

OBSERVATION POINT

Strikes By Public Employees Run Grave Public Risks



By Philip H. Power
Publisher

Local school officials in the suburbs and elsewhere are doing some hard thinking these days about bargaining new contracts with teachers and other school system employees.

The bargaining this year has been seriously complicated by the fact that the State Legislature dilly-dallied in a thoroughly irresponsible way over just what the state aid formula for local education would be for the coming fiscal year. As a result, local districts had no clear idea about how much money they would be getting from Lansing, and accordingly had no way of determining in advance what their limits in contract bargaining might be.

It would come as no surprise to many local school officials if there were strikes in some districts in this area come school openings this fall. This, despite the theoretical legal prohibition against strikes by public employees — legal in the sense that state law forbids them, and theoretical because most public employee unions have discovered they have more to gain by going ahead and striking and daring the courts and the public bodies that employ them to do their worst. Who, for example, is going to assume responsibility for firing all the teachers in Livonia's sprawling school system if they have to turn around the next day and hire an entire replacement staff?

THE ISSUE OF public employees having the right to strike is a tangled one. My guess is that if they have the right to bargain collectively, they ought to have some means of demonstrating effectively their displeasure at an inadequate contract offer, even though I am very bothered at the idea that this interrupts certain vital public services.

Earlier this summer, for example, the sanitation workers in Detroit refused to work any overtime until the city promised to restore jobs to some workers laid off during the usual budget crisis. Garbage piled up in mounds enormous even for Detroit and city officials worried aloud over the health hazard caused by the exploding rat population.

For the city, the argument was clear: There was no money available to spend on re-hiring the workers laid off, and overtime was necessary to get the garbage picked up. The union's position was equally simple: As long as the city is going to pay overtime to catch up with the garbage collection, they might as well use that money to hire more people.

The real losers in that strike were plain folks who found their alleys and back yards piled with foot upon foot of smelly garbage.

AT ABOUT THE same time,

the news was full of another kind of strike by public workers which took place in New York City.

Members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees staged a two-day walkout which resulted in 700 million gallons of raw sewage spewing into the waterways, closure of garbage incinerators, stoppage of school lunches for needy children and — with the cooperation of a Teamster local — disruption of 24 bridges leading into the city, causing traffic jams which we don't see here even at the interchanges at rush hour.

The strike was called not over the inadequacy of a contract offer from New York City. Rather it was explicitly designed to put political pressure on the State Legislature to ratify a generous pension offer previously negotiated between the city and union.

The strike backfired, mainly because of public outrage and press comment. "It would have been an obscenity to capitulate," said one New York state colon. "So far as the public was concerned, shooting at dawn would have been too mild a punishment."

This was a totally political strike, undertaken not as part of the collective bargaining process but as a crass pressure play to blackmail the State Legislature into buying a pension plan. It was entirely irresponsible.

THE ONLY PEOPLE who suffered were the public, and the public had no organized pressure group to represent their interests.

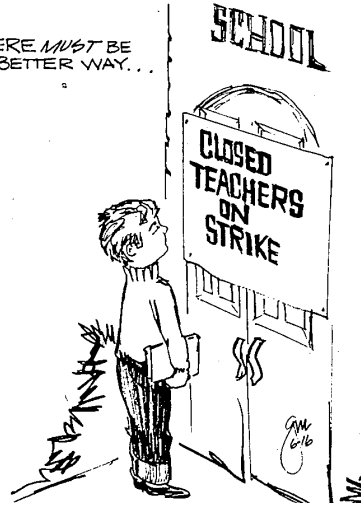
As a New York cab driver I talked with during the strike said, "Those SOB's gonna try to get their slice now. Well, if they get it, it'll come out of my hide, and our union can just turn around and strike over a wage increase for us."

In such cases, it should be clear that nobody — organized into a union or unorganized — benefits. Costs go up, and everyone pays eventually.

But the New York experience ought to be a sobering one to us in Michigan. If a strike can be called in New York for totally political purposes, entirely unrelated to contract bargaining, it could happen in Michigan. What, for example, would happen if Michigan policemen organizations decided to strike to force the State Legislature into upping state support to local police departments?

There must be a better way to protect the interests of public employees and the public bodies that employ them without exposing the public at large to the threat of political strikes. Sooner or later the Legislature and the courts will have to confront this problem, and it might as well be sooner, before somebody really gets hurt.

THERE MUST BE
A BETTER WAY...



Leonard Poger writes

When Is Right Time To Hand Out Boosts?

Congressmen, state legislators, and governors are usually reluctant — if not downright scared — of passing a substantial tax boost in an election year.

But Westland city councilmen last week departed from the traditional route and approved a 27 per cent boost in the city tax rate — or \$2.48 per \$1,000 of state equalized valuation — in a summer which has a primary election scheduled just a few weeks after the city tax bills are distributed to local taxpayers.

Many taxpayers and voters may quibble about the tax increase but there is little room for argument on how to finance a city budget which calls for virtually no additional personnel or programs.

But we can find considerable fault in the manner and reasoning in which the budget was eventually adopted by the city council.

THE ONLY AREA the councilmen cut out of the budget was the degree of pay raises for city administrators — who draft programs and carry them out for council candidates to take credit for in political campaigns.

The council, after studying a \$6 million budget proposed by Mayor Eugene McKinney since early April, could find only a few thousand bucks to cut and it comes out of the most sensitive area.

Disgruntled department heads and supervisory personnel are human beings and unhappy workers are inclined to put out less than 100 per cent in their day-to-day efforts.

