Strikes by Municipal Employees Major Problem for Local Governments

Editor's Note – Strikes of public employees have become a growing problem for the nation's local governments. Major cities have been crippled by such walkouts this year. Serious threats to the public welfare have been narrowly averted in many areas. Here is a report on the labor troubles of local governments.

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Six Chicagoans faced suspension from their jobs. Eight Bostonians were jailed for contempt of court. In both cases their troubles had a common cause – a strike of public employees against a governmental agency.

At least four of the nation's largest cities have been hit this year by strikes of public employees. Other walkouts have been narrowly averted. In at least one case, even a legal ban on such walkouts failed to prevent the strike.

Most strikes of public employees involve the same issues as the labor strife in private industry – wages, hours, fringe benefits. But, in some instances, the walkouts stem from more bizarre causes.

In St. Louis, Mo., last winter sanitation workers struck, leaving the city's garbage and trash uncollected, to back up a demand that they be excused from work in sub-zero weather.

St. Louis city officials refused to submit to the demand, insisting that garbage must be collected as long as other public services were maintained. The city fathers pointed out that mail carriers had to work outside in the cold too. But that didn't get the garbage cans emptied for a week.

All Demands Met

In Chicago the threat to public health was even more acute than that raised by the St. Louis walkout.

On March 30 members of Local 9, International Brotherhood of Electric Workers, walked off their jobs at the Chicago sanitary district's sewage disposal plant. Nineteen hours later they returned to work, but only after the district trustees had met all their demands, including a signed agreement that no disciplinary action would be taken against them.

William A. Dundas, general manager of the Chicago sanitary district, announced after the strike ended that a major catastrophe had narrowly been averted.

He said that supervisory employees were unable to locate keys to vital switchboxes to start the pumps shut down by the departing workers and the sewage disposal plant serving nearly 5 million persons very nearly blew up under the pressure of accumulating sewage.

Officials of the sanitary district managed to prevent an explosion but they couldn't halt the thousands of gallons of raw sewage which flowed into the Illinois waterways system, polluting streams and jeopardizing water supplies if continued.

Sabotage Charged

Despite the pledge against disciplinary action, Dundas has asked that at least six of the strikers be suspended. He accused the plant's chief electrical operator of "sabotage" in shutting down the pumps. Other strikers, he said, hid equipment, jammed doors and removed fuses to prevent supervisory employees from operating the sanitary district's disposal plants.

Residents of greater Boston were left healthy, if footsore, by their walkout of public employees.

On March 31 some 4,400 employees of the Metropolitan Transit Authority, a public agency which provides the mass transportation facilities for Boston and 13 nearby communities, staged a wildcat strike.

The walkout halted subway trains, street cars and buses.

Because the two-day strike was staged in defiance of an injunction, eight of the strikers were jailed for contempt of court. Nine more face similar charges this week.

Teachers Call Strike

On April 11, the 15,000-member United Federation of Teachers called a strike against the New York City schools.

Slightly more than half of New York's 40,000 school teachers remained out of their classrooms. In at least one school, a near riot resulted among the school children left to their own devices.

The teachers struck in violation of New York state's Condon-Wadlin act, which prohibits walkouts by public employees, but local authorities planned no action against the strikers.

Will the strike ever spread to employees of the federal government? A spokesman for the House post office and civil service committee in Washington thought it unlikely.

He pointed out that the Lloyd LaFollette act of 1912 gave federal employees the right to appeal their grievances to Congress. This act, he said, has been construed as prohibiting strikes by federal employees.

Another curb against strikes by federal employees, the spokesman pointed out, was a clause in the constitution of many federal employees' unions banning walkouts.

Unions representing federal employees, the spokesman said, have repeatedly told congressional committees they do not want the right to strike.

Drivers Cautioned To Be on Lookout For Playing Child

"A primary rule for drivers is to 'expect the unexpected' from children at play," said Chief Charles P. Champlin of the Medford city police today.

He cautioned all Medford motorists to be on the alert for young bicycle riders, ball-players and dog-chasers now that milder weather and longed hours of sunlight are here.

"Youngsters just have to release all the energy they've stored up over the winter months," continued the Chief, "and they do it by hopping out from between parked cars, thoughtlessly following a bouncing ball into the street without watching for traffic and often indulging in other actions that are hazardous. This is the nature of children, particularly the very young."

Chief Champlin said schools can teach youngsters certain elements of traffic safety but the burden of responsibility lies mainly with (1) Parents–who must train their children to obey the traffic laws and use common sense in traffic and (2) Drivers–who must always be ready for the unpredictable behavior of children in and around streets and while riding bicycles.

"The motorist is the child's last link with safety," said Chief Champlin. "When parents instructions and school training are forgotten in the excitement of the bicycle race or the ball game, the only thing that can save the eager but un-thinking youngster as he dashes across the intersection is the quick-thinking and careful action of the responsible driver."

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