed that “I am duty-bound to find another system of education. It will not be easy, financially, but I cannot shirk my parental responsibility. I will not allow my children to squander their intelligence and lose their potential for the future.” Philadelphian Valerie Hasiuk weighed in on the general strike itself, arguing that “if the city unions decide to support the teachers’ union...they will in essence be supporting an inappropriate public educational system and illiteracy for those unfortunate children who must attend the public schools. For shame!”<sup>92</sup>

But if the public school system failed, then what was to be done? The alternatives discussed in the pages of Philadelphia’s newspapers all revolved around market-based systems: new schools with non-unionized teachers, private schools as competition for the public schools, tuition or head taxes to pay for the current education system, and, relatedly, a system of “vouchers” that could instill competition by allowing students to attend whatever school their parent chose for them.

Edna Williams wanted Mayor Green to close the schools and re-open them with teachers who were not union members. Writing from Northeastern Philadelphia,

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<sup>92</sup> Dan Rottenberg, “Can Philadelphians Get Along without Their Schools,” *PI*, Sep. 29, 1981; “School Questions,” *PI*, Oct. 12, 1981; “A New System,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 19, 1981; “Duty-Bound,” *PI*, Oct. 20, 1981; “Illiteracy,” *PI*, Oct. 21, 1981.

Williams believed that “between the union demands and welfare recipients, the non-union workers and home owners are the victims of these greedy, power and money hungry people.” She also wanted Green to know that unions “have bullied us long enough and it is up to our leaders....to say ‘No’ to their demands....Many think the School Dist. should declare bankruptcy, fired these striking teachers, and set up a whole new school system with non-Union teachers. Many of the older citizens and homeowners live in fear of losing their homes, when taxes are raised to meet the demands of these selfish people.”<sup>93</sup>

Patrick Armstrong, also from Northeastern Philadelphia, simply wanted to shift the burden of paying for schools from homeowners toward those whose children attended public schools. “I feel that it is unfair for just real estate owners to support this [tax] increase,” he argued. “I suspect the majority of the children attending public schools are not, in fact, children of property owners....the parents of children who attend school should pay tuition of some type thereby having the burden of the cost directed toward those who benefit. I would urge keeping the property taxes of tax paying citizens of Philadelphia at a reasonable level so that the few responsible citizens of the city will not leave.”<sup>94</sup>

The private school system represented an obvious alternative to many critics of the Philadelphia schools. Private Catholic (or parochial) schools had emerged as an alternative to compulsory public schools as early as the nineteenth century, particularly in cities with large working-class European immigrant populations, like Pittsburgh,

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<sup>93</sup> Letter from Edna Williams to Mayor Green, Sep. 21, 1981, MWGP, Box A-5576.

<sup>94</sup> Letter from G. Patrick Armstrong to Mayor Green, Sep. 22, 1981, MWGP, Box A-5576.

Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia. Private schools had emerged as alternatives to integrated schools in the south during the white establishment's "massive resistance" to the Civil Rights movement. By the 1960s and 70s, private schools had also increasingly served as the refuge of many white ethnics from attempts to alleviate the de facto segregation of Northern urban schools. Thus, it was no surprise that critics of the public school system offered this alternative. In late September, the *Bulletin*, for instance, published an op-ed from Russell and Rosalind Jackson, who were "parents of three children who up until this year attended public schools in Philadelphia." The Jacksons "believe[d] in the concept and value of public education—properly administered. . . . Under present circumstances, private school offers the best short term option. For the longer term, we will, as many others already have, get out of this town as fast as we can and find a place where public education has not become the rotted plum of decades of selfish, unconcerned politicians and school personnel."<sup>95</sup> Others, who had sent their children to parochial schools, believed that the public school "crisis" had been overblown, implicitly offering Catholic schools as a viable alternative. Estelle Bucher diminished the teachers' demands with levity: "I really have to laugh at the public school teachers and their ruckus over the fact that they might have to teach 35 pupils instead of 33. Having put nine children through parochial school, where the classroom size was anywhere from 45 to 104, I really feel very little sympathy for the teachers. . . . And, I might add, the kids did receive a quality education." Philadelphian R. Tucci had a plan to deal with the fiscal crisis: charge tuition. "We, who send our children to private or

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<sup>95</sup> Russell and Rosalind Jackson, "The 'Rotten Plum' of Selfishness," *Bulletin*, Sep. 27, 1981.

