

# 'STRIKE FOR BETTER SCHOOLS'

*On Nov. 25, 1946, three days before Thanksgiving, teachers in St. Paul, Minn., walked off the job. It was the first strike by teachers in U.S. history, and it was a big surprise to people in St. Paul who were used to teachers' falling in line and accepting the wretched conditions and poor pay they had put up with for years. Perhaps these people were especially surprised at the walkout because a large majority of the teachers were women—members of the "gentler sex"—and the strike leaders were women, too. But the St. Paul teachers, who had seen the failure of all their attempts to bring about change, voted overwhelmingly to strike. They stayed on the picket line through zero weather and more than five weeks without pay until they won what they had gone out for—and, incidentally, gave birth to collective bargaining for teachers.*

*We owe special thanks to Cheryl Braunworth Carlson whose dissertation, *Strike for Better Schools: The St. Paul Public School Teachers' Strike of 1946*, was a compendious and fascinating source of information about the strike. We also consulted "The History of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers" (1968) by Michael J. McDonough, who was president of the St. Paul Federation of Men Teachers at the time of the strike and one of the strike leaders; and a Minnesota Historical Society interview with four St. Paul teachers, three of them veterans of the strike, which was conducted by James J. Dooley in 1974.*

*We are greatly indebted to Cheryl Carlson for the historic photographs used in this article, as well as for the opportunity to photograph one of the picket signs carried during the strike, which is now in the archives of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers.*

—Editor

*People all over the U.S. found out about the St. Paul strike when Life magazine carried this photograph of teachers cooking a Thanksgiving turkey on the picket line.*

BY KARIN CHENOWETH

ST. PAUL, MINN., twin sister to its larger and in some ways more sophisticated neighbor, Minneapolis, was still a rough-and-tumble city in 1946, proud of its pioneer legacy and spirit. But with a large Catholic population, which for the most part sent children to Catholic schools, and many absentee business owners who opposed any increases in property taxes, the public schools struggled to be considered a serious enterprise. At that time, St. Paul was the last of the big American cities without an independent school board, and running the schools was simply a political job. The mayor chose, from among the six elected city commissioners, a commissioner of education, who might have no particular knowledge about or interest in the schools. The commissioner hired the superintendent and oversaw the hiring of all school employees, including teachers. Given the city's legacy of political corruption, this meant that throughout the Depression, teachers had to pay for their jobs both with money and with electioneering or other favors. The situation had improved by 1946 because teaching jobs were more plentiful and teachers harder to find. However, the commissioner still expected to have his landscaping and other personal chores done by grateful appointees.

Financing public education in St. Paul was almost an afterthought. Schools were not considered different from any other public service, and they had to fight for their share of the budget along with road maintenance and the police and fire departments. To make matters worse, money was always in short supply. The city charter set a per-capita limit on the property tax, which funded all city services, including the schools. The limit could only be changed by a 60 percent majority of St. Paul citizens, and in 1946, it was still \$30: the level set in 1919. Attempts to increase the per-capita were staunchly and successfully opposed by business interests. Education money from the state, which would have helped relieve the schools' serious money problems, went directly to the city's general

fund to be divided among all the city's services.

It is not surprising, then, that many St. Paul schools were old and poorly maintained. In a 1970 interview, Lettisha Henderson, chair of the teachers' negotiating committee during the strike, remembered that several schools had been condemned by the fire department and public safety officials. Because the district could not afford to varnish the wooden stairs and floors, custodians oiled them each year before school began, making them fire hazards. When snow fell—as it often does in Minnesota winters—it would come in through poorly maintained windows. A substitute teacher interviewed by Cheryl Carlson in 1995, recalled that his school had no soap, no towels, and no toilet paper in any of the lavatories: Children had to bring their own from home. And it was not uncommon for elementary schools—even large ones—to have only one toilet for the boys and one for the girls. The underfunded school district did not even provide textbooks, and teachers often paid for the books and supplies of their poorer students out of their own paychecks.

Teachers' pay was meager at best—for teachers with a B.A., it ranged from \$1,300 to \$2,600 a year. Many were hired as temporary teachers at a daily rate, sometimes for years at a time, because it was cheaper than hiring them permanently. Because salaries were higher elsewhere, St. Paul was losing a large number of its credentialed teachers to other cities, and at the time of the strike, roughly 20 percent of the full-time teachers did not have college degrees.

To make ends meet, many teachers held second jobs at Montgomery Ward, Sears, the post office, or in factories or bars. Most of the teachers were women, who were expected to leave their permanent jobs once they were married, though they were often hired back in substitute and temporary positions, without any chance for pensions and tenure.

And to add to the terrible conditions for teaching and learning, class sizes were rising in the years right after World War II, so many teachers had fifty students in their classrooms.

