

# Les Biederman

## Inner-City Teacher Fights Education Board

Sol Plafkin

1967

At first glance, Les Biederman doesn't appear to be the martyr type. He requested an assignment several years ago in the so-called "inner-city." Placed in Jefferson Junior High School, just across from the Jeffries Housing Project, he found a sufficient challenge with those now popularly termed the "disadvantaged."

Biederman is not an aggressive person. He believes deeply in community-oriented teaching, education intimately related to the lives of his students. High goals—yes. But, realistic methods designed to capture the imagination of youth who are frequently frustrated by an educational system that refuses to admit the difficulties that old techniques and traditions can only compound.

However, so hide-bound and bureaucratically stifling is the present structure of education in Detroit that they can't take too much "progress" at one time. Go slow, not too fast—the frequent liberal plea; and Les Biederman went just a little too fast for the archaic educationalists that still dominate the Detroit and other big city school systems.

He was already in trouble for being too involved in the community before the current incident involving the now famous play took place. Community ignorance and apathy is presumed by the educational administrators and they fear any attempt to alter the situation.

Then boom! Came the play. An innocent little piece about life in a poor section of town about to be ruthlessly bulldozed by politicians who refused to follow their own campaign promises. A modern-day "Waiting for Lefty," written by two professors, only lacking the crisp dialogue and dramatic electricity of the Clifford Odets depression epic.

What was so controversial about the play "A Thousand Leaders Among You," performed over the past year in numerous churches and schools? Oh, it had a few "damns" and "hells" in it—and it treated sex like it really was a part of life, but not at all crucial to the point of the play.

Oh my God! The Board of Education screamed. We can't let the minds of our innocents be contaminated by reality. The play must go!

Biederman said no. If the play goes, I go — and he was suspended illegally, first with pay and then without.

The main issue is the right of an imaginative teacher to draw upon the resources of his community to stimulate and enrich the minds of his students. Somewhere along the line, the Board of Education has decided that all "outside" materials must be censored for impurities. Why, technically, a teacher can't even use -films from the Detroit Public Library because they haven't been screened by those brilliant minds whose recent record in improving the minds of their charges has been only noteworthy for its abject failure.

The American Civil Liberties Union which properly defends the right of fascists to spew their hate on soapboxes and through leaflets, has declined to take this case. Biederman was "insubordinate," they claim. He should follow "reasonable rules."

Another group on the "fink" list has been the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT)—whose attitude towards teaching smacks of the old craft-union approach of the old AFL with which they were originally affiliated.

Due to the backwardness of the rival Detroit Education Association (DEA), the DFT recently grabbed the plum of being bargaining representative for all Detroit teachers and forged out some sort of “contract” which doesn’t say much about teachers’ rights and is more designed to keep other organizations like the DEA from interfering with their holy “sweetheart” relationship with the Detroit Board of Education than with helping the individual teacher.

Anyways, the DFT has been trying its best to convince Biderman to return to work without the controversial play—that’s their contribution to academic freedom in Detroit.

As of the date of this writing (April 9) the situation is still in a state of flux. Two small parent groups in the school area are split down the middle, one for Biederman, one against. Requests are being made for assistance from other organizations such as the ADA National Lawyers Guild, NAACP, and Young Democratic and “senior” Democratic organizations.

# fifth Estate

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