

Protect an Endangered Species—Teachers!

by Sonja Ungemach

On Sunday, the 4-J teachers ran a full page ad in the *Register-Guard* to state their position in the ongoing strike, now in its fifth week. They make a strong case; that elementary teachers should have 30 minutes per day of preparation time; that "career-track" teachers should receive wages in line with teachers in other school districts in the state; and that, contrary to District assertions, the current union proposal would not require an increase in property taxes.

It is this final contention, that their proposal would not entail a tax increase, that most intrigues me. The teachers are asking for a change

in priorities—to move the money back into the classrooms where it belongs. The ad states: "Last year the District budgeted only 67% for instruction. Ten years ago instruction represented 71% of the budget. This year's total budget increased by 6.48%, but the instructional portion increased by only 1.7%."

Knowing what I do of public budgets, whether federal, state, city or school district, it is *always* a question of priorities, not a question of whether the money exists. Do we build more nukes or spend money on conservation and renewable resources? Do we develop more wea-

pons or fund human needs? Do we build a brand new big city airport or make moderate improvements to handle growth?

Our career-track teachers (those who have dedicated their lives to their profession, earning advanced degrees and hours of post-graduate college credits) are like our old growth forests. It takes a long time to become one. Old growth forests are more than mature tree farms for the timber industry. They support an irreplaceable ecosystem of wildlife, watershed, clean air, and plant life. If we cut them down, we lose more than the trees. Similarly, our teachers do more

than instruct our kids. They provide a secure environment that nurtures and supports our most precious resource, the formative minds and bodies of our children. To underfund the teachers is to undermine the faith and hope we have in our future.

We could choose to relate to our school rooms as factories where workers are simply interchangeable parts producing units of education. Or we could nurture and steward one of our society's most endangered species—the devoted, professional teacher in our public schools.

Does Eugene Value Quality Education?

by a Committee of Teachers

Many Eugene teachers feel angry and frustrated. They feel betrayed by a superintendent and school board who said they were dedicated to "excellence in education." Instead, they have shown the opposite.

As Mayor Obie admitted to Sheldon teachers last Wednesday, the community is saddled with a superintendent, a school board, and a selected negotiator, all of whom have very little experience in actually bargaining a contract.

The state bargaining law has worked in all but twelve of 5,000 instances.

Margaret Nichols and Steve Goldschmidt have managed to subvert this process. They have thrown out the teachers' past contract, developed with other boards over a 14-year period, and refused to discuss some 35 issues. In addition, they have refused to bargain over a 14-month period, maintaining their initial salary and insurance offers.

Negotiating Process

Margaret Nichols selected this negotiator, Steve Goldschmidt. She has known him for some time and knows of his approach to bargaining as taught in his class at the University of Oregon: force the other side to capitulate rather than to compromise. She hired Goldschmidt at \$75 per hour without a cap—a very questionable business practice. What is his incentive for resolving these contract talks? In addition, she hired Max Riley, Goldschmidt's assistant at the University, and is paying him on a similar basis. Superintendent Nichols also insisted on a clause in her contract that barred the Eugene School Board members, the people's elected representatives, from speaking directly to teachers or to teacher negotiators about contract bargaining.

What conclusions would you expect teachers to draw from such a set up?

Every other district in our state has settled their teacher contracts. In every instance, except in Eugene, the superintendent and the school board have sat down with the teachers to work out their mutual concerns and problems. They have sat down with the past contracts, and using good will and a give-and-take approach, have worked out their agreements.

Instead, in Eugene, where quality education is supposedly valued by the district and the public, teachers are in the fifth week of a strike, their second in eight years. The emotional and financial stress on teachers and their families has been enormous. The average Eugene teacher has lost over \$3,100 so far, money needed to pay bills and to feed families. Teachers are looking for better places to teach: Washington for one, where 91% of the education funding is supported by the state. Others feel they should just leave teaching and work in the private sector, where they can make more money, work set hours, and suffer far less abuse.

After all, what are we asking that is so terrible, that the district and public should find so disagreeable?

More Than A Salary Question

We want to improve our ability to teach children. Elementary school

teachers are asking for just 10 more minutes per day of preparation time, just 30 minutes total. (Ashland received 50 minutes per day in their contract settlement.)

We want the right to representation in any disciplinary action as well as our evaluation procedure spelled out in the contract. This, of course, would help prevent evaluations based on politics and personalities.

We want the two-track seniority bargained for part-time teachers, as the Employment Labor Relations Board has ordered the district to do. The District has refused to bargain this, however. These seniority rights are important because they insure that part-time teachers can apply for full-time jobs without losing their past credit for experience in the district.