## Growing Militancy

By 1946, the teacher union movement in St. Paul had a long and distinguished history. The St. Paul Federation of Women Teachers was organized as AFT Local 28 in 1918, soon after the AFT itself was established; and the St. Paul Federation of Men Teachers came into AFT in 1919 as local 43. One of St. Paul's early teacher union leaders, Florence Rood, was elected AFT's second president in 1923. St. Paul teachers enjoyed the protection of tenure, and Rood had led a successful fight for pensions 30 years before. But the union had not been successful in its efforts to change the system for funding public services, which kept the schools poor. In the early 1940s, a number of other groups joined the union in its efforts to do something about the shameful conditions in the St. Paul schools.

A 1946 campaign proposed five amendments to the

city charter, one of which would have raised the per capita to \$34. (Another would have established a school board separate from the city administration.) The amendments, which had the support of the League of Women Voters, the College Women's Club, the PTA, and other St. Paul labor groups, as well as the teachers' unions, seemed to have a good chance of passing. However, the amendments would have increased taxes slightly, and business interests and other groups that wanted to keep property taxes low made an all-out effort to defeat the charter amendments—and they succeeded.

The only newspaper that supported the proposed changes to the charter and consistently covered the teachers' complaints about conditions in the St. Paul schools was the *Union Advocate*, a paper for St. Paul union members that is still in operation. The *Advocate's* support helped to cement the relationship between the teachers and the local unions. Though they were long-time union members, many teachers preferred to think of themselves as professionals rather than part of the trade union movement. The fact that their complaints were understood and championed by a union paper helped change that attitude. Teachers would also find the support of their union brothers and sisters crucial in the events to come.

When the charter amendments lost, the teachers were back to square one, with poor pay, deteriorating working conditions, and a totally unresponsive political structure. Its casual indifference to teachers' legitimate needs was epitomized by what John Ryan, in a 1974 interview, said was "always the answer" to requests for a salary increase: "We know you should have a raise. We would like to give you a raise. Just one simple thing. Tell us where to get the money, and we'll give it to you."

Of course, with the \$30 cap on the property tax, there was never any money. St. Paul teachers had not had a salary increase in three years—and they were already paid less than the teachers in any other city of a comparable size. Soon after the defeat of the amendments to the city charter, teachers were told they would have to take a week's salary cut before January 1947.

Perhaps this was the last straw for the union leadership because they embarked on a course that few of the St. Paul politicians or businessmen who routinely ignored the schools and their teachers would ever have expected—union leaders started thinking and talking about the possibility of a strike. But would the membership go along? On Oct. 29, the turning point came. The Joint Council, which was made up of the executive boards of the men and the women teachers' unions, called a meeting of union members. It was attended by 1,000 teachers, and all but six voted to empower the Joint Council to act as a bargaining agent for the teachers and, if necessary, to prepare for a strike. The strike deadline was set for Nov. 25.

This was a risky business. Although the nation had seen its auto workers, miners, and railroad workers strike, there had never been a teachers' strike. Even the American Federation of Teachers had a "no strike" policy at the time. And of course many thought that teachers—of all people—would never walk off the job. According to the history of the strike written by

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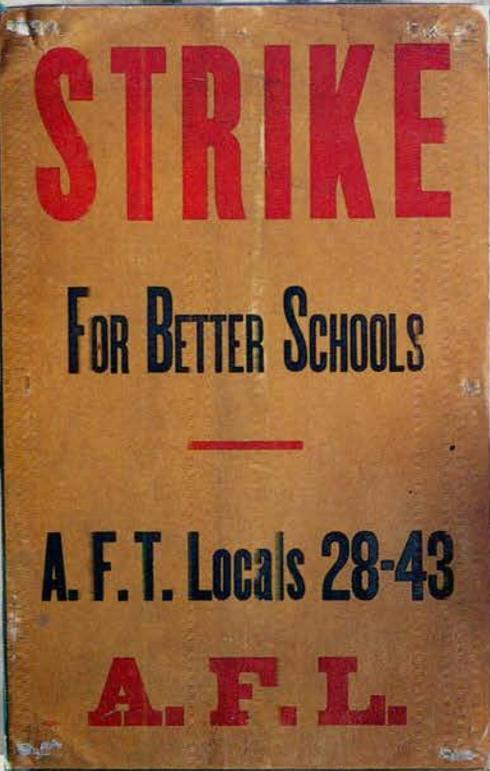
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PHOTO COURTESY OF MINNEAPOLIS MORNING TRIBUNE



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED PRESS



PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROB LEVINE

*There was broad support for the strike in St. Paul. (Top) Women from the community come out in sub-zero weather to serve coffee and doughnuts to striking teachers. (Left) Two students join their teacher on the picket line. (Above) One of the posters carried in the strike.*

Michael J. McDonough, who was president of the men teachers' union at the time of the strike and chair of the picket committee:

Bets were made in the City Hall that even if the leaders would declare a strike, very few of the teachers would obey. For years teachers were kept in line by promises to do something about the schools, class size, and salaries. These promises were made and never implemented, and the teachers remained docile. Up to this time, the teachers had never even threatened a strike. Everyone was of the opinion that they were too timid and individualistic and would never go so far as to go on strike.