Catholic schools pay a tuition plus our school taxes,” he pointed out. “Why should we pay school taxes if we have to pay tuition. Let them pay.” As the strike dragged into its seventh week, John Karpowicz had bigger ambitions. He believed that the strike would end “either when the teachers get exactly what they want or their bank accounts run out.” He argued that “the people of Philadelphia should send their children to private schools and organize a tax revolt.”<sup>96</sup>

Such drastic overhauls, however, were not very realistic with such a long history of state support for public education in the United States and consequently only generated limited discussion. Proposals for school vouchers, however, emerged as the most prominent systematic alternative to the public schools during the course of the 1981 Philadelphia strike. Voucher systems represent a hybrid between state financing of education and parental choice in schools. Though there are countless possible forms, a voucher system, generally speaking, is one in which individuals receive a specific amount of money that can be used to attend private or public schools under the logic that parents can best discern the appropriate school for their children and that competition for financing will create a better overall educational “product.” It was first proposed by the economist Milton Friedman in a 1955 essay, “The Role of Government in Education,” but vouchers also gained some prominence in by the 1960s and 1970s as an experimental idea among some liberals for black students to circumvent a white school establishment that was seen as unresponsive to the needs of inner-city blacks.<sup>97</sup> In 1980 vouchers truly

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<sup>96</sup> “Class Size a Laughable Matter,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 21, 1980; “Charge Tuition,” *Bulletin*, Sep. 26, 1981; “Disgust over Strike,” *Bulletin*, Oct. 18, 1981.

<sup>97</sup> Jim Carl, *Freedom of Choice: Vouchers in American Education* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

came into the national political mainstream through Friedman's PBS Series *Free to Choose*.

After winning the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1976, Friedman enjoyed substantial intellectual currency, which he cashed in for the widely popular PBS series. Conceived by a local Pennsylvania PBS station manager, the ten-hour series received no actual funding from PBS; instead, financing came from the Sarah Scaife Foundation (a conservative think-tank named after the mother of Richard Mellon Scaife), Getty Oil, and *Readers' Digest* (which also ran advertisements to promote the series). In January 1980, around the same time that a book of the same title reached the *New York Times* bestseller list, the hour-long segments began to air weekly.<sup>98</sup> The first half of each segment revolved around a different aspect of society which would be drastically improved, according to Friedman, through less restriction of market forces. Then, the second thirty minutes included a round-table discussion with relevant experts for each theme. So, for example, Episode 8 "Who Protects the Worker?" argued that unions actually hurt most workers by restricting competition. In the roundtable, Friedman debated his thesis with the Assistant Secretary of Labor, union leaders, and business executives.

Episode 6—"What's Wrong with the Schools?"—focused particularly on the flaws with "government schools." The episode began with footage from an inner-city Boston school, highlighting the school's police officers and metal detectors, placing the "taxpayers" at the forefront of the discussion as Friedman's avuncular, matter-of-fact voice-over narration argued that "nobody is happy with this kind of education. The

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<sup>98</sup> Lanny Ebenstein, *Milton Friedman: A Biography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 200-203.

taxpayers surely aren't. This isn't cheap education. After all, those uniformed policemen, those metal detectors have to be paid for.” He argued that wealthy Americans could opt out of sub-par schools by re-locating or simply sending their children to private schools. “Increasingly,” Friedman continued, “schools have come under the control of centralized administration, professional educators deciding what shall be taught, who shall do the teaching, and even what children shall go to what school. The people who lose most from this system are the poor and the disadvantaged in the large cities. They are simply stuck. They have no alternative.”<sup>99</sup>

In the economist’s view, educational choice would lead to both better quality through innovation since schools would be forced to compete for students. Specifically, Friedman advocated vouchers, highlighting a small-scale example in which the reform had improved education. He then used the example of a school in England to show how local “bureaucracies”—particularly teacher unions—blocked efforts to reform schools through vouchers:

This is Ashford, a town in the south of England. For four years, there have been efforts here to introduce an experiment in greater parental choice. Parents would be given vouchers covering the cost of schooling. They could use the voucher to send their child to any school of their choice. I have long believed that children, teachers, all of us, would benefit from a voucher system. But the head master here, who happens also to be secretary of the local teacher's union, has very different views about introducing vouchers.

Like several of the anti-union commentators had during the debate over the labor reform bill, Friedman used England—which had a reputation for even stronger union power than the US, particularly after the 1978-79 Winter of Discontent—as a cautionary tale as to

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<sup>99</sup> *Free to Choose, Episode 6: What's Wrong with Our Schools?* (Video Arts TV Production, 1980). Directed by Peter Robinson.

how American teacher unions would be able to stifle reform in the absence of school choice. The first half of the episode ended with Friedman concluding that the “system is not working and it is not working because it lacks a vital ingredient...What we need to do is to enable parents, by vouchers or other means, to have more say about the school which their child goes to, a public school or a private school, whichever meets the need of the child best...Market competition is the surest way to improve the quality and promote innovation in education as in every other field.”<sup>100</sup>

