

THE FEDERATION OF CATHOLIC TEACHERS
A BRIEF HISTORY
BY HAROLD J. T. ISENBERG

Teacher associations have long been an accepted part of the school scene. Organizations like the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have had active teacher memberships from the earliest days of the twentieth century. Then in the 1960's a new type of teacher organization - the teacher union - began to make itself known in a number of large cities.

In Catholic schools there was little immediate response to the efforts of public school teachers to unionize. However, as the number of lay teachers in some dioceses reached close to the halfway mark, it became obvious to them that their public school counterparts had made significant gains through unionization.

The first major public school strike took place in New York in November of 1960. Catholic school teachers, however, were not part of any advocate organization, although a number of them belonged to the Teachers Group of the Walter Farrell Guild.

The Guild met Sunday afternoon in the basement of the old chancery building, now the Helmsley Place Hotel on Madison Avenue, in back of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The topic for discussion at these sessions was whether social or spiritual aspirations were most important to the membership. Nonetheless, the Guild did have a speaking relationship with the superintendent of schools and was able to successfully lobby the archdiocese for a pension plan which took effect in July of 1962.

By April of 1963 when members of the Guild met at the Cathedral High School on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, it was clear that a more forceful organization was needed to meet teachers' needs. This was the birth of the Catholic Lay Teachers Group (CLTG), under the leadership of Eileen McLoughlin. The primary goal of CLTG was to organize all teachers within the New York Archdiocese into a strong, active association.

While the Archdiocese did "meet and confer" with the CLTG leadership, it did not grant CLTG "exclusive bargaining rights." Therefore, any agreements reached were merely "recommended" to the local schools which were under no obligation to implement them. Nonetheless, the fledging union was able to achieve

improvements in salary, medical coverage, insurance, and begin work on a "personnel practices" manual.

The salary issue, of course, was never adequately addressed by the Archdiocese. At a meeting with the superintendent of schools in February of 1965, then CLTG President Vera Monaco, questioned the employer's commitment to its teachers. Somewhat missing the point, the superintendent responded that the archdiocese was making "advancements in salary. It was now possible for a teacher with a degree and five years of experience to make \$4,200 per year. " All the employer asked was "more time" and it would - unilaterally - make further improvements in salaries and working conditions (maybe).

The lay teacher frustration level was particularly high by the Spring of 1967. CLTG had called a general membership meeting for May, at which time a course of action would be decided. Then a month before this gathering, a CLTG delegation, along with its chaplain, Fr. Harry Brown, met with Auxiliary Bishop Terence Cooke, who was representing Cardinal Francis Spellman. Future union president, Barry Ryan (1969-72), who was at that meeting, remembers Fr. Brown banging his fist on the table and telling Bishop Cooke that "these teachers eat hot dogs while priests eat roast beef."

Soon after that session, but before the scheduled union meeting, the Archdiocese issued a new salary scale. Teachers received a 40% raise; salaries went from \$3,600 to \$5,000 for the upcoming 1967-68 school year. Nonetheless, the May meeting drew a standing-room-only crowd of almost 800 teachers. Instead of "buying out" the lay staff, the employer had just proven how effective organized action could be.

During the presidential tenures of Sal Marro and Jim Harrington, the organization continued to grow and press the Archdiocese for formal recognition. This, however, did not come until the New York State Labor Law was amended in April of 1969 to include teachers employed by Catholic schools.

The Archdiocese threw every legal roadblock it could think of in the way of CLTG's request for recognition. It's most ingenious argument was that it was not part of the proceedings. They argued that the schools, except for the archdiocesan high schools, were really operated by the individual parishes and religious orders. Therefore, if the union wanted bargaining rights, it would have to petition in each of the approximately three hundred schools and bargain a separate contract with each

pastor and principal. Obviously such an arrangement would work an undue hardship on the union and neglected the real role and authority of the superintendent and the ordinary of the diocese in the operation of the schools and their responsibilities under canon law.

