

The New York Teachers' Strike

By DEBORAH MEIER

AFRIEND WHOM I HADN'T SEEN in many months called me a few weeks ago. She's a New York liberal who knew me as a radical and pro-trade unionist for many years. Yet she felt it necessary to ask: "Well, Debby, what did you do during the teachers' strike? Did you go to work or stay out?"

The remark is symptomatic of the unusual nature of the recent teachers' strike in New York City. For what, viewed in the context of the history of teachers' unionism or any unionism for that matter, ought to have been the most clear-cut and popular strike in years, seemed to many New Yorkers to be the most complex and dubious one.

While unionism is no where near as popular as it once was, it would be a mistake to view this phenomenon merely as old-fashioned anti-unionism, or even as simply a manifestation of a kind of neo-conservatism. Yet does it merely reflect the unpopularity of teachers, or their "misunderstood" plight? Strangely enough, never before have books, movies and articles on the plight of the urban teacher been so popular—witness the success, as both a book and a film, of Bel Kaufman's "Up the Down Staircase."

It was this that bewildered militant United Federation of Teachers (UFT) members. They saw themselves sacrificing their paychecks for a few weeks without expectation, as most strikers do, of eventually making it up by wage increases won *during* the strike. Wages were not at stake in the work stoppage and thus the teachers felt their *motives*

surely should not have been suspect. Yet never before were their motives more under attack!

The irony is that it was the very absence of a monetary motive that made the teachers additionally suspect. *The New York Times*, for example, claimed to be mystified at the UFT's contention that teachers struck because they were "desperate." "The salary offer," said the *Times*, "will make the New York teachers the best paid in the country." Only extreme frustration would make a walkout defensible, said the *New York Post*: "It becomes wholly indefensible in the light of the general wage terms." Real professionalism is so rare that it arouses greater suspicion than a simpler greed.

The Union's demands, while "professional," were hardly radical. The original package included some unusual and intriguing proposals for apprentice teachers, teaching internships, on-the-job training as a replacement for current educational methodology courses, new forms of supervision for inexperienced teachers and experiments with new methods of selecting principals, including the election of principals by the staff in several schools. But it was felt that it would not be possible to get teachers out and to win from the city on these innovations. The first task was to convince the teachers, and a doubting Board and public, that teachers could have an impact on school reform and not merely on wages and fringe benefits. Good education must include teachers as full partners, this was the meaning

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behind the display of power. It was partially then a "demonstration"—immediately aimed at certain specific and limited reforms—of the direction in which the Union sought teacher involvement.

After lengthy, often desultory, negotiations lasting all summer and part of the preceding spring, the opening day of school approached without a contract in sight. A fact-finding committee appointed by the Mayor came up with a last-minute proposal which offered the teachers one thing: a fairly substantial salary increase! The Union's refusal, backed by a membership vote, to accept this offer then narrowed down the issues of the strike to a few minimal demands. The crucial ones, as defined by the Board, the Union and news media, were those that involved class size, class discipline and special education programs for ghetto schools.

It was the Union's insistence upon a say in these areas which the Board called unjustified interference in policy. Teachers as employees should not be deciding policy. The teachers in turn argued that the function of an educator precludes such a concept of employee-employer relations.

THE TEACHERS RESPONDED to the Board's refusal to share decision-making by staying away from work on the first day of school, September 11. Teachers from every area and borough, both white and black, elementary and high school, young and old, "resigned" en masse from their jobs. The only areas in which any substantial dissidence occurred was in traditionally conservative Richmond County (Staten Island) and in parts of Queens. No one had expected such unprecedented solidarity. And swiftly and without direction or assistance from the under-staffed Union, leaflets were mimeoed and teachers organized emergency

schools—sometimes called Freedom Schools—to provide educational service for the children. Thousands of "non-working" teachers picketed their schools and then spent the day in makeshift classrooms—in churches, community centers, union halls, bingo parlors, bowling alleys and anything else available. At night many teachers went to meetings and speak-outs organized variously by teachers or parents. They argued, talked, explained and answered questions. More teachers became involved in their communities than ever before; more dialogue—generally bitter—between parents and teachers occurred than in years of organized school meetings. A selective process occurred in which the angriest parents or community spokesmen confronted the most dedicated teachers.

