OBSERVATION POINT

Teacher Strikes Hurt Public Most

By Philip H. Power
Publisher

Teacher strikes in local school districts this year are far more widespread than ever before.

Garden City teachers held their first strike in history, for four days, before a settlement was reached. Livonia's was a first, too.

Teachers in Southfield, Redford Union, South Redford and Clarenceville districts worked without contracts while bargaining continued. Plymouth teachers reached their settlement last year.

AS IN THE case in most collective bargaining breakdowns, a teacher strike hurts everybody involved.

It hits teachers, who don't get their paychecks for a while. It louses up school administration planning, forcing all kinds of rescheduling of early school-year activity.

It affects other employes of school systems, who may be laid off because a teachers strike means the system is not running and has reduced need for help.

High school football squads, who are required to hold 14 days of practice before their first game, find themselves in a pickle if coaches won't hold practice drills during a strike.

Local mothers, who had hoped the opening of school would give them a bit of much-needed peace and quiet, find no relief.

Local school administrators and boards, faced with steep contract demands, find quickly there isn't enough money to go around and are forced either to cut expenses (and, probably, school quality) or boost taxes.

Local taxpayers, still caught in the property tax squeeze, equate, probably accurately, a teacher strike with yet another millage.

AND SO THE circus goes on, and on.

Nobody likes it. Livonia Education Association President Keith Geiger says "a strike doesn't help anybody." His opposite number, Livonia School Superintendent Roliand Upton, agrees: "These young people pass this way but once . . . a strike hurts everybody, but it hurts the kids the most."

Trouble is that although everybody involved keeps saying teacher strikes don't help anyone, nobody feels enough pressure on them either to settle before a strike or to eliminate it.

School boards know that in the long run everybody will go back to work and that someone (meaning local taxpayers or the state as a whole) will pick up the tab. Teachers know that, too, and besides they don't want to give up the strike as a weapon.

The fact remains, however, that teachers are public employes; any teacher strike in the last analysis affects directly the willingness of the public to pay tax money to settle it.

A better solution has got to be found, and quickly, before everybody gets fed up with the situation and the public decides that it might as well get into the act and starts directing its anger at our whole system of local education.

Parents Really Worked Up

Did the teachers go too far this year in the strikes that closed schools in Livonia, Farmington, Garden City and Birmingham and in nearly keeping students at home in Redford Township and Southfield?

Judging from the great number of nasty letters we have received in the past week or so, we would have to say teachers' images were damaged considerably in all these communities.

Parents don't want their children around the house after a long summer vacation, and the youngsters would much rather be in school than loafing.

We might add that many parents have expressed fear of retaliation if they express their views on the strikes.

Fortunately, the sticky situations in Farmington and Livonia appear to be resolved. At least, agreements have been reached to open the schools for classes while negotiations continue. Garden City settled earlier.

Which automatically brings up a point: If the teachers return to classes after walking the picket lines for two weeks, why couldn't the same kind of an agreement have been reached before Labor Day?

Under the present circumstances, the strike has aroused parents to the point where they were thinking of starting court actions to get the teachers back at the blackboard.

However, the feelings of parents most certainly are reflected in unsigned letters sent to the Observer, letters which should make members of the various teachers' unions sit up and listen.

This is a sample:

"For the well-being of my child in school, I prefer not to sign my name, but I do wish my thoughts could be brought forth to the public.

"The teacher strike in Farmington is really a sham. The teachers claim they are fighting for class size... with enrollment dropping each year, the classes have not been as large.

"Their placards read 'we care'... if they really did care and were dedicated to their profession, they would be in school instead of acting like common laborers. It's too bad the schools could not see fit to fire the lot and start over."

Then there is the "bitter" mother from Livonia who writes, "I'm sure this letter will never be printed because I cannot sign my name. I'm sure if I did, the dedicated ladies behind the desks at — elementary school and — junior high would make life miserable for my children."

Is that the feeling the teachers want in Livonia? Is that what they hope to generate? A belief that teachers are vindictive and can't be criticized?

We most certainly hope not, but one can't get away from the fact that this is the way some folks believe.

True enough, there are always some who go way out on a limb to express their thoughts, and sometimes those thoughts are extreme. The fact remains that suddenly there are quite a few with this kind of thinking, and that isn't good for teachers trying to make good impressions.

