

# THE WAY THINGS WERE

BY JACK SCHIERENBECK

*With attacks on teacher unionism the fashion of the day, it might be useful to recall what things were like before collective bargaining brought conditions of dignity, equity, and security to the teaching profession. The following excerpt is taken from part one of a six-part series on the history of the United Federation of Teachers, New York City. The series ran periodically over the last year in the union's newspaper.*

*As Sandra Feldman, president of the UFT, remarked in her introduction to the series last February, "These stories show that most of the day-to-day rights and dignities we take for granted had to be wrested from a system that would never have changed on its own.*

*"Thirty-six years later, we're still fighting. Today our union is fighting for a contract that acknowledges our true worth to this city and its future, our students, and for a school budget that provides the means for us and our students to teach and learn. Nothing will change unless we make it change."*

J EANNETTE DILORENZO remembers coming home from her first day as a teacher in "total shock." She and her husband John had come into teaching at the tail end of the 1950s as a second career after organizing investigators, accountants and clerks at the city's Department of Finance for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. "We were adults where we were and we'd come into a system where the teachers were treated as if they were children. It was almost a throwback to feudal times. The principal was the lord. You were the serf."

Lou Carrubba had done a hitch in the service, so he was familiar with authority. But life in uniform was *nothing* compared to the nitpicking bullying that teachers suffered. "There was no real grievance machinery, no protections, no due-process procedures.

*Jack Schierenbeck is a staff writer for the New York Teacher/City Edition.*

Besides, if you complained, they'd make your life even more miserable."

So did teachers have to "eat a lot of crow" back then? "Today's teachers have no idea. I'm telling you, hardly a day went by when we weren't humiliated in one form or another," responded Carrubba. "Let's just say eating crow is a nice way of putting it." Authoritarian rule had always been a sore spot for teachers. The original Teachers Union was founded in 1916 in no small part "to fight oppressive supervision."

## The Principal as Tyrant

"The principal was a real matriarch, a tyrant," recalled Alice Marsh, who started as a teacher in 1929. "They thought we were their children."

Marsh recalled how she and her colleagues devised a system of shared monitoring that would have saved them all from climbing five double flights of stairs four times a day. Marsh was chosen emissary and walked into a frosty reception with the principal.

"She looked at me with those steely blue eyes and said: 'I am the principal of this school. Good day!'"

Around the same time, a first-year substitute teacher at a Brooklyn elementary school got an early lesson in the doctrine of principal infallibility. "She [the principal] came in and thought [my class] was too noisy and disorderly," Si Beagle recalled shortly before his death in 1985. "Being a wise guy, I said to her, 'But this is creative disorder.' She immediately told me to look elsewhere for work.

"In those days, the principal had the power to bring me up on charges by simply saying, 'Mr. Beagle has shown conduct unbecoming a teacher.' It was as simple as that.

"'Conduct unbecoming a teacher' meant anybody could be fired. Teachers would be asked to do work after school and you couldn't refuse." Beagle said. "When my principal said, 'Stay after school and coach





the track team,' you did."

Abe Levine did likewise when ordered to skip lunch in favor of "yard duty." Even by the early 1950s a teacher was still very much under the thumb of the principal. "I felt very much taken advantage of," said Levine. "You were completely beholden to the principal. He was the king. We had absolutely no rights. We were afraid to speak up."

## Cheap Labor

Along with monastic-like obedience came a vow of poverty, or something close to it. So pitiful was the pay that there was a long-standing joke that whenever teachers were introduced to each other they'd ask what the other did for a living.

A *New York Times* editorial in January 1955 titled "Teach or Wash Cars" posed the question why anyone would take a job teaching at \$66 a week when washing cars paid \$72.35.

The fact is, it wasn't just anyone who went into teaching. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, schoolwork was woman's work, a natural extension of the home schooling that women had always done. Besides, as Diane Ravitch writes in her book *The Great School Wars*, school officials preferred women. With other "respectable occupations" all but closed, they'd be happy to take the job and all that came with it.

Low salaries were easily explained away. Teaching, after all, was only a "temporary" occupation before a woman settled into her real career as wife and homemaker. Besides, as unmarried women they could "af-

ford" their jobs because they lived at home with their parents. Later, officials used marriage as a convenient rationale for miserly wages. When Brooklyn schoolteacher Mary Murphy successfully mounted a court challenge in 1905 that allowed women to keep their jobs after marrying, the official line was that with husbands to support them, women didn't need the money.