In the panel discussion that followed, Friedman entered into a spirited debate with a variety of different experts on the school choice issue, including voucher proponent John Coons (co-author of a policy piece widely cited in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s—*Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*<sup>101</sup>) and AFT President Albert Shanker. Shanker, unsurprisingly, defended the public school system from the market forces that Friedman championed. “You cannot have free competition,” he argued, “where one group of schools must accept every single student who comes along, no matter what his physical or emotional handicaps or other problems; whereas the very essence of a private school and your voucher school is that they're going to be able to keep out the[se] students and the finest schools that you saw in that film were schools that deliberately kept out the most difficult students.” Shanker went on to worry that a voucher system would destroy the notion of public obligation to provide equal education to all students, since there would be a permanent group of “problem students” who would be ghettoized into the public schools that would be forced to keep them. Friedman

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, *Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (Troy, NY: Educator’s International Press, 1999).

admitted that “...there are a small minority of people who are problems,” but he nevertheless wondered

Is it desirable to impose a straightjacket on a hundred percent of the people, or ninety percent of the people, in order to provide special assistance or special help to four or five or ten percent of the people? Not at all. I think that there's a big difference between two kinds of systems. One kind of system in which the great bulk of parents have effective freedom to choose the kind of schools their children go to, whether it's the lower or the higher level. And there are programs and provisions for a small minority. That's one kind of a system. That isn't what we have now.

Shanker countered in the segment’s concluding point by comparing the voucher plan to “a hospital throwing out all the sick patients and keeping the healthy ones.”<sup>102</sup>

Shanker may have had the last word in the debate, but if the public debate over the two Philadelphia teacher strikes was any indication, Friedman’s view had begun to grow in political legitimacy. During the 1980 strike, *Inquirer* columnist Dan Rottenberg referenced the discussion around the Philadelphia teachers, much of which had tarred the teachers with acting, “in a word, piggy.” Rottenberg also pointed specifically to *Free to Choose* and to Friedman’s voucher plan, weighing the economist’s “optimistic idealism” against Shanker’s “gloomy realism.” He hoped that the 1980 strike would “force us to...come up with some creative long-range alternatives—perhaps like the voucher scheme Friedman proposes.”<sup>103</sup>

In the fall of 1981, voices in the media advocating a voucher plan to replace the current Philadelphia school system grew louder. The *Philadelphia Bulletin* led the charge. Just after it became apparent that Mayor Green’s austerity measures would

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<sup>102</sup> *Free to Choose, Episode 6.*

<sup>103</sup> Dan Rottenberg, “The Schools are Asked the Wrong Questions,” *PI*, Sep. 23, 1980.

provoke a strike, the *Bulletin* editorial page went beyond merely supporting Green's fiscal solution. Comparing the situation to private sector labor relations, the newspaper believed that a voucher program would provide the school board leverage to break the strike: "If the teachers decide to strike, the city conceivably could offer a voucher system which would pay parents to find alternate schools or means to educate their children."<sup>104</sup>

Though the basic view of the editorial board of the *Inquirer* did not change much between 1980 and 1981—the newspaper never directly advocated vouchers as did the *Bulletin*—it did print several op-eds by Neil Peirce advocating a voucher overhaul of the American school system. Representative of Peirce's view was his first piece published during the strike (on October 5), which, specifically linking teacher strikes with taxes, implored the reader to "look across the political and educational wreckage of many major city school systems this fall—militant unionism, intransigent bureaucracies, forced busing, taxpayer revolts, skyrocketing costs, and slumping student achievement scores...." Peirce used the Philadelphia strike as his major piece of evidence regarding the failure of the public school system. In this context, he asserted that "for the sake of the kids, if not the taxpayer, hasn't the time finally arrived to break the effective monopoly of the public school system? Why not experiment with a system of vouchers to permit parents to shop for the school they believe would provide their child the best education?"<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> "Time for a School Compromise," *Bulletin*, Sep. 2, 1981. The *Bulletin* referenced the potential of a voucher system again just five days later. See "Labor Day, 1981," *Bulletin*, Sep. 7, 1981.

<sup>105</sup> Neil Peirce, "...But There are Alternatives to the Present System," *PI*, Oct. 5, 1981. See also Peirce, "It is Time to Give School Vouchers a Try..." *PI*, Oct. 19, 1981.

Philadelphia parent Geoff Steinberg agreed with Peirce's assessment, and he was "glad to read" the column advocating vouchers. "How wonderful and convenient it would be if the public school one block from our home were an adequate educational institution. But it is not, and we are not willing to gamble and assume that the schools will improve. Our child, no matter what the sacrifice, is not going to be subjected to the miserable Philadelphia school system." D.B. Stad's support for vouchers hinged more specifically on the teacher strike: "Children need schools they can depend on and teachers who care about them and maintain a professional attitude toward their work. Let's get on with concrete plans for a voucher system and financial support for alternative schools as soon as possible." Gerald Palladino believed that vouchers represented "the only way out." The benefit of a voucher system, for Palladino, was that "the school system would have to compete. Those not measuring up to the standards of the people desiring education will fail, as they should."<sup>106</sup>

By the end of the 1981 strike, then, public discussion of teacher unions and the education system (proxies for the labor movement and the liberal state, respectively) were vastly different than they had been back in 1970 when the state of Pennsylvania had passed its far-reaching public sector labor law. In 1970, policy makers had tried to improve the way local governments bargained with their workforces and had hoped this would create a better-functioning education system. In 1972 and 1973, many Philadelphians wanted to know how to solve the structural problem of financing the city's public schools, and this debate had often offered a far-ranging critique of

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<sup>106</sup> "Voucher System," *PI*, Oct. 29, 1981; "Voucher System," *Bulletin*, Sep. 26, 1981; "Competition," *Bulletin*, Sep. 12, 1981.

metropolitan political economy; by the end of 1981, in contrast, many Philadelphians wanted to find systematic ways to make private the previously public obligation of educating the city's students.