School administrators, who did not want to take any risk, however small, tried to play on the doubts and fears felt by many teachers—especially those close to retirement. On Nov. 19, the school administration ordered all the teachers and principals to the city auditorium. Teachers were told that if they went out on strike, they would lose their jobs, their teaching licenses, and their pensions. But the union had already prepared teachers for tactics like these with a flier explaining that such threats had no legal basis. So the teachers listened in silence to the attempts to intimidate them. Afterwards, on their way to a union meeting, they passed a tire company. All the employees stood on the street clapping and cheering as the teachers walked by. This was the first sign of the general approval with which the strike would be met.

At the union meeting, Mollie Geary, the chair of the Joint Council, announced that the strike would begin the following Monday. In a speech that was reprinted in a local paper the next day, she talked about the strike goals, which went far beyond a salary increase:

The strike will continue until the city government accepts its full responsibility for the establishment of a decent, modern public school educational program and takes positive action toward the accomplishment of that objective. This is not a strike for salaries alone. Their every salary request could be met tomorrow, but the teachers would not accept unless that offer were accompanied by unchangeable proof that the other shameful needs of the St. Paul school system will be met.

St. Paul needs more teachers to relieve crowded classes and give every child a fair chance at instruction, a thorough-going modernization of its teaching equipment, adequate supplies, proper health service for the pupils, and expanded visiting teacher service. It needs proper maintenance of its school buildings, and it needs a long-term, carefully planned program of replacement and new construction.

Until these things are assured beyond a question, St. Paul teachers will remain on strike. They owe that to the 30,000 public school pupils of St. Paul.

Frank Marzitelli, secretary of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers Union, and some other local union leaders also spoke at the meeting and gave teachers who still might be worried about losing their jobs a shrewd piece of encouragement: "Don't let them kid you, because they cannot find 900 teachers to fill your jobs. You do what we tell you, follow our instructions, and you have nothing to worry about." Albert Hanzel, who remembered these words when he was interviewed in 1974, credited the other unions with getting the strike "rolling": "Personally," he said, "I think if it hadn't been for the support of labor, we never would have gotten off the ground."

## Strike!

On Nov. 24, during one of the coldest winters in memory in a city known for bitter winters, the teachers struck. Things were well organized. Picket signs were distributed at central points in the city, and each teacher was assigned two-hour picket duty. Those who couldn't picket because of physical ailments served coffee at rest shelters.

There was considerable anxiety about school principals. They were union members, but would they support the strike? Many teachers didn't think so. But when Albert Hanzel asked his principal, what he planned to do, the reply was, "Well, Mr. Hanzel, I'm not going to see the teachers going around my building picketing without my carrying a sign with them." And Hanzel said, "he was there at seven o'clock every single morning." Hanzel's principal was not alone in supporting the strikers. According to union records, fewer than twenty-five teachers and principals, out of the total St. Paul staff of 1,165, crossed the picket lines and went to work. As the strike went on, those walking the picket line were even joined by two sympathetic professors from the University of Minnesota.

Teachers were surprised and heartened by the broad support they got from the community. Teacher Nora Kelly remembered that:

It was ten [degrees] below [zero].... And the neighbors around felt so sorry for the women, that the men would come and carry the picket [signs] for us, and we would go into their homes, and they'd have coffee for us and then we'd go back out after we got warm. The children would come along with us and visit. They liked to see the teachers carrying the signs, because we were helping them.

This support showed that the union had been successful in convincing many people that the strike was not just about higher pay and better working conditions for teachers but was indeed what the picket signs said, a "strike for better schools."

On Dec. 12, the *Union Advocate*, carried an article entitled, "The Shame of a City," which said, "Today, the entire nation knows that St. Paul has been decadent in its educational stewardship. Truly this is the shame of a great city if ever there was one." The *Advocate's* claim that the strike had become a national story was no exaggeration. When strike leader Mary McGough spoke on national radio, her statement, "The teachers' strike in St. Paul aroused an apathetic public to an awareness of what it means to have classrooms without teachers," was picked up by newspapers all over the country. And *Life* magazine—which was famous, at the time, as a source for picture stories about all the great national and international events—featured a photograph of St. Paul teachers cooking a Thanksgiving turkey on the picket line.