Meanwhile the great hue and cry by the United Parents Association, the Board of Education, the school principals and the Negro and Puerto Rican associations for parent volunteers to man the schools produced a maximum of 6-7 thousand the first couple of days and one thousand by the end of the second week. Despite the Board's grand "strategy" of claiming that the school system was operating normally, parents and children discovered otherwise and by the end of the second week only those requiring baby-sitting were still going to school. Alfred Giardino, Board President, and Bernard Donovan, School Superintendent, kept issuing daily statements to the effect that school was open "as usual" and that teachers would, they were sure, cease neglecting their obligations and return to their posts. Perhaps the Board intended to produce a daily confrontation between parents and teachers and thus put greater pressure on the Union to settle. But if this was their hope, only at Harlem's Intermediate School 201 and perhaps one or two others, was the confrontation a problem. And

there it was not primarily parents but organized Afro-American Nationalist groups that made the teachers' picketing difficult.

The teachers just stayed out—90% remained with their union; and this, despite an array of opposition to the teachers unprecedented in the UFT's brief and stormy history.

RADICALS WERE DIVIDED: the most militant Negro leaders lined up almost solidly against the UFT, along with some "moderates," and many white liberals were active snipers too. CORE leaders in Brooklyn called upon the Board of Education to send striking teachers to Vietnam. Community action groups, organized by radical and black militants, spent the summer organizing and training parents to be strike-breakers in case of a walk-out, particularly in the upper west side of Manhattan, in Harlem around I.S. 201 and in the area of Brooklyn called Ocean Bay-Brownsville. At one meeting in Manhattan, for example, a leaflet was distributed in early September showing a Negro child with a knife labeled UFT stuck into his breast. The anti-union campaign was pitched on a highly emotional level and saw Floyd McKissick and Rap Brown in the role of strike-breakers. Of course many conservative white ladies, conscientious ministers and rabbis, retired teachers and middle-class businessmen also ventured briefly into the schools to do their little bit. And after the strike was over, William H. Booth, chairman of New York's Human Relations Commission, publicly condemned teacher unionism, and suggested that teachers instead should join professional educational associations. He also supported demands that striking teachers be "screened" by local parents before being permitted to return to their schools. When the union protested this kind of old-fashioned anti-unionism and

called upon the Mayor, as Booth's boss, to repudiate him, they were accused of racial bias—since Booth is a Negro!

A group of black teachers, members of the African-American Teachers' Association (formerly the Negro Teachers' Association), took violent issue with the union and announced that they would work during the strike. How strong this group was or is cannot easily be determined. Few black teachers actually did go to work, but a large number felt sympathetic to the ATA's position—some for reasons of personal status and others out of mistrust of a predominantly white union's motives.

The good white women of EQUAL, a militant organization of white radical mothers organized some years ago to work for school integration through bussing, pairing and educational parks, and which has engaged in many school boycotts and numerous protests, also denounced the teachers with venom, eagerly exposing every inconsistency. The class struggle appeared to have disappeared and been replaced by an equally deep division within society between Parents-as-a-Class and Teachers-as-a-Class, the former representing progress, the latter reaction.

Puerto Rican parents and community groups, both the militant and conservatives ones, also came out against the teachers. The traditional Establishment groups were also anti-union. The United Parents Association and its president, Florence Flast, used all its prestige and influence to urge parents to fulfill their parental duties by replacing delinquent teachers in the schools. The Citizens Committee for Schools and the Public Education Association took similar stands. And the Board of Education and local principals (most of them involuntarily), who had traditionally made it difficult for parents to enter schools under any pretext, urged anyone and everyone to come in and take a class.

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THE DAILY PRESS was hysterical. *The New York Times*, which rarely supports any strike, seems to have a particular aversion against public employee strikes as incipient forms of "anarchy."

The right wing *New York Daily News* acted as expected. The liberal *New York Post* was betwixt and between. The editors decried the strike as unnecessary although they went on record as upholders of the "principle and practice of teacher unionism." *The New York Post* columnist Max Lerner issued a "school credo" which came out against "using children as pawns" and differentiated learnedly between the automobile industry and the education industry. A striking teacher might be confused by students with a striking auto worker, he feared, and this image-confusion could be damaging to learning. *Post* editor James Wechsler in his column argued mostly for fairness and expressed doubts as to the responsibility of teachers and the representativeness of the Union, basing himself on the small attendance at the meeting at which a strike was voted (about one-third of the teachers voted). Later, however, he printed in full the arguments of Negro leader Bayard Rustin in support of the UFT. Finally, Murray Kempton bitterly attacked the UFT, until the strike was settled. He deplored it for being strong enough to protect its members and for being less "idealistic" than it had been when he had been its fan several years before, and when, he failed to mention, it had struck for wages and fringe benefits only. In an article entitled "The Guilt of the UFT" he described the poor education received by children in East Harlem's Benjamin Franklin High School. These children are victims of union teachers, said Kempton, and "such people . . . may have rights, but they cannot expect sympathy."