## **Conclusion**

Not everyone in Philadelphia, it should be pointed out, was optimistic about voucher schemes; as might be expected, teachers were particularly skeptical. In response to the public discussion about vouchers on October 6, 1981, Philadelphia teacher Elliott Rubin called them “an effort in America to destroy public education as we know it because the expense in dollars seems to far exceed the return.”<sup>107</sup> Though vouchers may not have actually represented a cynical effort to “destroy public education,” Rubin’s framing of the issue in terms of expenses and returns represented an accurate appraisal of how education was being debated by the end of the 1970s, and particularly, in the 1980s. A decade of economic difficulty, inflation, skepticism toward the efficacy of the state, mounting taxpayer consciousness, and the rising influence of neoliberal economics represented by the ascent of Friedman had shifted the very terrain on which a large portion of Americans understood both economic opportunity and social equality. At the end of the 1960s, most Americans still believed that labor unions—even in the public sector—were instrumental in fostering democracy and ensuring decent wages and working conditions, and most Americans believed that state-supported education represented more than just a set of economic inputs and outputs. The robust debates over school financing that we saw at

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<sup>107</sup> “Destruction,” *PI*, Oct. 6, 1981.

the beginning of the Philadelphia strike in 1972 and the St. Louis strike in 1973 highlight the purchase of these assumptions. By the end of the St. Louis and Philadelphia strikes examined in this chapter, however, it is clear that many Philadelphians and St. Louisans viewed teacher unions as *the* most important problem stunting the school system. Metropolitan political structure and its relationship to endemic inequality was no longer even on the map, and a deluge of commentators in both cities focused the discussion on what results the taxpayers were getting for their money. In President Ronald Reagan's inaugural address in January 1981, he famously argued that "in this present crisis" of a stagnant economy, rampant inflation, and staggering energy costs, "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."<sup>108</sup> By the end of the strike of 1981, it was clear that many Philadelphians would add the intractable difficulty of the city school system to this assessment: government was not the solution to the problem, government and its unionized workforce *had become* the problem.

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<sup>108</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration*, <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/major.html>>, accessed Mar. 7, 2010.

## **Conclusion: Class as a Category of Social Solidarity in Postmodern (and Neoliberal) America**

In October, 2012, the Fordham Institute, an education policy think-tank headed by Reagan administration veteran Chester Finn, Jr., published a 400-page study entitled *How Strong Are Teacher Unions? A State-by-State Comparison*. The researchers used several different metrics in an effort to determine just how much unions influenced education policy in the United States. Co-sponsored by Democrats for Education Reform, the study was not a mere partisan endeavor. As the authors explained the rationale for the report, “in recent years, debates over school reform have increasingly focused on the role of teacher unions in the changing landscape of American K–12 education.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, teacher unions have continued to be highly important in both American politics and American culture in the years after 1981. On the one hand, the number of significant teacher strikes has declined drastically since the period of this study. In part, this was the result of the effort (under Chairman Paul Volcker’s stewardship of the Federal Reserve) to stamp out inflation in the early 1980s. With lower inflation and a rebounding economy in the 1980s, municipalities and public employees alike did not have to worry nearly as much about what the combination of economic stagnation and inflation would do to their immediate bottom lines. Teacher strikes also decreased because of the harsh climate for labor unions in the United States in the Reagan years. The Philadelphia strike of 1981 showed what this new climate meant for public sector

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<sup>1</sup> Ambler Winkler, Janie Skull, and Dara Zeehandelaar, *How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-by-State Comparison*, 8. A full copy of the report can be found at <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/how-strong-are-us-teacher-unions.html> accessed 2/4/2013.

collective bargaining. Neoliberals had successfully convinced many Americans that the state and labor unions were responsible for the economic crises of the 1970s, and support for strikes by unionized workforces asking for higher wages from public coffers were limited. As a result, whereas in 1975 alone there had been 241 teacher strikes, in the eight years from 2000-2007, there were only 137 total teacher strikes in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the decrease in strikes did not mean that the unionization of teachers had become any less important. The NEA and the AFT continued to try to influence American education policy through massive campaign contributions—mostly to Democrats—in the 1980s, 90s, and 00s. In the 2012 election cycle, for example, the AFT’s Political Action Committee gave over \$2 million to Democratic candidates, among unions third only to AFSCME and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). The NEA gave around \$1.7 million directly to candidates and spent another \$1 million through its Super PAC.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the identification of the AFT and the NEA as “special interests” in national politics have led to a welter of criticism, particularly from the right, that teacher unions stifle efforts to reform the American education system.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best recent evidence of how mainstream this notion has

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Weaver, “Pennsylvania Teachers: Number One in Strikes,” *Allegheny Institute for Public Policy Report #07-06*, August 2006, 2-3 <<http://www.stopteacherstrikes.org/AlleghenyInstitute.pdf>> accessed 2/4/2013.

