

Should Teachers Strike?

Whether teachers should go on strike is one of the most contentious public issues. A strike is a work stoppage by a group of employees, usually because they believe their grievances have not been adequately addressed. Most American judges have prohibited public employees, including teachers, from striking; but a few states allow strikes in their collective bargaining statutes. Many Americans abhor strikes. They view teachers as public servants who should place their students' welfare above their own. Many critics argue that if teachers want to be viewed as professionals, they should never use a blue-collar power strategy like a strike. Others argue that strikes are justifiable when all other attempts to come to a mutual agreement have failed. As Bill Sherman has discussed in this article, the first American teacher strike occurred in the city of Memphis, TN, in 1918. It resulted in a \$10-a-month salary increase for teachers.* But what about teachers in rural areas? Sherman explores the forgotten early teacher strikes in rural Iowa to reveal the conditions that led to the strikes, the teachers' demands, and the results. He suggests that these strikes resulted in more equitable salaries and, in one case, improved working conditions.

--Eds.

The Forgotten Rural Teacher Strikes

William L. Sherman

Strikes by public school teachers rarely happened prior to 1950, but newspaper research reveals that at least five took place in Iowa before 1947. Three involved teachers working in one room schools in single townships, and two took place in small towns. These strikes were under reported by local newspapers and were not mentioned in official state education publications. As a result, they were forgotten shortly after they took place and have remained episodes in hidden history.

In September 2012, when Chicago teachers went on strike, *The Des Moines Register* included a story about Iowa's "first and only teacher strike," which took place in Keokuk in 1970. (1) The Iowa State Education Association (ISEA) also lists on its website the Keokuk strike as Iowa's only teacher strike. (2) Yet at least three rural

teacher strikes had taken place fifty years earlier in different Iowa townships and counties:

- Mound Prairie Township in Jasper County,
- Center Township in Sioux County, and
- Correctionville in Woodbury County.

Two other Iowa strikes occurred in Zearing in Story County in 1922 and Pleasant Valley Township near Fort Dodge in 1946. These strikes were among the earliest undertaken by teachers in America.

Russell Oakes was perhaps the first to study teacher strikes. He reported in his 1954 thesis, written for the School of Education at New York University, that there “had been 115 teacher strikes in the United States since 1918.” (3) According to Oakes, the first teacher strike in America took place in Memphis, Tennessee, in September 1918. He identified a 1919 strike in Stockton Township near Linton, Indiana, as the first place where one-room schoolteachers may have gone on strike. Oakes overlooked the three 1920 Iowa strikes but did identify the 1922 Zearing strike. (4) To better understand why these strikes took place, I will look at the causes and impact of the strikes. Then I will discuss the factors that empowered rural Iowa teachers to take such a radical step.

The Mound Prairie Strike

The Newton Daily News reported that seven of the eleven Mound Prairie Township teachers went out on strike on February 4, 1920, an action that forced the closure of seven schools. (5) The teachers wanted \$100 a month salaries for normal school graduates and \$90 for those who had not completed the program. The township school board had adopted the state minimum salary schedule which had gone into effect on July 4, 1919, and provided \$75 a month for normal school graduates and \$85 a month for those with at least two years of experience. (6) Two days later *The Daily News* reported, “Teachers Still Out.” That story listed the names of the striking teachers in bold face type. The article reported that the school board had said they could not increase wages because their operating levy had been set by the county in July and could not be increased. The teachers countered that the board could borrow money

from a bank and include that amount in the levy for next year. They also said the board could issue warrants and include that money in the next levy. The story concluded, "Whether the school board will do either of these is not known at this time." (7)

An analysis of the salaries earned by Mound Prairie teachers in 1919-20 and the following school year reveals the impact of the work stoppage. Most of the 1919-20 salaries were \$65 a month, and only two teachers earned more. The following year most of the salaries had jumped to \$90 a month, and only two teachers earned less. (8) This nearly 40 percent salary increase was a major accomplishment considering the economic conditions at the time. Howard R. Bowen reported in "Iowa Income: 1909-1934," that Iowa farm income had declined from one billion dollars in 1919 to 336 million by 1921. (9)

The Center Township Strike

A month later, one room teachers in Iowa struck again. The *Sioux County Index* reported that on Friday March 5, 1920, five of the nine Center Township teachers refused to report to work. County newspapers indicated that the striking teachers were unhappy with their salaries. Three days later, board members voted to maintain the teachers' current salaries. (10)

The following week the striking teachers sent letters to county newspapers to explain their position.