The *Amsterdam News*, Harlem's only newspaper, was against the UFT from start to finish and for every one of the possible reasons: it was a strike in defiance of law, it was an attack aimed at black children, it was using children in a power struggle, etc.

WHY SUCH GENERAL UNPOPULARITY? Many based their opposition on the strike's illegality. The Union called its action a mass resignation, the Board of Education called it a strike. As a strike it was in defiance of the newly operative Taylor Law outlawing public employee strikes. The United Parents Association might have meant it when they insisted that regular school attendance is too sacred for teachers to tamper with. But militant Negro opponents of the strike who argued along the same lines this time ("our children cannot afford to miss a single day of schooling," said CORE and black nationalist leaders) have a long history of "using children" as "pawns" for school reform. Only last year boycotts were called for at I.S. 201 and P.S. 125 over the demand for greater community participation in the choice of principals, and CORE and EQUAL were the leaders of two massive city-wide school boycotts several years ago.

The Union, it is true, did not do a decent job of presenting its *own* case. Given the active hostility of so many groups this was an important and surprising default. During the summer no staff members were assigned to work with community and parent groups and, in fact, most of the staff did not return from summer vacations until the eve of the strike. As a result, it took more than a week for official UFT leaflets to arrive. Major newspaper ads did not appear until several days after the strike began, and the transit ads that stared down from buses and subways (and which had been placed there many months before) had

all the punchiness of a good soap ad campaign: "Teachers want better education."

Still by the time the strike was over the press *had* conceded most of the facts—albeit half-heartedly and often in such a way as to bury the issues. These facts were: (1) The teachers had virtually nothing in terms of salary increases to gain by the strike. (2) No major fringe benefits for teachers were at stake in the strike. (3) The crucial issues outstanding involved matters of educational policy: class size, school reorganization, use of personnel, etc., matters that teachers believed were related to *effective* education.

The two most controversial issues were the handling of "disruptive" children and the expansion of the "More Effective Schools" (MES) program.

ANYONE WHO HAS READ about city schools know that a serious deterrent to attracting teachers is the city schools' reputation for unruly pupils and difficult classroom discipline. The teachers have long believed that the city schools do not have adequate facilities to relieve or assist teachers with "difficult" children. The large class sizes, the differences in background between teacher and pupils, the confusion resulting from the authoritarian climate of the school and its anti-authoritarian ideology, the lack of contact between school and family, the general contemporary rebelliousness, particularly of minority group children, the tougher educational demands of modern society—these factors all combine to produce vastly complex discipline problems.

To cope with these situations the average young teacher without experience is often at a loss. And these are the teachers that too often are expected to handle the most difficult classrooms. Either of two things now happens to the most difficult of such children: (1)

They remain within regular classrooms—disturbing their teachers and in turn becoming more disturbed themselves. Meanwhile other children, bewildered by the school's inability to keep "control," become angry and confused too. The well-behaved children find that precisely by being "no trouble" they are ignored and maximum and generally useless attention goes toward the "disruptive" children. (2) If, on the other hand, the school does "do something" to relieve the teacher, all that happens is that it suspends the child, at first for a day or two and finally, with the approval of the District Superintendent and after a meeting with the child's family, "indefinitely" (often meaning forever). The parents are left bewildered and without help, the child generally develops a strong sense of righteous grievance, and no one derives much benefit except those immediately relieved of the child's presence in school.

Since severe emotional problems are more prevalent among the very poor and deprived, most such children in large cities are Negro or Puerto Rican. Furthermore, middle-class white children who have severe emotional problems are more likely to be sent to private schools or to be receiving private help from other agencies. Finally, symptoms of emotional problems are more likely to be *exhibited* in areas in which children are already unable to achieve success. Thus, academically successful children with emotional problems are less likely to demonstrate their problems within the school or to display them in ways destructive to the learning situation.