But even more disturbing is the manner the council handled Planning Director Randall Graves, who was refused any pay raise at all — even a cost-of-living raise.

Graves' colleagues received a flat \$800 raise — based on the \$750 raise given union employees working for the city. The \$800 figures out to about 5 per cent — or about the cost of living.

But the council made a serious error in deciding whether or not Graves should get a raise.

MERIT certainly wasn't a factor in the council's decision since his presentations on zoning and other land use matters before the council are complete, sound, and leave little to be questioned.

But what bothered some councilmen was that Graves urged the denial of certain projects which those councilmen wanted approved without question.

Even Mayor McKinney, usually reluctant to get into a public squabble with the councilmen he has to work with, admitted at a press conference that the council's handling of Graves' salary issue was a demonstration of poor taste by the council.

The mayor also admitted that the council's action was based on Graves issuing recommendations that didn't go along with what the council wanted.

"The planner can't dance to anyone's tune — particularly the city council's," McKinney commented and we agree.

There was a split vote in a closed door meeting held just before the council announced its budget action.

But in public, the councilmen voted unanimously to approve the salary issue, which makes it difficult for voters in the summer primary election to know who is trying to call the tune for the city planner.

Tim Richard writes

What's Wrong With School Political Clubs?

Nixon Administration officials are afraid to handle commencement speeches on many college campuses this year because of possible student disruptions. On some campuses, anti-war rallies and teach-ins are the rule while ROTC programs, military recruiters and Dow Chemical interviews are harassed or excluded.

Some Michigan Republican gubernatorial candidates, attempting to shake hands with and talk to auto workers, have been interrupted by sound cars emitting flatulent sounds. In Livonia, former Mayor Harvey Moeke, who specializes in below-the-belt, last-minute charges that the opposition can't answer starts a recall campaign against school board members on the eve of an election.

THE POINT being that no age group or political party has a monopoly on dirty pool, let us

proceed to the phenomenon at hand, namely youth participation in politics.

A cautious Livonia Board of Education recently approved a one-year trial period for political clubs, reversing a policy of prohibiting clubs that espouse an ideological point of view. It was too bad that the vote was only 4-3, that the action has a time limit, that it took the board a year to do it, and that other school districts aren't as enlightened.

Consider that at 18 these students will be able to vote, be party convention delegates and circulate nominating petitions for candidates. Some sort of preparation beyond the sterile civics textbook seems desirable.

We have Junior Achievement to prepare youth for private enterprise; we have scouting to prepare lads for the military; we have school newspapers and in Southfield a school radio station

to prepare them for the communications game. Why not political clubs to prepare them for the real nuts-and-bolts of participatory democracy?

Besides, if you let the clubs organize in the open and with faculty sponsors, you can keep an eye on them. This is far preferable to the system of secret and illegal high school fraternities and sororities controlling school politics. Just ask any former student of Detroit's Redford High School about that.

ON THE CENTRAL news desk, I read articles about public officials from seven cities, five townships, four villages, three community colleges and 10 school districts, and one of the most progressive and responsive guys has to be Westland's Mayor Gene McKinney, who is organizing a Youth Advisory Council.

That group, in the words of its

temporary chairman, Mike Lijewski, would be an advisory body to the mayor in such possible areas as drug abuse, draft information, job opportunity program, recreational activities, "a political science cooperative program in City Hall, and of course an environmental program."

Young political groups will do some dumb things, which is quite all right. Far better for people to work off their political naivete at 15-18 than when they become mayors and school trustees in middle age. As Shakespeare's Prince Hal said during the middle of a rowdy escapade:

"My reformation, glittering o'er my fault, shall show more goodly and attract more eyes than that which hath no foil to set it off. I'll so offend, to make offense a skill, redeeming time when men think least I will."

Jackie Klein writes

Are Tenants Just Transients?

One of the most high-handed arguments against apartment and townhouse zoning was tossed into a meeting of the Southfield Planning Commission last week by a Franklin resident.

The lady, concerned about a townhouse proposal for property bordering Southfield and Franklin, asserted, "Tenants are not responsible citizens. They're transients."

The inaccurate generalization touched a sensitive spot in mild-mannered planning commissioner Kenneth Larson who happens to be a "renter."

"I take exception to the

lady's remarks and I want to go on record as doing so," he said. "I was president of the Southfield School Board, I serve on the Southfield Planning Commission and I've been a member of other boards. Is that being irresponsible?"

Fearing change is human nature. Protection of the nest is instinctive. But does living within four private walls give anyone the right to label those who pay rent second-class citizens? This is "snob zoning" and a form of discrimination that nobody in the suburbs can be proud of.

IT SEEMS TO US that human

values take priority over property values. People who pay rent pay taxes, send kids to school, work for a living, vote, share community responsibility — no more, no less than people who make mortgage payments.

They live in apartments by choice, or maybe by necessity, but it doesn't make them "irresponsible transients."

And the lady who lives in the town that time forgot seems to have forgotten that people cannot be judged by where they live or in what kind of structure they choose to live.

Larson is just one example.

Editorial & Opinion

OBSERVER NEWSPAPERS, INC.

Philip H. Power, Publisher

The Livonia Observer • The Redford Observer
The Westland Observer • The Garden City Observer
The Plymouth Mail & Observer • The Southfield News & Observer
The Farmington Enterprise & Observer



Published by Observer Newspapers, Inc.
36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, Mich. 48150

Serving the communities of:
Livonia, Plymouth, Farmington, Canton Township, Farmington
Farmington Township, Redford Township, Garden City, Westland,
Southfield, Lathrup Village, Franklin, Bingham Farms,
Village of Beverly Hills