That same party who is afraid to sign the name goes on: "I am fed up with the greed of these so-called dedicated Livonia teachers. Let them stay on strike... our children will go to school 182 days regardless. So the teachers may be teaching through Christmas vacation, Easter vacation or during their three-month summer vacation.

"Why didn't they negotiate their contracts last June after school was out instead of the day before classes start in September?

"I'm sick of the teachers using our children as pawns to get what they want no matter how much the children suffer. They'll get what they want, because they know they have everyone over a barrel."

There are other letters in our files from bitter parents in Westland and Farmington expressing their disgust for the actions of the teachers and their unions.

All express desires to have their youngsters in schools, not in late September but at the scheduled start a day after Labor Day.

Many can't understand how the teachers can strike when state law says they can't. They call this a flagrant violation of the law and wonder why the teachers, like other public servants, aren't ordered into court and told to get back in classes.

There are a good many individuals in all parts of the state who have the same feeling, and it may be that teeth will be put into the laws to make things a bit rough for the teachers come another contract time.

One wonders just what the teachers think of this kind of adverse publicity.

We know how one felt a few days ago. He screamed like a wild man when calling the office to complain about a story that appeared in the newspapers. He was so wild that one questions whether he should be allowed to retain his job.

After all, if he is that irate after reading an article, how does he conduct himself when irritated by students?

Fortunately, at the time this was written, Farmington and Livonia teachers had agreed to go back to classes. That will relieve some of the mutterings, but we're sure the teachers haven't heard the last of it. Time alone will tell.

Need Buses More Than Airport

READERS' FORUM

Please type (or write clearly) and limit letters to 300 words.

- Letters must be signed, with the writer's address. Names will be withheld only at the writer's request and for good cause.
- The editor reserves the right to reject unsuitable letters.

EDITOR:

Livonia's mayor now has a proposal before our city council "to study existing nearby airports for possible acquisition and use as a municipal airport."

To assist the council, the city's industrial coordinator mailed questionnaires to 175 of Livonia's foremost business and industrial concerns, inquiring into their flight needs and habits. After all, the airport would be for their use. Projected cost of such a facility is reportedly a minimum of $1 million.

Meanwhile, Livonia's same mayor continues to insist that our city shouldn't be in the public transportation business. That's the responsibility of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA), he says, to organize all public transportation in this seven-county area.

He conveniently ignores the fact that SEMTA does not have broad enough powers or sufficient resources to cover the area with anything resembling a minimum system of public transit.

SEMTA just gave Livonia a sample of what it is able to deliver, without local help — the Middle Belt bus. Barely inside our borders, the bus does not provide public transportation for Livonians. It is a route designed to facilitate access to Wonderland, the Livonia Mall and the race track for people from surrounding communities.

It is a regional line, created by a regional authority.

SEMTA has told Livonia in the past that a dial-a ride system would work well in our city and has authorized mini-buses for some such purpose. This requires local cooperation which our city is unwilling to give, thus endangering expanded public transit for Livonia.

Instead, our city seems doomed toward establishing a municipal airport for 175 "foremost business and industrial concerns." Surely, 110,000 regular people shouldn't count as much as the collective importance of a privileged 175 in Livonia.

One top level city administrator was recently appointed to the Airport Authority for City Airport in Detroit, and is part owner of another airport and a travel agency. On the basis of the recommendations coming out of the mayor's office, it appears unfortunate for all Livonians that this particular person doesn't own an interest in mini-buses or a dial - a - ride concern as well.

JEANEANE HAVSTAD
Livonia

Are Teachers Baby-Sitters?

EDITOR:

I have received two letters from the Farmington Education Association containing statements which I question. One referred to Farmington School District's success being "directly attributed to the positive attitude and motivation of its teachers and administrators." The second said the community is "served by a teaching staff which is highly motivated, and committed to quality education."

When I moved to the Farmington School District 18 years ago, I would have agreed with these statements. Unfortunately, as my three children progressed through the schools, it became apparent that the motivation teachers originally had was disappearing, and "quality education" was meaningless.

Two of my children have graduated and gone on to universities where they have been intellectually stimulated and educated. The third, a senior, is dreading her final year lest it be as boring and unproductive as last year was. In many of her classes teachers would average a mere 10 minutes of classroom instruction.