... the teachers are not striking because they are not satisfied with their salary which is \$85. At the board meeting in July [1919] it was decided that all first grade teacher salaries should be \$85 [a month] and second grade[,] \$75. Is it fair to these first grade teachers that one teacher holding a second grade certificate should receive a \$100 [a month salary]? (11)

First grade and second grade certificates were determined by scores teachers received on exams they took following classes they had completed in normal school or county institutes held during the summer. First grade certificates were awarded to teachers earning high scores on their exams, generally over 90 percent. Second grade certificate holders scored lower, generally between 80-90 percent. Requirements for

the certificates varied by county. Beginning in 1919, the state minimum salary schedule called for \$75 a month for teachers holding first grade and \$60 for those holding second grade certificates. (12)

Why did the school board deviate from the salary schedule policy by paying a teacher with a second grade certificate more than those with first grade certificates? To better understand the situation, Center Township teacher salary schedules from 1918 - 1922 were examined. (13) The analysis indicates there were problems at Center #4, where Jennie Verberg, the \$100-a-month teacher with the second grade certificate, was working. A different teacher was employed at that school each year from 1917 through 1922. Two were employed during 1919-20, the year the strike occurred. Perhaps there were discipline problems at Center #4. Verberg may have been brought in at a salary above schedule because school board members felt she could solve the problem. The fact that she taught only five months at Center #4 may mean that problems continued during her tenure.

The strike by the five teachers may have caused school board members to adhere to their adopted salary schedule. This was done for 1920-21, the year following the strike, when those with first grade certificates earned \$10 more than those with a second grade certificate. (14) The impact of the strike in Center Township, like that in Mound Prairie, was not felt until the start of the following school year.

The Correctionville Strike

The third 1920 Iowa teacher strike took place in the last week in April in the town of Correctionville. The *Sioux City Journal* reported,

The entire staff of high school teachers in the public schools at Correctionville went on a strike at the end of last week because the board of education granted an increase of 25 percent in the salaries of grade school teachers and a raise of only 10 per cent to those in the high school, as well as the principal and superintendent, according to a report received at the office of J. F. Garnes, county superintendent. (15)

The newspaper also noted that the Correctionville kindergarten to twelfth grade district superintendent, J. Frank Smith, and the principal, P. P. Youngberg, had abandoned their offices. (16)

Another news story in the May 6 *Palto Alto Reporter*, published in Emmetsburg, stated, "We presume they [the teachers and administrators] just quit and this was termed a strike," wrote the editor. "There is a difference between quitting and striking. The former is where one steps down and out and the latter is where they step out and do not want to quit but go on with more wages." (17) The Correctionville work stoppage was the only early Iowa teacher strike involving men. Unfortunately no additional newspaper articles could be located to see how this conflict was resolved.

The Teacher Strike Issue

In 1920 a teacher strike was not a common topic of discussion among Iowa educators. No mention of the three teacher strikes could be found in records maintained by the State Department of Public Instruction and the County Superintendents. Also, there was no coverage of the strikes in *Midland Schools*, the official serial publication of the Iowa State Teachers Association. (18) Yet ironically an article appeared entitled, "How Far Can Teachers' Organizations Go and Be Professional?" The article was based on a paper presented at the Iowa Superintendents Club three months before the first known Iowa strike took place. It was reprinted in *Midland Schools* a month after the second strike occurred. (19) The speech was given by H. P. Smith, Superintendent of Schools in Newton, a town located about ten miles from Mound Prairie Township. In his thoughtful analysis, Smith suggested that teacher organizations "should make use of the principle of collective bargaining but for purposes of public and child welfare rather than for selfish partisan interests alone." His concluding comment was, "... teachers cannot be professional and use labor's weapon, the strike." (20)

The Zearing Strike

Salary was not the issue in another Iowa teacher strike that took place in Zearing in 1922. Remarks made by a male high school teacher prompted eight women to strike. They demanded that the school board dismiss the teacher making the offensive comments. A compromise was reached when the teachers apologized for their hasty action, and the school board announced it would demand a retraction of the controversial statement that caused the strike. The board also penalized the teachers who went on strike by reducing their pay by \$5 a month for April and May. (21) Unfortunately, the controversial statement that caused the strike was not reported.