<sup>3</sup> “Public Sector Unions,” Center for Responsive Politics, <<http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/industry.php?txt=P04&cycle=2012>> accessed 2/4/2013.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Myron Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions: How They Sabotage Educational Reform and Why* (San Francisco: The Free Press, 2000); Peter Brimelow, *The Worm in the Apple: How the Teacher Unions Are Destroying American Education* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003); Rod Paige, *The War against Hope: How Teachers’ Unions Hurt Children, Hinder Teachers, and Endanger Public Education* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006); and Terry Moe, *Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2011).

become is New Jersey governor Chris Christie's keynote speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention, in which he argued that the difference between Republicans and Democrats is that the latter "believe in pitting unions against teachers, educators against parents, lobbyists against children. They believe in teachers' unions. We believe in teachers."<sup>5</sup>

Republicans, however, do not have a monopoly on criticizing teacher unions. The contracts signed by individual affiliates that restrict what school administrators can do have led many critics in the center or even on the left to blame unions for stifling efforts to reform the American education system. District of Columbia school chancellor Michelle Rhee (2006-2010)—appointed by Democratic Mayor Adrian Fenty—rose to national fame through her well-publicized efforts to dismantle the structure of educator unions in the schools of the nation's capital. Davis Guggenheim's prize-winning 2010 documentary film *Waiting for "Superman"* places responsibility on teacher unions for the failing American education system while arguing that charter schools—which can circumvent collective bargaining agreements—represent its salvation. Most recently, in the two-week strike by Chicago teachers in September 2012, Democratic Mayor (and former White House Chief-of-Staff in the Obama Administration) Rahm Emmanuel offered a stinging rebuke to the Chicago Teachers Union for resisting efforts to tie performance evaluations more firmly to their students' standardized test scores. Thirty percent of teacher evaluations already relied on their students' test scores while Emmanuel wanted to increase the percentage to half.

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<sup>5</sup>“Transcript of Chris Christie's Speech at the Republican National Convention,” <<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/08/28/transcript-chris-christie-speech-at-republican-national-convention/#ixzz2JxYyfOkE>> accessed 2/4/2013.

This highly politicized role of teacher unions underscores the extent to which labor unions and the role of the state have been inextricable since the New Deal. This dissertation has shown that in the years after World War II, a central assumption of American politics was that positive state action, aided by robust labor unions, was necessary to advance social equality and economic justice. The economic and political crises of the 1970s helped to undermine this notion, but only because of very specific developments. Indeed, the expansion of the public sector labor movement in American cities at the exact moment that they faced both declining tax revenues and calls for more social services served as a powder keg that exploded. Major teacher strikes exacerbated an already overwhelming sense of crisis in the decade and interjected anxieties about the direction of the country directly into the everyday lives of many Americans in these cities and in the suburbs surrounding them. The result was that many—from school board members, mayors and newspaper editors to taxpayers and parents of school age students—reassessed their political beliefs and the cultural assumptions on which those beliefs rested. Neoliberalism may not have become central to American politics overnight: indeed, the calls for vouchers at the end of the Philadelphia strike in 1981 appear to have been a false start as voucher schemes in the last thirty years have been few and far between, and the voucher plan's more moderate cousin—the charter school—only began in earnest in the 1990s. Still, it is apparent that the center of American politics has shifted dramatically in the last three decades, and in light of this development, historians have begun to seriously re-assess the relevance of class as a cogent category of analysis in the recent past.

In the time since I began researching the material for this dissertation, there have been three major syntheses of American politics that cover the span of this study: Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010), Daniel Rodgers's *Age of Fracture* (2011), and Robert Self's *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (2012). Together, these three books have painted a picture of an America in which the "modern" notion of class—a social, cultural, and political solidarity based on the position of various groups stemming from occupation and income level—has far less salience than it did in the New Deal era. Cowie argues that the once vibrant labor movement lost most of its political power during the 1970s through a combination of challenges to the long-held racial and gender prerogatives of its mostly white male industrial union members, a greater emphasis on "cultural values" over economic concerns, deindustrialization, and political opportunism by Republican politicians. Rodgers's book is an intellectual history that shows how understandings of power—among politicians, activists, and social theorists (sometimes the same people)—that had often relied on a less complicated framework of identity "fractured" in the decade. After the smoke had cleared, "class" could no longer structure political action the way it had before since society had fragmented, in an increasingly neoliberal era, into much smaller, less easy to understand identities. Finally, Self argues that much of the New Deal notion of class politics revolved around the male "breadwinner" and when this concept was challenged by feminists, gay rights activists,

and pornographers, the place of the “family”—not class—increasingly represented the primary fault line in American politics.<sup>6</sup>