The Labor Board, without commenting on the employer's arguments, ordered them to form as large an association of schools as possible and then report back on their efforts. Virtually all parish elementary and secondary schools became part of the employer association. A number of high schools run by religious orders also joined. Some schools refused to join the "archdiocesan association," but their teachers showed little interest in forcing the issue. It was later learned that some of these people were "bought off" with promises of higher salaries. Of course, once the crisis passed, these teachers never saw any of the items they were promised.

With the legal issues resolved, an election was ordered. It was one of two in September of 1969. The New York Lay Faculty Association, formerly part of CLTG, won bargaining rights for teachers in the twelve archdiocesan high schools, three days before CLTG, (which) with 65% of the vote, became the "exclusive bargaining agent" of the parish elementary and secondary schools.

The first round of negotiations was a long, difficult, drawn-out affair. On December 8, 1969, teachers marched from a meeting at a nearby hotel to the chancery office and formed an informational picket line. The media coverage was overwhelming. By the time teachers next met on January 19, 1970, it was either a vote on a strike or accept a new offer from the Archdiocese. A strike was avoided and for the first time anywhere in the nation, both Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers were covered by the same agreement. It was an historic agreement and teachers were finally granted tenure, a grievance and arbitration procedure, sick and personal leave, a significant raise in salary and many other benefits.

The contract was retroactive to September of 1969 and would run two years until the end of August of 1971. On the surface it appeared that we had won two years of labor peace. Unfortunately, that was not to be. In December of 1970, the CLTG moved to affiliate with the American Federation of Teachers under the name of the Federation of Catholic Teachers (FCT). Although the contract was clear that the agreement "shall bind, apply and inure to the parties hereto" and "their successors,

transferees, lessees assigns," the Archdiocese seized upon this opportunity to challenge the union's bargaining status.

Catholic high school teachers in Philadelphia and Chicago had been the first to win collective bargaining agreements in 1966 and the first to affiliate with AFT. The national union was the only one offering assistance and technical help to parochial school teachers.

The Archdiocese was successful in challenging the affiliation and the New York State Labor Board called for another representation election in May of 1971. The employer mounted an ambitious, costly and vicious attack on CLTG/FCT during the weeks leading up to the election. Every one of the 3,000 lay teachers in the system were bombarded with management's propaganda. The schools had the great advantage of having access to every voter. Principals handed literature to teachers. The union had to scramble to get at least one delegate in each school to do the same. On election day, we were vindicated by an overwhelming vote of support and confidence from the teachers.

The Archdiocesan re-recognition of the union was followed by months of delay on their part in beginning the second round of negotiations. It was obvious that they did not want to bargain with the teachers and were simply "going through the motions" to avoid any unfair labor practice charges by the FCT. Meanwhile, President Richard Nixon had imposed a three month wage-price freeze that made most strikes illegal.

The freeze ended in mid-November and negotiations suddenly became very intense. The teachers met and took a strike authorization vote. Unfortunately, when the membership again met on November 21, the Archdiocesan position had not changed and over a thousand members voted to strike. It was the longest job action in Catholic school history, up until that time. It lasted twenty-one school days. When it was over, the union had survived and a contract had been won. The employer could not break the FCT and begrudgingly recognized it would have to deal with the union.

Although the new agreement ran for two years, it contained a salary re-opener provision for the 1972-73 school year. This matter and subsequent contracts for the periods of 1973-75 and 1975-77 would be dealt with during the presidency of Jack O'Neil. The negotiations process was difficult, but the union achieved its settlements without the need of a strike or job

action. Teachers however, were forced to work without a contract for a brief time while negotiations were in progress. The union was successful because members engaged in a number of demonstrations that focused public attention on our plight.

In July of 1976, Harold Isenberg became FCT president. In October of that year, he lead a picket line of Catholic Teacher leaders who had been "locked out" of a National Catholic Educational Association meeting in Bethesda, Maryland on "Unionism in Catholic Schools." The Catholic school unionists demanded to be heard and asked the NCEA to sponsor a symposium that would bring both Catholic school labor and management together to discuss their problems and seek solutions.

