

# Strikes likely in area districts

By JUDITH BERNE

Teacher strikes in Michigan school districts may be the rule rather than the exception this year, and that could prove the first major test of the Michigan Education Association's drive toward regional bargaining.

That's the opinion of both teachers union and board of education officials monitoring progress of school bargaining in Oakland and Wayne counties throughout the state where most teacher contracts will expire by Aug. 31.

"It looks terrible. Progress is not being made anywhere," says Connie Math, who heads the MEA's Oakland County Coordinated Bargaining Committee.

"Everyone's still talking general issues — not economics and fringes. It looks very, very bleak as far as settlements being in by Labor Day," she said. Labor Day week marks the traditional opening of school in most districts.

"There could be 10-20 strikes in Oakland County alone," she added. Twenty-one of 26 unions belonging to the MEA in Oakland County have unsettled contracts.

THE HEAD of the Wayne County MEA agrees it is doubtful many of the 21 unsettled districts there will reach agreement on teacher contracts by Labor Day.

George Alpervitz cautions he speaks only for districts represented by the MEA. Teachers in the mammoth Detroit Public Schools belong to a different union — the Detroit Federation of Teachers — which is also working toward a new contract.

Coordinated bargaining has slowed negotiations, Alpervitz says, but forecasts: "In the long run it's going to produce settlements more quickly than in the past."

Teachers are seeking unified clout to gain mutual goals. School boards are trying to get the most for their money. Taxpayers are generally reluctant to shell out any more in the form of taxes.

Harry Bishop, associate executive director of the Michigan Association of School Boards based in Lansing, predicts from 40-60 teacher strikes throughout the state. Last year there were 27.

Bishop, in charge of labor relations for the MANSB, is "pessimistic about the progress of negotiations prior to the Labor Day weekend. I would not be at all surprised to see one of these coordinated bargaining units engineer an area-wide strike," he said.

He calls the few settlements which have come in "some of the highest I've ever seen." He fears some will mean teacher layoffs and program cutbacks in light of spiraling inflation, declining enrollments and Headlee-initiated state aid rollbacks.

ATTORNEY CHARLES FINE sees "a tremendous reluctance for unions to reach agreement" this year. His Birmingham based law firm of Clark, Hardy, Lewis, Fine and Asher advises approximately 20 school boards in Wayne and Oakland counties on labor relations.

"They don't want to be the first," he says. Fine said local unions are intimidated by the coordinated bargaining process. He sees them all playing a waiting game through Labor Day.

School will start on time in most Oakland and Wayne County districts, he predicts, "but maybe not all."

He doesn't see Wayne County striking on a countywide basis, but says what Detroit Public Schools teachers do could be "a catalyst to the whole

thing" since the two unions vie for leadership in Wayne County.

The AFT has less influence in Oakland where it represents just two of 26 teachers unions.

In Oakland, he says "Rochester and Bloomfield Hills broke the trend (by settling). We hear what the salaries are. But what about the rest of the items that were supposed to be part of the list of the coordinated bargaining package?"

DO SCHOOL BOARDS have an organization which parallels the union's regional bargaining power bases?

Yes, say teachers union officials. No, counter school board representatives.

"Of course there is one," the MEA's Ms. Math declares. She defined a "Task Force 28" in Oakland County and "Task Force 35" in Wayne, made up of negotiators of the 28 school districts in Oakland and 36 Wayne County districts.

He said they meet monthly presumably to plan bargaining strategy and goals.

"That's totally false and erroneous," retorts Attorney Fine. The Oakland "Task Force 28" existed for one year in the early '70s when it did in fact set forth financial guidelines to bargain contracts up that year, according to Fine. He believes it was made up of a school board member from each district.

"It was quite successful," he added, but it disbanded the following year when charges of conspiracy were leveled.

He fully acknowledges monthly sessions of the Oakland Negotiations Association in existence since 1967. He says the group discusses many facets of labor relations and compares notes, but does not set goals.

"Everybody knows about it — even some MEA people have participated," Fine says. He said a similar group operates in Wayne County.

"IT'S LOGICAL, it makes sense for boards of education to get together and define a bargaining strategy," says Wayne County's Alpervitz. "I have no quarrel with that. It should enhance the bargaining process."

"We've been accused of goal-setting on occasion," admits Bishop of the Michigan Association of School Boards' role in bargaining.

"But a founding precept of the MANSB is a belief in local control.

He says the so-called task forces ("I don't know why they have to call it that") are "a lateral committee designed to let one another know what's going on in each other's district.

There are too many dissimilarities between districts to do that kind of lock-step type thing," he says. "I don't see this being the boggy man the MEA makes it out."

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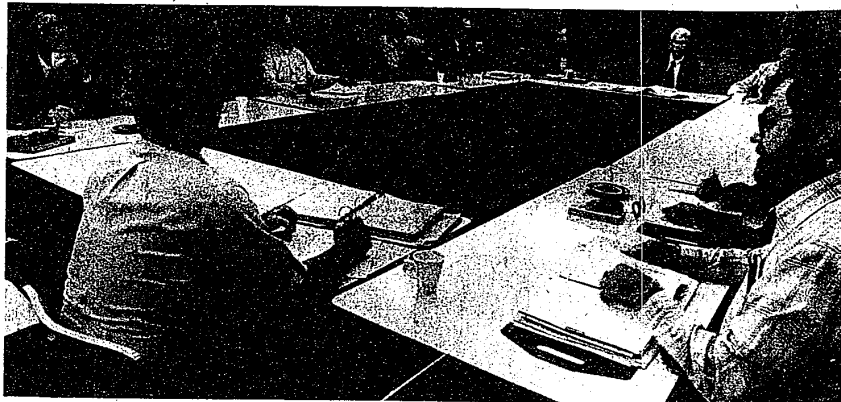
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• Birmingham — Negotiators will step up bargaining this week toward an Aug. 26 target date to reach tentative contract agreement. The target date is earlier than the Labor Day target date of past years. Unsettled issues include salary, fringe benefits and class size. Spokesmen from both sides say talks this year are showing earlier progress than in the past. Negotiations affect 440 teachers. There are roughly 11,100 students in Birmingham schools.

• Bloomfield Hills — Settled. Teachers (Continued on page 4A)



Teacher contract talks like these in the Birmingham School District are going on throughout Oakland and Wayne counties as well as state-wide. Progress everywhere is reported as slow. (Staff photo by Charlie Kidd)

## Them bones

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## Here's a list . . .

Bargaining progress has been described as slow by teacher and school board representatives throughout Wayne and Oakland counties.

Here's the status of school districts covered by the Observer & Eccentric newspapers with less than three weeks left until classes are scheduled to resume in most districts:

- OAKLAND COUNTY
- Avondale — Major issues are still unresolved following three days of marathon bargaining last week. However both sides say they are optimistic school will start on schedule, right after Labor Day. The contract for 140
- teachers expires Aug. 31. About 3,200 students attend Avondale schools in the Rochester area.
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