Things began to change after World War I. Due in large part to stricter enforcement of child labor laws, more and more children were going beyond grade school. As the number of high schools quadrupled in the decade after the war, an acute shortage of teachers developed. At the same time, there was an audible concern among school officials and others that the teaching of older male students would be better left to men. To attract male teachers in the post-war boom economy, salaries were raised—so much so that by 1928, teachers' wages were competitive with most private sector jobs. As an added inducement, the board maintained separate eligibility lists from which men were often given preference in hiring. Slowly more men began to enter the teaching field, including many Jews who could not find work in WASP-dominated banking, insurance, and law.

Still, it wasn't until the Depression of the 1930s that many men, desperate for any kind of job, thought about teaching. The promise of a steady job drew out-of-work Ph.D.s, accountants, and even lawyers—men like Jules Kolodny, Dave Wittes, and Charles Cogen



who, over the coming decades, would play pivotal roles in the growth of teacher unionism.

Together with equally brilliant but professionally thwarted women, there evolved what many have argued was the greatest assembly of brain power ever in the schools. But if it was the Golden Age of talent, it was anything but golden for the teachers themselves.

These mind workers came cheap. The deepening Depression had all but wiped out the salary gains. With more qualified candidates than openings, teachers were in no position to bargain. The city had the upper hand and used it, cutting salaries and imposing one-month unpaid furloughs—even going so far as to coerce teachers into “voluntarily” contributing 5 percent of their pay for needy children.

The School Relief Fund, as it was called, raised close to \$6 million at the height of the Depression. While there’s no denying that the money went to a good cause—everything from a hot lunch program to clothing and eyeglasses—it amounted to yet-another shake-down scheme. A little nudge from a supervisor or principal was all it took to leave teachers in a giving mood.

The Depression had given the Board of Education the chance to keep thousands of teachers in a permanent state of job insecurity. Instead of appointing a teacher to a regular position whenever there was a vacancy, the board filled it with a substitute. These “permanent substitutes” had no sick pay, no paid holidays or vacations, no pension, no health insurance—and they could be let go at any time with or without cause.

With as much as 25 percent of the teaching force employed as substitutes, management’s already considerable power got even stronger. Lacking even the slightest leverage, all teachers were forced to work under the most demoralizing conditions.

### Pregnant? Leave Now!

Double and even triple sessions were not uncommon, especially during the post-WW II baby boom years. As part of a series called “The Scandal of Our Schools,” the *New York Post* reported in January 1952 that one Queens elementary school built for 1,140 students had an enrollment of just under 3,000.

The forty-eight children who jammed Alice Marsh’s first-grade class were typical. “My first year I had to leave twelve children back because I couldn’t get to them when they were slipping. This was par for the course.”

Lunch was no break. For elementary school teachers, there was no such thing as a duty-free lunch period. Lunch, what there was of it, amounted to a sandwich gobbled down in makeshift, overcrowded rooms. “You lined up with your kids in the schoolyard and stayed with them the whole day, even eating with them—even a bathroom break,” remembers Janet Miller.

As for sick pay: You needed a doctor’s note if you were out sick for even one day. No note, no pay.

Sabbaticals were a luxury few could afford, since the pay was only 40 percent of the regular salary.

It wasn’t until 1957 that teachers, along with other city employees, were allowed to participate in the government retirement and disability program.

## \$3-a-Week Raise Fails To Halt Stoppages

### Teachers Continue Revolt Against Activities — K-6B Group Protests

Mayor O’Dwyer’s \$150-\$250 salary increase proposal for the teaching staff drew no expressions of gratitude from teachers today. Instead, they seemed more resentful at the “token” increase offered than they had been before.

The executive committee of the High School Teachers Assn., spearheaded the stoppage of extra-curricular activities. The K-6B group protested a salary schedule in recommending a salary differential for high school teachers.

*New York Sun*, Feb. 16, 1947

## How Pupils Are Jammed

### Double and Triple Sessions in Classroom Do the Work of Two or Three

*The New York Times*  
Oct. 2, 1952

### SIX CITY TEACHERS FACE OUSTING FOR DEFYING

### Refusal to Tell They Are Red Dismissal U

### TRIAL OF 8 O

### Week’s Delay

*The New York Times*  
Feb. 6, 1956

## TEACHER MORALE AT NEW LOW HERE

### Money Is Root of a Growing Rebellion in School System, With Pupils the Losers

By BENJAMIN FINE  
The morale of teachers, super-

And pensions? You got one, but not until you were either sixty-five or had logged thirty-five years of service.