When NCEA refused to act, FCT held a national workshop for Catholic school teachers in New York in February of 1977. Much to our surprise and delight, Msgr. Olin Murdick, then the secretary for education of the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC) agreed to participate in our conference. He was sent to represent the USCC's recently formed subcommittee on lay teacher unionization and had come "to listen and to learn and to let the unionists know that the USCC was interested in their problems." For the first time, lay teacher leaders say "an opening and opportunity for dialogue" between themselves, the USCC and hopefully, their dioceses.

The dialogue that followed involved the broadest possible consultation with lay teacher leaders across the nation. All were invited to a meeting in Chicago with the full membership of the USCC subcommittee on teacher unionization. The unionists' response and input was being sought on a draft statement of principles related to collective bargaining in Catholic schools. The subcommittee described their efforts as an attempt "to reassert in a forceful manner the traditional Catholic social principles involved" in the unionization issue. Subsequently approved by the USCC's Administrative Board, the three basic principles enunciated were that Catholic school teachers had a right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers, that it was up to the teachers to determine what agency or group would represent them in the process, and that teachers had a right to free elections, full negotiations, mediation, conciliation and similar services under the auspices of a neutral body.

Regretfully, the USCC guidelines were soon to be overshadowed by the controversy surrounding the role of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in Catholic schools. In

March of 1979, by a vote of 5 to 4, the U.S. Supreme Court held that schools operated by a church were not under the jurisdiction of the NLRB. The high court ruled against teachers on the technicality that the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) did not specifically include parochial schools. The unionization efforts of a number of lay teacher organizations throughout the nation came to an abrupt halt. However, teachers in states, like New York, with equivalent labor laws were still protected. Although the New York Archdiocese is currently in Federal court trying to remove the Long Island and New York Lay Faculty Associations, as well as FCT, from the jurisdiction of the present state labor laws. It is doubtful that they will be successful, but even if they were - our strength, as always, is in our unity and numbers.

In April of 1981, the FCT voted to end its eleven years of affiliation with the AFT and its state organization. Isenberg said that "despite our best efforts to the contrary, there is an inherent conflict of interest between public and private school teachers over the issue of governmental assistance to our schools and parents." Although AFT had promised to downplay its opposition to legislation, like tuition tax credits, it did not or could not honor that commitment. Once several other Catholic locals had disaffiliated, AFT made it clear that it also would not pursue the NLRB issue or seek amendment of the NLRA to reinclude parochial school teachers. The executive council concluded, and the membership agreed, that we could no longer "in good conscience" continue to support an organization that vehemently opposed legislation vital to the long-term survival of our schools and refused to render necessary help.

FCT has been active in the fight for federal and state assistance to our schools and parents since the establishment of the CLTG. In 1970, our Save Our Schools (SOS) campaign helped win passage of a state bill granting funds to parochial schools. Since 1976, we have been at the forefront of the fight for a constitutional form of federal assistance to our schools and the parents of children attending these institutions.

The last three collective bargaining agreements have covered the periods of 1977-80, 1980-83, and now 1983-86. All were hard fought for victories. All involved months of difficult negotiations, mass picketing, and a one day strike in October of 1980. And all proved the absolute need for teacher solidarity.

Each of the recent agreements contained a parity offer of new money for teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels. And each has had a progressively better salary schedule than any previous agreements. A number of significant improvements were also won in the area of contract language in these contracts. The last one, the seventh in the series, resulted in raises of from 8% to 11% in the salary scales. Nonetheless, in the next agreement, the union wants a true percentage raise, not the usual flat across-the-board offer, an end to the disparity between elementary and secondary school salaries, longevity increments for senior teachers, and a number of additional changes in contract language affecting benefits, medical coverage, and working conditions.

The preface to our current contract reminds all that less than 10% of the lay teachers in this nation enjoy the protection of a union contract with its standardized salary scales, health benefits, provisions covering working conditions, job security and grievance and arbitration. It is time that all teachers in this Archdiocese realize how far they have come and join together through their union to further improve their conditions of employment.