The Pleasant Valley Township Strike

It would be twenty-four more years before the next known teacher strike took place in Iowa, and salary was once again the issue. Four rural schools enrolling ninety students were closed in Pleasant Valley Township for a week beginning on November 25, 1946. According to stories in the *Fort Dodge Messenger and Chronicle*, the teachers were unhappy with their salaries, so they asked the school board to boost their monthly wages from \$160 to \$190 a month. (22) The strike ended when the school board and teachers agreed to a \$20 monthly increase retroactive to September 1. (23) This may have been the first time an Iowa school board agreed to a retroactive teacher salary increase. The Fort Dodge settlement was disseminated by newspaper wire services, including United Press International. As a result, this story appeared in national newspapers, including the *New York Times*. (24)

But the Fort Dodge agreement was overshadowed by a teacher strike that was occurring in St. Paul, Minnesota. That action closed seventy-seven schools and impacted thirty thousand students. The teachers wanted their annual wage scale of \$1,200 to \$2,600 increased to a \$2,400 minimum and \$3,600 maximum. The strike was described as the biggest schoolteachers' strike in the nation's history. (25)

At the same time, a strike was averted in neighboring Minneapolis when an agreement was reached after fifteen hours of negotiations. Mayor Hubert Humphrey

helped broker the deal with the school superintendent and representatives of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers. The Minneapolis agreement provided an immediate \$150-cost -of -living bonus for each of the two thousand teachers and an initial \$40 monthly pay raise beginning January 1. (26)

What Empowered Iowa Teachers?

It is important to examine the factors that contributed to the Iowa teachers' decisions to take a stand. Three supported these actions: an economic downturn, growing political activism by women generally and teachers specifically, and a newspaper campaign focusing on the statewide teacher shortage.

An Economic Downturn

As mentioned earlier, an economic downturn which began in 1920 resulted in a drastic reduction in Iowa farm income. This decline also impacted teacher salaries and contributed to a teacher shortage. State education officials responded by lowering standards. The *American School Board Journal* reported: "...the serious shortage of teachers in Iowa had caused the state board of examiners to lower regulations for the certification of teachers." (27) These changes included permitting high school graduates who had reached their seventeenth birthdays and completed at least one semester of normal school to take the teacher certification exams. The board also agreed to offer provisional certificates to men and women who had earned first or second grade certificates as early as 1906 to encourage them to return to teaching. Normally teachers were required to attend annual workshops and take annual exams to maintain their teaching certificates. In addition, the General Assembly provided a salary floor for teachers by adopting a minimum salary scale that went into effect July 4, 1919. This schedule specified minimum salary amounts based on teachers' training, experience, and scores on certification exams.

Political Activism

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, women became more politically active, including teachers, many of whom participated in the Woman Suffrage Movement. A leader in the effort to empower rural teachers in Iowa was Sarah Gillespie Huftalen. She began teaching in a one room school in Delaware County and in 1908 started organizing country schoolteachers. Her efforts led to the formation of a section for country school teachers within the Iowa State Teachers Association. This organization enabled rural teachers to organize an annual conference, plan programs, and network with each other. Starting with sixty members in 1909, section membership topped six hundred by 1927 when Huftalen retired as president. (28)

Women's suffrage was approved in Iowa and nationally in 1919, and women were able to vote for the first time in 1920. May Francis, who became Iowa State Superintendent of Public Instruction that same year, was the first woman elected to a statewide office in Iowa. Francis began teaching in a one-room school in Bremer County in 1899 and remained supportive of country schools and rural teachers throughout her career. In 1919 she drafted the legislation and wrote the implementing rules and regulation for the Evans-Smith Act providing for the standardization of Iowa's eleven thousand one room rural schools. This bill, known as the Iowa Standard School Law, was a major effort to improve rural schools and build support for higher standards and salaries for country schoolteachers. (29) These political developments were likely to have contributed to rural teachers' decisions to go on strike.



The Grand Rush, The Des Moines Register, March 13, 1920

Courtesy of Special Collections at Cowles Library, Drake University

The Teacher Shortage

A third contributing factor was an endeavor to inform the public about the teacher shortage by the *Des Moines Register*, Iowa's major newspaper with a statewide circulation of 111,000 in 1920. (30) On February 17, 1920, the *Register* launched its effort to inform readers about the teacher shortage with this front-page headline: "Why Are Iowa Teachers Quitting? Write The Register Your Views of Situation, Remedy for Crisis." (31) During the next three months, more than forty articles were written about this issue. Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist Ding Darling produced a memorable front-page cartoon on March 5, 1920, under the heading, "The Vacant Chair." (32) The cartoon featured a classroom with many students but no teacher. The campaign was a

constant reminder that teachers were in such short supply that they could find employment elsewhere if their school boards did not respond favorably to their demands.