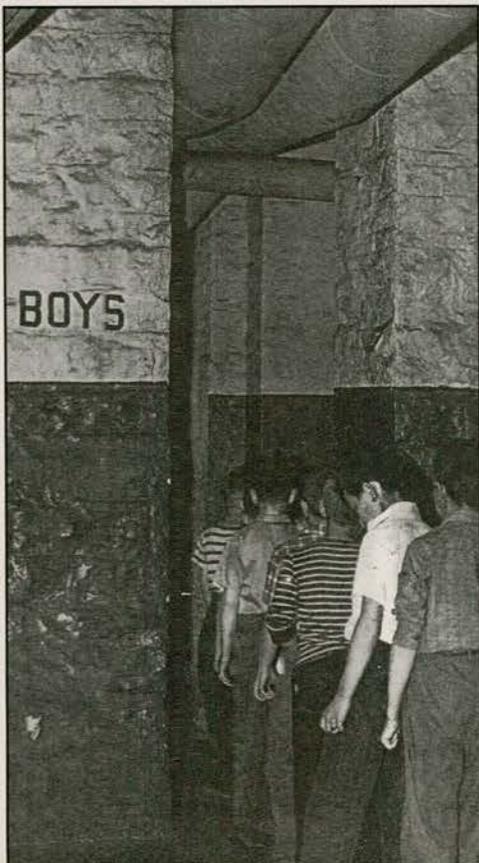
Thousands of letters supporting the strikers and more than \$20,000—much of it from other union locals—poured in from around the country. Some of the money was loaned to hard-up teachers to get them through the no-paycheck weeks, and some went to pay for advertisements in local papers that would not run stories including the teachers' viewpoints. Teacher John Ryan remembered a \$1,500 check from the AFT local in New York:

That was something that buoyed the teachers up very, very much in spirit, because everybody looks to the New York teachers federation. It was a big and powerful federation. And when we had their moral backing, why, we figured that's it.

The teachers stayed out for five weeks and three days. What the strikers remembered especially in later years was the bitter cold. But they also talked



*Photographs of St. Paul schools taken in the early 1940s document some of the conditions that led to the strike. (Top) Many classrooms, like the one shown here, were still heated with individual coal stoves. (Left) School lavatories, like the one these boys wait in line to enter, were often primitive and poorly equipped.*



about the quality of their leadership: Recalling Mary McGough, Albert Hanzel said, "There wasn't a single thing that any of the councilmen could argue with [her] but what she had it up here, when they had to be looking it up in books." And Margaret Kelly remembered that the strike leaders "operated then, not like timid women any more, but as very sure of themselves...they did their homework and they were able to influence the other teachers...they didn't look like they were prima donnas, just doing it for show or a name...they were really doing it for a good cause."

In the end—after several disappointments, as the city council seemed ready to meet the teachers' conditions but then drew back at the last minute—the council agreed to put a charter amendment on the ballot proposing changes in the tax structure to permit a separate school budget and to increase the per-capita expenditures to \$18 for schools and \$24 for all other city services (in contrast to the old \$30 for all services, including schools). The charter amendment passed with the necessary 60 percent of the vote in the spring of 1947.

The immediate results of the strike and subsequent charter amendment gave the teachers what they had been demanding. Buildings were fixed, supplies became available, and there was no more talk of cutting teachers' pay. In fact, salaries rose significantly, and by 1948, they were comparable to salaries in other cities of equal size. And at the urging of St. Paul teachers, the state passed a law stating that jurisdictions failing to provide textbooks would be ineligible for state funds. The strike also got the attention of cities all over the country which, alerted to the militancy that could be aroused by ignoring teacher issues, began giving their teachers unsolicited pay raises. Eventually, in 1965, St. Paul got a separate school board.

It took a lot for St. Paul teachers to go out on strike—and stay out until they had prevailed. And what they achieved with their courage and resolve had an effect far beyond the St. Paul schools. Thanks to them, teachers' unions all over the country had a clear example of how the solidarity of teachers, coupled with the support of other unions and parents, could improve both working conditions and the education of children.

Describing the impact in a message to the St. Paul Federation of Teachers on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, Al Shanker said, "The St. Paul Fed...made history in 1946 with the first teachers' strike in the nation. The issues were so familiar that they sound like today's headlines: job losses, 6 percent pay cuts, forced furloughs. Local 28 won the strike—and paved the way for collective bargaining all over the country."

In a 1974 interview, Margaret Kelly, who taught in St. Paul for decades after the strike, emphasized a different but equally important lesson taught by the St. Paul strike. The strike, she said:

...had an impact clear around the United States. It was felt in every little school and every little community, and nearly all the schools in those areas were having...the same type of problems. Education was not financed correctly, or it wasn't financed to the advantage of students. And that is the reason [for the strike]. It was not for salaries alone that teachers were interested; it was in the working conditions, in the things that they could do for students who were being deprived. □