Until 1937, teachers were forced to take a two-year, unpaid maternity leave. Though this was a far sight better than in the private sector, where maternity protection was rare, the practice of forced leave was a huge financial hit. Even later when the rules were relaxed, teachers were still required to report to their principals as soon as they became “aware” they were pregnant. But since admission meant you were required to leave immediately, teachers usually hid their condition until there was no denying the evidence.



**THE BULLETIN**  
 Democracy in Education Education for Democracy  
 MAY, 1948  
 BY SUBSCRIPTION

**TEACHERS GUILD**  
 "How to Prevent Future Salary Crises . . ."  
 COME TO JOINT MEMBERSHIP AND DELEGATE ASSEMBLY MEETING  
 Wed., May 19th  
 4 P.M. promptly  
 COMMUNITY CHURCH  
 46 East 55th Street

# Fight Looms As Teachers Denied City-Wide Raise; Increments Given

**Guild Parades at City Hall Hearings**  
 Guild and AFL Leaders Urge Mayor to Include Staff

Denial of the city-wide 5% raise to teachers brought their indignation to a school staff suffering from eight years of inflation topped off by a 28.7% real salary increase.

Teachers' leaders came to a hearing in the City Hall to discuss the matter. The teachers' union and the City Board of Education were present. The hearing was held in the City Hall.

The teachers' union leaders were heard first. They urged the Mayor to include the staff in the city-wide raise. They also urged the Mayor to include the staff in the city-wide raise.

**NO PAY CUTS**

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**Last Minute Appeal For Voc. Teachers**

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## EXODUS FROM CITY LINKED TO SCHOOLS

Deterioration of Neighborhoods Also Held Factor in Move of 75,000 a Year to Suburbs

### SLUMS FOUND SPREADING

Municipal Facilities, Though Vast, Are Seen Inadequate to Meet Citizens' Wants

By [Name]

the night before," Marsh remembers the principal saying.

Board and school authorities were intent on teachers setting a "proper example" to their students—so much so that very little about a teacher's appearance, speech or even personal politics escaped their scrutiny. For example, while the board never had an official standard of "school attire" for teachers, many a principal drew the line when it came to sporting facial hair or men's not wearing jackets, even in the hottest weather.

The Board of Examiners, which had the final say in the issuance of licenses, was a law unto itself, functioning as the educational equivalent of the medieval Star Chamber by allowing anonymous complaints against the character of candidates.

## Free Speech Denied

In 1937, Albert Smallheiser, president of the Teachers Guild, challenged the Board of Examiners for capricious practices such as disqualifying candidates with a foreign accent for having "speech defects." Even as late as 1950, "people who had foreign accents could forget it," said Carubba. "Even a distinct Brooklyn or Bronx accent was looked down on."

It was an open secret that many racial and ethnic minorities were not welcome. In her book *Having Our Say*, Sadie Delaney tells of how she, a young black woman, had outwitted a bigoted principal. An elementary school teacher, Delaney had made it to the top of the seniority list for a high school appointment. All that stood in her way was an interview with the high school principal.

"At the appointment they would have seen I was colored and found some excuse to bounce me down the list," wrote Delaney. Instead, she skipped the appointment and just showed up at the all-white Theodore Roosevelt High School on opening day. "Child, they just about died when they saw me."

For Eastern European Jews and other immigrants, on the other hand, getting a job meant long hours learning how to break the board's sound barrier. In anticipation of the dreaded oral interview, many a would-be teacher took the mandatory speech course at City College and fretted over how to avoid the dead giveaways.

Just how much of the board's standards can be explained by simple prejudice will never be known.

There was no question, however, that certain forms of "speech" could get a teacher into trouble. In her book *My Daughter, the Teacher*, Ruth Markowitz tells of how one teacher in the 1930s was censured and warned by her principal not to "plant any seeds of doubt in her pupils' minds." Her crime? She asked her high school civics class "to debate whether President Roosevelt had too much or too little power." Another was chastised for calling a number of congressmen "racists." Still another was transferred after posting a union notice on the school bulletin board. □

"You stayed until you showed," said Phyllis Wallach, who favored loose jackets during her pregnancy in 1962.

Wallach scoffs at the idea that the board was simply worried about a woman's health. "It was Puritanism, pure and simple," she said. "God forbid students would see that their teacher was having sex. For them, exposing children to a pregnant teacher was akin to corrupting the morals of a minor."

Three decades earlier, Alice Marsh's elementary school principal had made known her disapproval of female married teachers. "I don't see how you can stand in front of a class after you've slept with a man