THE ISSUE OF THE "disruptive" child became critical last spring when the teachers in a Bronx junior high school, where the administration's failure to solve severe discipline problems had long been a standing grievance, staged

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a wildcat strike for an immediate resolution of discipline problems. The demands of the teachers were extreme and tainted, some charged, with latent racial and class prejudices. As a result the few Negro teachers in this predominantly non-white school did not go out with their fellow teachers. However, the strike was temporarily a "success" and the Board guaranteed to the teachers swifter and more decisive action in cases of student misbehavior. The position as it was then formulated by the particular chapter and modified by the union's Executive Board, provided relief for the teacher and the rest of her class, but neither safeguards for the child nor his parents against teacher error, nor educational and emotional help for those removed from the regular classrooms. It simply guaranteed that after a specified number of incidents had occurred a teacher could unilaterally insist that disciplinary action—up to suspension—be taken.

Many community groups reacted sharply at the time. During the following months a study by the Citizens Schools Committee was published which factually demonstrated that Negro and Puerto Rican youngsters were the primary targets of suspensions, and that few suspended pupils ever received either academic or emotional help. Not too long after, a lower court ruled that in view of the severity of the penalty, a child could not be suspended unless he had access to "due process," including the right to a hearing at which he could be represented by a defender of his parent's choice with access to all pertinent information.

The union leadership, already worried about the wildcat strike and its impact, began to revise its own approach in light of these developments. But the revisions were never announced and thus when negotiations began it was not surprising that the

story circulated that the union was pressing for teachers' unilateral right to permanently suspend pupils at will. This was what the newspapers claimed, what community groups were told, and what many teachers believed too. In fact, back around the negotiating table, the union was presenting a new position far in advance of any of its critics. The union proposed the establishment within each school district of an independent Review Board, composed of a teacher, a parent and a third party—psychologist, social worker, etc.—acceptable to both. If, after attempts had been made within a school to find the best solution to a child's problems in regular classrooms, the teacher, the principal or the parent felt further action was necessary, they could insist on an investigation by this Review Board. This Board would have access to all information and would conduct meetings with all those involved. It would have responsibility for making recommendations and for following up on cases under its jurisdiction. Since, the union argued, it was important to keep children with their fellow classmates in regular classes, there should be greater attention to new ways of aiding teachers and students within the class or of removing the child from his regular class for only a part of the school day.

Albert Shanker publicly announced this policy at numerous press conferences, but it finally reached the general newspapers only when Bayard Rustin made public a letter he had received from the union on this question. Even after this many of the papers and opposition groups ignored the union and continued to claim that teachers were out for the power to kick kids out whenever they wanted to. By the end of the strike most of the major papers admitted to one degree or another that this was not the union's position. The new position was reported

however as: "establishment of an outside committee to consider a teacher's request for 'permanent removal' of disruptive pupils." Even after the *New York Post* and *Times* were stating it this way, the *Amsterdam News* was still insisting that the union was seeking naked power for biased teachers to kick out black children. (The African-American Teachers Association still charges that the U.F.T.-sponsored program for the "so-called 'Disruptive Child' . . . was racist and did not meet the needs of the community." Generally, the more militant black groups argued that there was no such phenomenon as "disruptive" children but only "disruptive teachers."

THE OTHER ISSUE was the union demand for an expansion of the More Effective Schools program—a union-initiated effort of intensive, compensatory education in 21 "disadvantaged" school neighborhoods. These schools combine all the standard but expensive items associated with better education—smaller class size, more remedial teachers, more social workers, psychologists and audio visual materials, better parent-teacher cooperation, etc. The UFT feared that MES would follow in the tradition of Higher Horizons, another much publicized, highly financed effort at providing compensatory enrichment to disadvantaged neighborhood schools. The Board began that "experimental" program on a concentrated and highly publicized basis amid much proof of success, and then watered it down until it could legitimately claim some years later that it was no longer effective. Then it was dropped. To avoid this the UFT announced last year that maintenance and expansion of MES standards and MES schools would be the major bargaining issue in 1967. The controversy over the MES schools consists not in whether they do good, but whether

they do enough good to justify the expense. Dispute centers on interpretation of their success as measured by scores on standard achievement tests. The most recent evidence suggests that while some MES schools out-scored any comparable non-MES ghetto schools, there were others that did not produce higher test scores. Dramatic academic improvement, at least as measured by these tests, did not occur. The only other clear facts were that MES teachers were happier, staff turnover was greatly reduced and parents unusually enthusiastic. Strangely enough, considering the latter fact, the leaders of Harlem's Poverty Corporation—HARYOU-ACT—joined conservative opponents in demanding an end to the MES program. HARYOU-ACT's opposition reflected the current ideological position within certain Black Power circles that black children do not need anything special (not even what suburban parents take for granted). They just need unbiased teachers with the right pro-black ideology. Class size, number of books, specialists, etc. are unnecessary educational luxuries, they claim, in a language reminiscent at times of reactionary white parental opposition to "progressive" education and academic "frills."