The Vacant Chair, The Des Moines Register, March 5, 1920

Courtesy of Special Collections at Cowles Library, Drake University

Conclusions

There are important lessons that can be learned as we look back at these early Iowa teacher strikes. These rural educators demonstrated that by working together, they could produce change even though their group actions were not always unanimous. Seven of the eleven Mound Prairie teachers, five of the nine Center Township teachers, and the entire Correctionville high school faculty (including the high principal and superintendent) went on strike. All eight of the Zearing women

faculty and all five Pleasant Valley Township teachers struck. Each of these actions was initiated locally without involvement by outsiders.

The impact of these strikes was not always immediate. The results of the first two strikes were delayed until the start of the following school year in Mound Prairie and Center Townships, but the striker's goals were achieved. The third strike, carried out by the Pleasant Valley teachers, had an immediate, positive impact: they earned a retroactive pay increase. The Zearing female teachers received an apology, but their salaries were reduced by \$10. Results of the Correctionville strike could not be determined.

Whatever their local impact, these strikes were not precedent setting. Individual school boards could pretty much write teacher contracts any way they wished. In fact, the issue of strikes by public employees and teachers was not addressed in local contracts until the passage of the Iowa Public Employee Relations Act in 1974. This law prohibited strikes by public employees, including teachers. Teachers and other public employees were allowed to begin collective bargaining on June 1, 1976. Since then, there have been no strikes by public school teachers in Iowa. (33)

The fact that rural teachers in Iowa were among the first in the nation to put their jobs on the line and fight for a cause is a significant but forgotten episode in American history. Although many of these teachers were probably young and inexperienced, and although most worked in separate buildings, they managed to join forces to achieve more equitable salaries and, in one case, improved working conditions. More startling perhaps is the fact that their collective actions produced positive results.

Notes

*James A. Johnson et al., eds., *Foundations of American Education*, 14th ed. (Boston: Pearson - Allyn & Bacon, 2007), 206-207; Marcus D. Pohlmann, *Opportunity Lost: Race and Poverty in the Memphis City Schools* (Nashville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 56.

1. "Chicago Teachers, Board Still Far Apart," and "Iowa Teachers and Strikes," *Des Moines Register*, September 11, 2012, 5A.
2. Visit "Our History," ISEA.org/.
3. Russell Oakes, "Public and Professional Reactions to Teacher Strikes, 1918-1954," Ed.D. thesis, New York University, 1958, 1.
4. Russell Oakes, "Should Teachers Strike? An Unanswered Question," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 33, no. 7 (March 1960): 342.
5. "Teachers Walk Out on Strike," *Newton Daily News*, February 4, 1920, 1.
6. Teacher's Minimum Salary Schedule, State of Iowa, 1919.
7. "Teachers Still Out," *Newton Daily News*, February 6, 1920, 1, 8. The February 4 and Feb. 6 articles appear to be the only ones that covered the strike.
8. Rural School Collection and Mound Prairie Township School Records, Jasper County, Center for the History of Rural Iowa Education and Culture, Rod Library, University of Northern Iowa.
9. Howard R. Bowen, *Iowa Income: 1909-1934*, a paper published in 1935, is cited in Lea Rosson DeLong and Gregg R. Narber, *A Catalog of New Deal Mural Projects in Iowa* (Des Moines, IA: L. R. DeLong, 1982), 5.
10. "Teachers Strike, But Fail to Get Increases," *Sioux County Index* (published in the small town of Hull), March 3, 1920, 1. Center Township is located about 240 miles northwest of Mound Prairie Township.
11. "Teachers Side of the School Strike," *Alton Democrat*, March 20, 1920, 1.
12. Teacher's Minimum Salary Schedule, 1919. The school records are part of The Center for the History of Rural Iowa Education and Culture at the University of Northern Iowa. See also Center Township School Records, Sioux County, Rod Library, University of Northern Iowa.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. "Teachers Go On a Strike," *Sioux City Journal*, May 2, 1920, 7. Correctionville is located in northwest Iowa in Woodbury County near Sioux City.
16. Ibid.
17. "Teachers on Strike," *Palto Alto Reporter*, published in Emmetsburg, May 6, 1920, 6.
18. The name of the ISTA was changed to Iowa State Education Association in 1954.
19. H. P. Smith, "How Far Can Teachers' Organizations Go and Be Professional," *Midland Schools*, 34 (April 1920): 279-281.
20. Ibid.
21. "Teachers End Strike; Zearing Schools Reopen," *Des Moines Capitol*, March 23, 1922, 1.
22. "Four Rural Schools Near Fort Dodge Closed by Strike," *Fort Dodge Messenger & Chronicle*, November 25, 1946, 1. Pleasant Valley Township is located south of Fort Dodge in Webster County.
23. "School Strike Ends; Teachers Get \$20 Raise," *Fort Dodge Messenger & Chronicle*, November 29, 1946, 1.
24. "St. Paul Teachers Shut All Schools," *New York Times*, November 26, 1946, 32.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. "Teachers and Administration," *American School Board Journal* 59, no. 6 (December 1919): 78.
28. Mary Hurlbut Cordier, *Schoolwomen of the Prairies and Plains: Personal Narratives from Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, 1860-1920* (Albuquerque, NM: University on New Mexico Press, 1992), 209-245.
29. "May Francis Championed the Smallest School Unit," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, Fall 2001, 134. Also see Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990).
30. *Des Moines Register.com/circulation* 1920.
31. *Des Moines Register*, February 17, 1920, 1.
32. "The Vacant Chair," *Des Moines Register*, March 5, 1920, 1.

