

Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1967

Well, the Detroit Teachers' strike is over—and guess who got the royal screwing? About 175,000 black kids whose basic conditions of instruction were not improved more than a piddle.

The matriarchy of Union President Mare Ellen Riordan triumphed again. She and her Marygrove Mafia have succeeded in developing such tight control of that organization that it's almost impossible to move without an approving glance from her.

Democracy is a forgotten term in the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and those that dare criticize Mother Mary's operation are either expelled or severely censured.

There's been a slow-developing "black caucus" within the Union, both locally and nationally, but the fascistic type restrictions in the union impede seriously any significant movement into positions of power.

Mary Ellen was taken aback a little bit last spring when, under the direction of 3rd V-P Zeline Richard, a "Conference on Racism" was sponsored by the Union, featuring such outstanding Black Power advocates as Dr. Nathan Hare (late of Howard University) and Core's Floyd McKissick. But Mary recovered quite quickly, and unnecessarily provoked a strike to solidify her power before it had a chance to wane.

The teachers got a pretty healthy salary increase of \$1700 spread out over two years. In 1968 a beginning B.A. teacher can earn at most \$200 a week.

I suppose that there'll be some indirect benefit to the kids because better, and more educated teachers should theoretically be drawn into the profession.

But all the dedication in the world won't get a teacher very far if he has to deal with over-crowded classrooms, inappropriate materials, and an increasingly entrenched bureaucracy that fails to allow for creative and imaginative teaching.

The Union made no significant requests for radical changes in the educational structure—and, naturally, was not given any. It's interesting to note that the teachers' union comes from a background of the old American Federation of Labor which was composed of conservative craft unions with little progressive social philosophy and a primary concern for the better buck.

Class size? Oh, it's supposed to be held at 34. But, and here's a cute little gimmick, in determining average class size for a school, the administration takes the total number of pupils in a school and divides it by a figure which includes not only the teachers but also, the principals and assistant principals.

Now, if the class size in an individual room goes up to 39, a teacher can now call on the services of a "Class Size Review Board" (you'd better believe it) which will "evaluate" the situation and see if it's necessary to remedy the teacher's plight.

The most destructive feature of the contract is the granting of premium or "combat" pay and other privileges to substitutes who are willing to serve "anywhere" and any school" are euphemisms for Black schools.

So the board and Union, acting in collusion, are not only admitting but, hopelessly freezing for eternity Black children into a non-educable niche.

And the contract is now binding for two years after being rammed through, appropriately in the stifling atmosphere of the Old Temple Baptist Church which used to be the site for “homeowners” rallies against school bussing.

The contract does not provide for evaluation of pupil growth or minimal standards of academic achievement. While the teachers are allegedly granted a little more say in the planning of curriculum and choice of instructional materials, there was no significant as coequals in the educational process.

(Ah, shades of the case of Leslie Biederman whom the Union did its best to successfully fuck out of the system.)

And true community involvement—especially after the lesson of last summer’s insurrection—no talk of that. The Detroit Federation (way behind its New York City counterpart) would never think of pushing for the participation of the Black man on the street in designing the future of his kids.

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