We want to be able to attract the best new teachers to the Eugene schools to preserve and enhance the future of our children's education. How can we do this when Eugene schools currently pay \$1300 less than Springfield offers to its beginning teachers? How can we attract good career teachers when Eugene schools pay their career teachers \$4,000 less than Springfield does and \$3,000 less than Bethel does? Do Springfield and Bethel have better economies than Eugene?

District Has Surplus Money

The newspaper and the district have done a good propaganda job on the teachers' requests for salaries and insurance. The district does have the money, an audited surplus of 6.1 million dollars for last year alone, more than enough to meet current teacher bargaining proposals. The auditors noted that the Eugene school district is in "excellent" financial shape. The district, however, has chosen to hide these funds in "rainy day" accounts and in materials, rather than to invest them in the instructional funds.

All the board and superintendent have to do is shift this surplus to the instructional fund to settle. No new property taxes would result from agreeing to the teachers' salary and insurance proposals.

We teachers trusted this superintendent and school board. We trusted them when they kept assuring us everything was "going as planned." What other employee group working on a contract basis would continue working for eight months without a new contract? What other group would work these eight months just to keep the schools open for children?

Did the public care whether we settled or not? Did the business com-

A Eugene School Board Member's Perspective

by Steve Robinson

This is one article the author fervently hopes will never get published. As I write on May 1, 1987, Eugene teachers have responded positively to the School Board's decision to add Chairman Jack Billings and Superintendent Margaret Nichols to our bargaining team. I hope the EEA will respond with a new willingness to compromise, which is what we need to end the longest teacher strike in Oregon history. But if the strike is still on, I'd like you to understand the Board's position.

Perhaps the Socratic method would be best. I'll choose the questions and answer them as well.

Haven't the teachers made big compromises? Why won't the Board respond?

Yes, collective bargaining is a two-way street. But on this road to Skinner's Butte, the teachers sallied forth from Seattle, while the Board commenced in Creswell. The EEA put over 100 separate issues on the bargaining table, including a 30% cost increase, while the Board started with a small set of important issues and a 3.9% boost (equivalent to inflation). The teachers *have come a long way*, it's true, but they're still in Salem (well, maybe Albany), while the District is already downtown.

Why can't the teachers have what they're asking for? Don't you respect them?

Of course we respect them! We are the most pro-teacher Board on the face of the earth. But we have to balance the expectations of *all* employee groups with each other, and with the ability and willingness of the voters and taxpayers to fund the District. We can't give teachers a big raise and tell classified employees and adminis-

trators "maybe next time." And no way are we going to fund increases with massive layoffs. That would damage the quality of education, not to mention the younger teachers who would lose their jobs.

Come on, you're avoiding the issue. Don't teachers deserve whatever they can get?

Sure they do. So do the rest of us. I've lost count of the number of people who tell me personally, "I have a master's degree and years of experience, and I make much less than teachers do." *Nationally*, teacher salaries are a big problem and need to be raised, or we'll continue losing the "best and brightest" to more lucrative work. *Locally*, teachers are doing pretty well, especially compared to the economy, the property owners and other union-represented folks. Even in 1983, when they voluntarily took a 4% rollback, teachers still got a 4% raise, compared to zero inflation!

Aha, the rollback! Didn't you promise to make it up?

Nobody I know made such a promise. In fact, the teachers got a pretty good deal that year, all things considered: cost-of-living raises for two years, a trial-basis early retirement plan, *no layoffs*, and community support leading to an adequate new tax base in 1984.

Some teachers say money isn't the real issue. What about other issues, like working conditions?

Let's be frank. The EEA has had a great contract with 4J—the best in the state. You can bet they wouldn't trade it for Bethel's or Springfield's or anybody else's. The strong contract is a function of the District's ability to attract excellent people, give them good working conditions and good pay, and turn them loose to teach kids. From that standpoint, the contract has worked: Eugene continues to attract and keep good teachers.

But there are some real problems for both sides. We started with an unmanageable issue agenda because it's been a long time since we bargained a full contract. Now we've got trouble. My conclusion is that we desperately need to talk with each other *all the time*, not save up lots of ammo for collective bargaining.

How about binding arbitration, Steve Goldschmidt, the "six million dollars," and all that stuff?

These non-issues simply distract us from the *only* issue: a fair settlement. The Board is committed to a settlement, not confrontation. We need the EEA to move into a reasonable cost range, to set the stage for final resolution. We'll keep talking, as long as it takes.

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