ACTUALLY BOTH Board of Education members and Negro militants were probably not reacting primarily to the real merits or demerits of the MES, but to the issue of teacher "dictation" of policy. The Board reiterated time and again that it considered the question outside the province of collective bargaining. Black militants echoed this: stick to your classrooms, don't meddle in policy—we're always glad to hear your ideas, but the decisions are ours. The Board might feel obliged at last to give up some of its prerogatives to angry, desperate parent and community groups—at I.S. 201 in

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Harlem, at Ocean Bay-Brownsville in Brooklyn and Two Bridges on the lower East Side—but it had no intention of capitulating to teacher demands for participation in policy-making. The Negro groups, in their drive for greater power, also viewed the militancy of the teachers as a threat and preferred to look upon the teacher as a technician who should be prepared to do as ordered.

The final settlement was a moderate victory for the union. Something was gained in every category. The victories were not dramatic, many teachers were disgruntled and others were unsure. The teachers, however, won a procedure for "disruptive" children very similar to the one they suggested with slightly modified powers for the Review Board. The contract reduced class sizes slightly, eliminated certain non-teaching chores from the teacher's duties, outlined a new transfer procedure designed to insure more experienced teachers in Harlem schools, maintained and slightly expanded the provisions for preparation periods in special service schools, eliminated the substitute teacher category, and created a liaison between Board and teachers on policy matters. Finally, it provided for a fund of at least \$5 million to be spent on intensive programs, not necessarily MES, in low-income areas. This fund would be spent under the direction of a committee composed equally of representatives of teachers, parents and the Board.

The work stoppage or "strike" was over and everyone tried to assess the impact. The papers played up the deleterious effect on parent-teacher relations. The "strike" certainly shone light on the antagonisms, but I doubt that it really added much fuel. During the early stages and in its immediate wake, tensions were probably intensified. But by now the situation is back to "normal"—that is increasingly ex-

plosive in certain specific areas, moderately good and perhaps even improving in rare individual schools, and drifting in most. Insofar as it produced a change, I would suspect it was a healthy one. Teachers are aware of and discussing community and parent relationships to the school as they never did before. They understand better the importance of parental support. They are better able and willing to listen even to the bitter and repetitive attacks made on teachers at meeting after meeting. Many are, of course, uncomfortable in this new "awareness" and unsure where it will lead. There are others who are reacting with a kind of "backlash," especially teachers in all-white areas who read and hear about these attacks but do not work in such communities, or others who had particularly difficult experiences with African-Nationalist groups. Thus many delegates to the union's recent Delegate Assembly refused to accept any proposal to make up for lost time, no matter how well they were paid for it, in a spirit dominated by a desire *not* to accommodate to the community!

THE REAL REASON for the unprecedented anger this strike aroused is that the teacher has become the focus of a new kind of public attention. Never before has the school been consciously viewed as such a critical force in society. It is expected to play a social role it never in the past assumed. It is no longer viewed merely as the training ground for specific skills or as the "finishing school" for an acknowledged elite (which might co-opt a few select underprivileged). Instead entire social groups are looking to the educational institutions to create or alter their future economic and social status. Middle class, working class, lower class—each has distinct self-contradictory demands and

expectations. Racial divisions complicate this even more.

For the middle and upper-middle classes the school has become the focus of intense emotional and intellectual concern. From a status or career viewpoint, academic success has never before been so important as it is today in industry, government and other areas. Many parents therefore are openly out to find teachers, schools or methods (beginning in pre-nursery school) that will make their child Harvard-potential. Other well-to-do parents look to the school to give their children a new passion for life, a belief and faith in the vitality of living and in themselves, a task once assumed by the family. They look for teachers like A. S. Neill of Summerhill School in England or Sylvia Ashton-Warner of the New Zealand infant schools (although often secretly still hoping that Summerhill will lead to Harvard).