I object to paying high taxes when teachers baby-sit instead of teaching. I also object to unearned higher salaries, increments, and tenure. Other professionals must earn similar salaries over a 12-month, 40-hour per week period, and must produce to get merit raises and retain their jobs.

My hat is off to the few dedicated TEACHERS in the Farmington district. They deserve every support from the community. But for the majority of teachers I would suggest independent evaluating committees, similar to those used by many universities, who would make unbiased teacher evaluations every two years. They would be empowered to weed out the "do-nothings," and education would improve.

R.L. MILLER
Farmington

Teachers Stir Reader's Ire

EDITOR:

The citizens of this community are being robbed by a small group of people whose present salaries and benefits currently exceed any reasonable limits for 8½ months work.

The members of this group call themselves teachers. This title is certainly appropriate, for they are teaching us all how a small and selfish group of people disregard their obligations and damage our society.

W.D. ROBERTS
Livonia

FEA Right In Coaching Ban

Although some parents and editorialists may disagree, this writer believes the Farmington Education Assn. (FEA) was entirely correct in banning football coaches from the practice field.

The FEA can do little else if it wishes to present itself as a bargaining agent for teachers. And coaches can do little else but honor the decision of their union if they wish to present themselves as educators.

One of the disgusting elements of the current wave of feacher strikes is that some unions and school boards have allowed football teams to scrimmage while a strike was in process. Any and all school activities should be banned for the duration of a strike, without exception.

The tragedy of the Farmington situation isn't that three high school teams may miss the opening game. The real tragedy in Farmington, Livonia and elsewhere, is that classrooms are empty because adults fail to agree on contract terms after negotiating all summer.

Women's Lib In Police Departments?

Police departments have traditionally been the last stronghold of men supporting the theory of male superiority – or male chauvinism if you're betting on Billy Jean King against Bobby Riggs in Thursday's tennis match.

But the situation is changing for women who want to be a policeman – but maybe we should change the title to "police officer."

In many suburban departments, there are a few women in the building working as secretaries, clerk-typists, or, rarely, as a policewoman with specialized responsibilities.

But some departments are changing the bonds of past traditions when it comes to hiring qualified candidates without regard to sex.

Westland is on the verge of changing its hiring standards for new officers after a young lady who wants to be a career police officer challenged the physical standards which clearly lock out most female applicants.

Many big city departments are also taking a step forward in the area of opening up the department to qualified women in all areas of police work.

In past years, police women were traditionally given cases handling teenagers, runaways and rape victims.

But most of an officer's typical day includes activities which could be done by a woman or man equally well.

With police work changing and departments using new techniques, the best change could be in opening doors to qualified women candidates instead of directing them to the nearest typewriter when they apply for a police job.

Editorial & Opinion

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Time Voters Know What's Happening

Plymouth Township has instructed its attorney to file suit against township firemen who are picketing because, the board maintains, the firemen have a contract.

Trustees representatives of the firefighters' union and the township board – in "executive" session – reached accord, and thus the firemen have a contract.

What the board failed to mention was that at no time has it ever approved a new contract in open official action at a regular or special township meeting.

Until such time, it has no claim "that a valid contract exists."

It may be true firemen voted to ratify a pact, but their union officials have not all signed the agreement, and though the township board has voted informally to approve, the trustees have not officially voted on it.

This is not the first time the Plymouth Township board has decided something "unofficially" that it then considers official.

For example, the board met in "executive" (secret) session to instruct its attorney to contest the annexation petition which recently came before the State Boundary Commission.

Although what was really determined was a matter of policy, the board failed to give township residents the benefit of discussing it at a public meeting.

Another example of how the board has, in recent history, kept a decision from the public was its refusal to make public a copy of the proposed 1973-74 township budget before it was approved by the board.

It is time the Plymouth Township board realizes township residents have a right to participate in the decision-making process of their government.

The residents can't do that if the board makes policies behind closed doors, "ratifies" contracts in "executive" session, or keeps necessary information from the public.

How can the township board maintain firemen have a "valid" contract when it not only hasn't been signed by the proper firemen's union officials, but hasn't been legally adopted by the township board either?

Certainly that question will be asked during the current dispute with the firemen.

Perhaps it will be answered by lawyers from both sides, but whatever the legal implications of the board's attitude, township residents have again been left out.