It seems difficult to dispute such an assessment, particularly with what we now know about the developments of the decades that came after the period of this study. Clearly, fewer Americans viewed politics strictly through the prism of social class. In the 1980 Presidential election, for example, Ronald Reagan almost received a plurality of the union vote, as 45% of union families voted for the California Governor as opposed to 47% for President Carter. For reasons documented in chapter 5, of course, unions were less than enthusiastic about Carter’s support for labor, but we should bear in mind that Carter had given official backing for the labor reform bill, and many union members likely knew Reagan’s broad views on labor unions. Further, President Reagan paid no political price among union families for smashing PATCO in 1981, as he received 46% of the union vote in the election of 1984. Even in the 2008 Presidential election, 40% of union members voted for Republican John McCain over Democrat Barack Obama in spite of the fact that the organized labor establishment heartily endorsed the Democratic candidate, and virtually every Republican in the contemporary version of the party opposes any expansion of union rights (and in many cases, actively supports overturning them).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Daniel Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011); Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, “US Elections: How Groups Voted in 1980,” <[http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how\\_groups\\_voted/voted\\_80.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how_groups_voted/voted_80.html)> and “US Elections: How Groups Voted in 1984,” <[http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how\\_groups\\_voted/voted\\_84.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how_groups_voted/voted_84.html)> accessed 12/20/2012; “Table 402. Vote Cast for President by Major Political Party: 1952 to 2008, US Census Bureau,” *The 2012 Statistical Abstract*, <<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0404.pdf>> accessed 12/20/2012.

These are crude statistics, and I use them only to point out that many Americans' voting behavior—including those who would seem to be directly impacted to their detriment by the policies of one party—does not stem exclusively or even primarily from what may on the surface appear to be their economic interests. For the first two decades of the postwar era, the understanding that both one's economic security and a greater chance of economic equality rested with the New Deal's interventions in the market, largely through its support of labor unions, had been one of the major pillars of support for the Democratic Party. Self, Rodgers, and Cowie have certainly shown that social solidarities aside from class—based on the very different understandings of race, gender, and sexuality that emerged in the 1960s—played a key part in the rightward shift of the center of American politics.

It is important, nonetheless, as *Against the Public* has shown, to point out that these new developments by themselves did not discredit postwar liberalism. Rather, many observers at the time believed that this liberalism failed because it could not offer a convincing answer to the intractable problems of the 1970s. One such failure was the relative decline of an economy which had been so strong for so many years, mostly as a result of the fact that America had emerged from World War II unscathed and with an industrial capacity that dwarfed every other nation in the world. This liberalism had no good answer for the combination of high energy prices, a stagnant economy, and rampant inflation.

But more than this, on the local level, labor-liberalism had no answer for contradictions of its own making that came to a head in the 1970s. The Democratic Party brought private sector labor unions squarely into its fold through the Wagner Act in the

1930s, guaranteeing workers the right to organize and the right to strike, but this coalition's relationship to the public sector was more ambivalent—particularly since no national law codified exactly what public sector workers (aside from those in the federal government) had the right to do. State and local governments—which in the New Deal era grew to provide drastically more public services—kept public sector workers at arm's length, sometimes supporting rights to bargain and sometimes resenting the loss of control that resulted from such a concession, and public sector unions always remained in a liminal legal and political space. Teachers, firefighters, and sanitation workers, for example, were often allowed to form unions and to collectively bargain, but they were repeatedly warned against using the primary leverage at their disposal—the right to strike—in order to improve their negotiating power. Postwar liberalism never answered the question of what the role of teachers, among other public employees, should be. Were they employees whose rights in the workplace were paramount or employees whose primary obligation was to provide services to the public? This was a contradiction that labor-liberalism could not adequately solve.

The other intractable question that postwar labor-liberalism could not answer was that of metropolitan political economy. The decentralized, often ad hoc nature of government in the era of the New Deal Coalition meant that many of the most important government programs—like Aid to Dependent Children, Medicaid, and Title I of ESEA—involved some kind of partnership between federal, state, and city governments. This partnership meant that there existed no systematic way to deal with the special needs of cities—which because of internal and international migration, capital movement, and government policy itself disproportionately provided the necessary social services to the

nation's impoverished and was the primary locus for equalizing economic opportunity. The massive budget deficits incurred by cities like Philadelphia in the 1970s did not result so much from the excessive power of teacher unions as they did from a disconnect between the promises of postwar liberalism to provide economic and social equality and the reality of that promise in a patchwork system of policies.