Those middle-class parents whose children cannot make it into the private Summerhills or the French lycées, and who do not wish to flee to the suburbs, turn to the public schools with an eye to influencing them. They feel more righteously impatient because they often view their child's mere attendance in the public school as a voluntary contribution to integration, a service to the less fortunate. One good turn, they reason, deserves another. In addition it is difficult for such parents with considerable expert knowledge about teaching technique, learning theory, mental health, not to mention phonics and new math, not to second-guess the teachers, whose background and biases are more likely to be lower-middle class and middle-brow.

The more modest middle- and working-class families are more easily satisfied, except that they are impatient with any new-fangled educational gimmicks," and demand merely lots of

homework, discipline, three "R's," and "no fooling around." They also want less "social engineering," i.e. integration, and continually threaten the school system with "trouble" if further integration is attempted. While this group is less likely to move to the suburbs or send their children to fancy private schools, they are, at least in New York, largely the parents whom parochial schools appeal to.

OF THE LOWER-CLASS, economically marginal parents, the whites are rarely heard from and are, perhaps, the most forgotten of all groups. But the Negro, and lately the Puerto Rican poor, are, at last, becoming a *major* force for school change. They constitute, for one thing, probably a majority of the school population. Past passivity, which was a mixture of fear and rage, ignorance and awe, is giving way. As the schools are more openly attacked by powerful middle-class groups, past taboos against criticizing the teacher are dropped by less militant individuals too. The general mood of black militancy also gives courage to angry parents—some wild and paranoid, others just miserable with concern. And a certain irrefutable logic (and one wonders that it took so long in coming) makes many black parents ask:

"If this country is smart enough to get to the moon, rich enough to fight a war thousands of miles from our shores for God knows what reasons, *then how can anyone explain why they cannot teach our children just to read properly?* It cannot be lack of know-how or power or resources, and we no longer believe it's because *we* are no good. It must be that society does not *want* to do the job. And how do they avoid doing it? By sending us teachers who do not teach our kids the same way and the same stuff they teach oth-

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er children. They make *sure* our kids fail."

Since poor people, like most Americans, view teaching as a matter of "telling," and learning as a matter of "listening," then their conclusion is that ghetto teachers are not telling it right to black kids or else they won't make black kids listen.

Put that way it makes a lot of sense, and it surely explains the anger in the various Harlems.

And, after all, there is a lot of truth to it. To begin with we do not apply toward learning the kind of energy, tenacity and brain power that we do toward space theory. And while this injures all children, it is less disastrous for those whose families provide the kind of background which makes learning *within* the school of less consequence. Secondly we do not expend the resources on education that we do on space, war, highways, etc., and what we do spend on education is disproportionately spent on those least in need of it. Finally, many teachers and school administrators are biased: some are merely sadistic toward all children, others toward those without middle-class manners. The overwhelming majority are prejudiced both toward non-whites and toward the "shiftless" poor, some without intention, some through thoughtlessness, some out of their own frustration in the teaching situation, and some consciously because of racist convictions. And even those who are fond of the children often harbor strong dislikes and lack of respect for their parents.

YET WHEN ALL THIS is said, the fact remains that the "plot" which angry lower-class non-whites believe in does not exist and biased teachers do not explain the depth of our crisis. The African-American Teachers Association is doubly naive when it demands that the UFT and the Board

of Education "admit it never intended to educate black children." For even where no racial bias exists (where it is whites teaching the white poor, or black educators teaching the black poor) and even where the educators are clearly the most dedicated, we have yet to make a major breakthrough in creating an educational system that truly educates, and not merely trains, the lower classes.

For learning is nowhere near so simple a matter as merely "telling" and no teacher can succeed in producing learning in an atmosphere of mutual mistrust, rage, fear, anxiety and vindictiveness. It is this atmosphere, which has long characterized public education in general and which is rampant in ghetto schools in an exaggerated form, that is the main enemy of learning.

Where children's energies are primarily focused on protecting their basic sense of well-being, holding back damaging rages, resisting authorities whose aims they fear, then learning has a poor chance. Many new teachers annually enter the system intending to do away with all of this and "reach out" to their children. Many try, and perhaps the very best are among those who quit in those first few years or who flee from the "difficult" neighborhoods into the suburbs or private schools. Almost all those who remain long in the system begin to succumb to the teacher's easiest rationale for failure—it's the parents' fault anyhow.

This is the counterpart to the parent rationale that it's "all the teachers' fault." Like its counterpart it also has a certain "irrefutable" simplicity and logic. Teachers too have their stories about parent *brutality* toward children, parent neglect and indifference, authoritarianism and capriciousness, etc.