33. The statutory prohibition against public employee strikes is in Iowa Code Section 20.12, titled: "Strikes Prohibited." See also *Celebrating Excellence: A History of the Iowa State Education Association: 1854-2004*, cited in Mandy Easter, Iowa Library Services/State Library – Law Library, to author, February 4, 2013. Faculty members at a private Iowa institution, University of Dubuque, organized a two-week strike in August 1981. See WWW.encyclopediadubuque.org/Scharnau,Ralph. A three-day strike was undertaken by the theology faculty in September 1980. In August of 1981, the liberal arts faculty conducted an eleven-day strike. See Alvin J. Straatmeyer and Joel L. Samuels, *Child of the Church: University of Dubuque, 1852-2008* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: WDG Communications, 2008), 188-190.

Cartoons:

Courtesy of Special Collections at Cowles Library, Drake University
The Vacant Chair, The Des Moines Register, March 5, 1920
The Grand Rush, The Des Moines Register, March 13, 1920

Appendix:

TEACHER'S MINIMUM SALARY SCALE	
STATE OF IOWA	
Teachers' Salaries based upon Certification, Training and Experience	
By action of the 38th General Assembly of Iowa, the old "Teachers Minimum Wage Scale" was repealed and a new Minimum Salary Scale is made effective. The minimum salary to be paid in Iowa under the new law is determined by Certification, Training and Experience. The law goes into effect July 4th, 1919.	
The school district can not legally pay less than the minimum given in the following scale. The teacher can not accept less. School boards where possible should pay their teachers more than the minimum required, according to circumstances and special qualifications. The Scale is as follows:	
Graduates of Four Year Course in an Approved College with Iowa State Certificate or Iowa State Diploma	
Minimum,	\$100.00 per Month
Minimum after First Two Years experience	\$120.00 per Month
Graduates of Two Year Normal Course with Diploma or Equivalent and Who Hold Iowa State Certificate	
Minimum—	\$80.00 per Month
Minimum—After First Two Years experience	\$100.00 per Month
Holders of Iowa State Certificates Secured by Examination	
Minimum—	\$80.00 per Month
Minimum—After First Two Years experience	\$100.00 per Month
High School Normal Training Certificates of Iowa	
Minimum—	\$65.00 per Month
Minimum—After First Year Experience	\$75.00 per Month
Minimum—After Two Years Experience	\$80.00 per Month
First Grade Uniform County Certificates of Iowa	
Minimum—	\$75.00 per Month
Minimum—After First 2 Years Experience	\$80.00 per Month
(One Year of experience is required before this grade of certificate is issued. After one year of teaching on this first grade certificate the teacher is entitled to the \$80.00 per month.)	
Second Grade Uniform County Certificates of Iowa	
Minimum—	\$60.00 per Month
Minimum—After First Year experience	\$65.00 per Month
Third Grade Uniform County Certificates of Iowa	
Minimum Salary	\$50.00 per Month
Provisional Certificates	
Holders of Provisional Certificates, when needed, will receive salaries based upon conditions and circumstances under which employed, to be mutually agreeable. The County Superintendent should be consulted as no Provisional Certificate can be issued without the consent of the County Superintendent. The statute does not mention provisional certificates.	
Teachers Must Furnish Proof of Teaching Experience	
The experience called for under this law must be certified to by the County Superintendent before the teacher qualifies for the minimum wage covering such experience.	