The conservative political networks that emerged in the 1970s—increasingly interested in a return to the liberalism of the nineteenth century—had ready answers to these two problems. First, this “neoliberalism” squarely asserted that teachers and air traffic controllers and police officers were employees whose primary obligation was to provide the services for which they were hired. They were individuals—not groups of unionized employees—who were to compete in the marketplace if they wanted better wages, and if they were not happy with their conditions of employment, their recourse should be to get a different job, not strike. In terms of the problems of the cities, this also represented a simple solution. Make everything private: offer alternatives to “government” education, municipal garbage collection, and urban development, and let the market determine who gets access to what services. Though neoliberals have not always got their way in pushing these notions, the obvious benefit of these answers to the problems of the 1970s is that they are straightforward, easy-to-understand solutions, as opposed to the more nuanced efforts to ascertain when it may or may not be appropriate for unionized teachers to shut down a city's public school system.

As *Against the Public* has shown, highly charged debates around controversial teacher strikes helped to usher in a drastically new political climate by the end of the 1970s, one in which consent for privatization, enthusiasm for the market, and animus

toward labor unions now structures a great deal of our policy decisions. As historians begin to seriously interrogate the big developments of the past forty years, it is worth asking what, if any, relevance class might have going forward, and what this study can say about such a question. To fully consider it, we also must consider the other major development of American society since the 1970s—the shift toward a postmodern world.<sup>8</sup>

A central conceit in the “modern” age—which most scholars of postmodernity date from around the seventeenth century Enlightenment to some point in the 1970s—was that through reason, human beings could know all that there was to know and could tame the vagaries of nature, thus inuring people from both chaos and want. Indeed, the assumptions of New Deal policymakers fit quite squarely into this rubric, perhaps most symbolically evidenced by President Franklin Roosevelt’s notion of the “four freedoms” outlined in 1941—that every person is entitled to freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and, most significantly, freedom from want. This overarching goal, however, is not the same as saying that all human beings are endowed with similar faculties. Indeed, another central conceit of the modern era was that the “universal” subject, who has the sole responsibility for reason, and hence, political action, was white and male (and as Michel Foucault reminds us, heterosexual).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Drawing on both Francois Lyotard and Zygmunt Bauman, I here define “postmodernity” broadly as the era after “modernity,” in which notions of human progress through reason have been de-naturalized. In other words, if the modern era began with the Enlightenment and stressed the “meta-narrative” that human society could attain perfection through scientific achievement and rational thought, the post-modern era stresses the limits of human understanding and views “universal” reason as instead a parochial bourgeois conceit. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

The upheavals of the years after World War II—in which previously colonized racial “others” took the reins of state from departing European colonizing forces and, in the United States, racial minorities, women, and homosexuals shattered the categorical framework of modern subjectivity (a process documented aptly by *All in the Family*)—ushered in an era in which there is much less faith in the notion that human beings share a common understanding of reason. In the postmodern era, there is indeed a greater awareness of the fracture points in society, and “reason” serves as a set of agreed-upon rules for the “language games” in which different groups engage.<sup>10</sup>

Though some scholars have bemoaned this loss of a “common culture,”<sup>11</sup> I would argue that such a view of the world always perpetrated violence against those who were not “normative” citizens and were thus excluded in any number of ways from political agency, economic power, and social dignity. In this sense, by discrediting the notion that certain citizens held a monopoly on reason, the postmodern era has opened up the possibility for truly democratic social movements.

Still, the assertion by postmodern critiques that we have entered a new, exciting era of human history has incited a good deal of skepticism, most notably from Marxist geographer David Harvey. This skepticism views postmodernity as ignoring history, instead using the past as a smorgasbord of disembodied events to be selected at random for the purposes of meaningless pastiche.<sup>12</sup> In my view, part of the reason that there has been so much academic criticism of postmodernity stems from its contemporaneity with

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<sup>10</sup> On this point, see Lyotard, *The postmodern Condition*, 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Allan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

neoliberalism. In a society in which the reifications of so many social groupings have broken down, it is understandable, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, that an economic and political program built around the market power of the individual would emerge to fill the space left by the discredited labor-liberalism of the modern era.<sup>13</sup> But this is not the same as saying that there is necessarily a connection between postmodernism—the effort to understand the postmodern world and develop a political and/or aesthetic response—and neoliberalism just because they emerged at roughly the same time.

There is a very important difference with regard to the two, in fact, that is worth pointing out here. Neoliberalism necessarily ignores history, while postmodernism need not do so. If both nominally attempt to discredit socially constructed identities like race and gender, only postmodernism is actually capable of doing so. The primary assumption of neoliberalism is that all individuals are equal bargaining agents, able to sell their goods or labor in a marketplace that supposedly does not allow for any distinctions based on anything other than exchange value. But in assuming this, neoliberalism willfully ignores history. An African-American woman, who has been disadvantaged by a poor education and limited job opportunities resulting from a history of unfair housing policies, limited options for higher education, and perhaps the burden of raising children is supposed to compete on an equal playing field with a white male who comes from wealth, whose parents had the means to provide him with an expensive private education, and whose wife has the luxury of staying out of the labor force and rearing the couple's

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<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 260-278.

children at home. This assumption is the foundation of neoliberalism, and without it, the notion that the “market” is inherently equitable and efficient crumbles.