Yet it is precisely because teaching is "only" a job that teachers are in a better position to understand, and to

bend a little further. But few teachers seem able or willing to comprehend the extent of the bitterness and despair which a lower-class Negro mother feels when she says "it's the teacher's fault." For the failure of education dooms this woman's child, and her entire social class and ethnic group, to a hopeless status within a society of incomparable opportunity.

Unlike past lower-class immigrant groups, the black poor today have only the option of education as a way into this constantly tempting, seemingly overabundant mainstream. Time was when the American poor, who then constituted a majority, saw an escape, a way "up," based on the vast demand for unskilled labor. This escape no longer exists. Only after they had achieved moderate financial stability and a sense of "belonging" to a well-organized working class, did the former immigrants turn to education as a means of upgrading their child's future. But the non-white was specifically and purposely excluded from pursuing that path at that period; that option was denied him.

Having excluded Negroes from that road into the mainstream, we offer them now only one quick way to make up for our past discrimination—through academic success. And then we say: but, alas, you're not really fit for that either.

THE TEACHERS' UNION, to its credit, recognized this stalemate. And in the attempt to sidestep the "it's your fault" contest, it switched its old role this fall and decided to go all out for educational reform rather than teacher benefits. But the leadership, probably ahead of its membership in this recognition, was fearful of going too far out ahead. And because they dared not go all out for *really significant* educational reforms, many of their demands had the ring of being "old clichés." The

union, as a result, could not really pretend to parents that if the Board conceded to every UFT demand, education in New York would really be substantially better. And, as the history of the disruptive child issue demonstrates, the union was often insensitive to the feelings of parents, or felt obliged to soft-pedal excellent demands or emphasize irrelevant ones in order to maintain the solidarity of its own ranks.

It is of course questionable whether, given the eagerness with which many ghetto parents, aided and abetted by even more angry Nationalist groups, sought revenge against teachers, any programmatic demands that the union made could have had support in Harlem. "It's too late for anything you have to say. You've had your day. You're guilty, guilty, guilty. Let us take over," they shouted. Vengeance was at least as sweet as anything many had tasted for years.

But the vast majority of Harlem parents, while sympathetic to Black Power slogans and logic, are also sympathetic to the opposite kind of defensive and apologetic positions. Few have a consistent ideology, and thus they are ready to applaud many different things. "Nationalism" and hostility to teachers speak to something in all, but what is incredible is that many are still open to hope, to an awakening on terms more compatible with good education. For this to become possible it will require changes not merely in the internal line-up within the UFT, not merely in the attitude of teachers in Harlem or throughout the city; it will require educational resources from the State and Federal government, new employment possibilities for Negro youth, improved training programs for high school graduates aimed at real careers, new housing and recreational facilities—in other words, a new commitment from society as a whole, not merely from teachers.

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In the meantime the struggle will go on within the educational system with, as Albert Shanker said on the day of victory, "the common victims of the inadequacy of the school system ... turning on each other." The direction the union took was right. But, Shanker went on, "the problems of the schools are so overwhelming that this kind of piecemeal approach may not avert disaster." Yet is the union prepared to offer something more comprehensive and less piecemeal?

Failure to do so will surely lead to parental hysteria, for no parent can calmly and objectively discuss the coming "disaster" that faces his own child. In coming up with their own program, teachers may have some effect in convincing parents that if we are to have good education it takes more than better bosses—it takes better teaching methods, better ways of organizing our classrooms. Good teaching requires the creation of good learning environments. And in the creation of this the teacher plays a critical role. Learning of some sort occurs no matter how

classes are organized or what teachers do, but unfortunately what is learned is usually not what teachers, the Board or the public intends. In order for learning to be related to what the public and the teachers intend, the teacher must be in a position to control the learning environment. High pay, technical skill and dedication are not enough. The teacher who accepts the order to get back to his "duty" and stop interfering in policy is already derelict. There is no such thing as "dedication to duty" separate from the duty to insist upon standards under which learning can occur.

In offering such a program, in demanding such standards, and in risking their security in a daily struggle for them, teachers might yet play a role in igniting the sparks that could light a new movement for change in which parents and teachers might join together.

DEBORAH MEIER was housing chairman of Chicago NAACP and active in community organization with Chicago CORE. She is presently teaching in a Harlem public school.