By contrast, postmodernism does not need to ignore history. Though its critics have often viewed it as ahistorical and heavy on “nostalgia” since there is no longer any sense of human progress, I would argue that these are mere caricatures of the shallowest aesthetic responses to the postmodern era. Indeed, by disabusing ourselves of the notion that through some kind of universal rational process we can solve the gamut of human conflicts, we actually clear the way to more closely consider the role history plays in reifying the very concepts that give some groups and individuals privileges over others in the first place. A postmodern critique allows us to examine the ways that imagined social categories have led to very real discrepancies of power in our society.

It also allows us to consider the notion of class in new ways. It may very well be that most of the solidarities that we have called “class” throughout American history in fact resulted instead from different social categories. Clearly, one of the major impediments to solidarity in the American working class has been gender, ethnic and racial difference, as labor actions in the early twentieth century often foundered on the shoals of racial, ethnic, and gender distinction.<sup>14</sup> Further, after the establishment of the New Deal coalition, the labor hierarchy (i.e., the AFL-CIO) held an always ambivalent relationship to civil rights and feminism, perhaps evidenced most famously by the 1972 Presidential election, when AFL-CIO President Meany withheld support for George McGovern after a robust effort by the party to represent women and racial minorities at

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<sup>14</sup> Among the best examples of this is James Barrett’s *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago’s Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

the Democratic National Convention.<sup>15</sup> In other words, as this dissertation has shown, culture and ideas matter as much as one's income level or position on the shop-floor. Working Americans—even union members—could oppose the labor movement if they believed that by supporting shutdowns of the education system they were eroding respect for law and order or that higher taxes to pay inner-city teachers diminished racial and gender privilege. Indeed, this study indicates that there is no such thing as false consciousness—economic interests are intimately entwined with culture—and determining whether or not working people have been “duped” is not a question that gets us very far.

Above all, Americans were and are individuals—rooted in a society, to be sure, but still individuals, each with a range of subjectivities based on one's past. This is a major reason, I would argue, that Marxist social critique has lost much of its resonance in the postmodern United States. Marx's analysis in *Capital* culminates by showing how workers become dispossessed as a group—a classification scheme that makes perfect sense in a modern world in which progress is a process that can be attained by society as a whole. But in the postmodern era, the “fracturing” of society that Rodgers shows us means that individuals are the primary locus of action. It may very well be that human thoughts and actions are structured by their place in society, but at the end of the day, they are still individuals—with limits on their own consciousness—and a class is really a collection of individuals.

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<sup>15</sup> The convention is examined in detail by both Cowie and Self in full-length chapters. See Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, chapter 2 and Self, *All in the Family*, chapter 9.

What this means is that successful organizing as a “class”—at least in the near future—will resemble more of a “coalition” around specific issues and actions than a more permanent effort to wrest control of economic production from an exploitative class of owners. In a different context, Judith Butler has argued that in pushing for the breakdown of the normative identity of “woman” that feminist action should be structured as a loose network of coalitions that use parody and camp to discredit reified identities and the social violence they perform.<sup>16</sup> It is not unreasonable to think that a coalition such as this might work equally well in issues of economic justice. The Occupy Wall Street movement—whose focus on fighting for the 99% hearkened to an even more capacious version of the Knights of Labor’s inclusive late nineteenth century effort on the part of “productive” citizens—is an example of how such a coalition works, drawing attention to excessive wealth and the concentration of political power with those who have access to such wealth. Though the Occupy movement may not have led to many immediately substantive political or policy victories, it is not difficult to imagine similar efforts that *do* lead to enough shifts in individual political views for larger policy changes to occur.

And, one can certainly point to more targeted versions of such coalitions—such as the Black Friday 2012 protests around the nation that brought together both Wal-Mart workers and consumers to draw attention to the economic injustice of the retail behemoth’s labor structure. As the public debates around teacher strikes in the 1970s have shown, for such efforts to be successful, however, they must be intellectually and

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996).

culturally persuasive, making a convincing case that the interests of the “public” are best served by paying these workers a decent wage for their work as opposed to driving the prices of consumer goods to the absolute rock bottom. It is not enough for teachers to protest when school boards try to tie their job security to their students’ standardized test scores or when a governor tries to strip collective bargaining rights; they must also picket department stores that force their employees to give up the Thanksgiving holiday that public school teachers take for granted. Just as postwar liberalism was discredited by its inability to solve problems of its own making, so can neoliberalism be discredited by the central problem of its own making: its suppression of the past.

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