



Opinion

Looking back: The '73 teachers' strike

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by JAKE FRIEDMAN, Daily News
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This year marks the 40th anniversary of the hugely impactful Philadelphia teachers strike, and the academic year is ending without so much as a nod from the press. My parents not only participated in the strike, but, as young singles, shared what Mom calls a "picket romance."

My mother has saved an old *Evening Bulletin* newspaper as a token of their courtship. On the yellowed front page, my father is 23 years old, and is ushered by cops from a paddywagon to the city's Police Administration Building. He looks angry. Defiant. Beside him a colleague thrusts his fist in the air like a Black Panther.

The teachers strike lasted 11 weeks. What the union was demanding doesn't seem unreasonable, but both my parents were jailed nonetheless. They will discuss the ordeal only when asked, and, with a little research, the pieces begin to come together.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, included not just educators of early childhood, elementary school (my mom), junior high (my dad) and high school, but also counselors, secretaries and nurses. They wanted salary increases, smaller class sizes, better health benefits, a brief prep time during a marathon teaching day and more assistance for English-as-a-second-language and special-needs students.

As the '72-'73 school year approached, contract negotiations had stalled. There was a lockout of all city schools for the first three weeks of September until Superintendent Matthew Costanzo asked for an impermanent continuation of the old contract. With a promissory settlement, the teachers temporarily went back to work.

"A contract lays out what you can expect from them and what they can expect from you," explains my dad. "But we were working without an umbrella, with no control of our future. The school district could have done anything they wanted - and did, like not pay us in salary but in 'scrip' - which is like an IOU. You can't invest in a house or build a family on that."

Negotiations eventually broke down. The teachers ruled that the school district was not negotiating in good faith, and the union agreed to strike on Jan. 8. Three days later, Common Pleas President Judge Donald Jamieson ordered an injunction banning the strike. It was a bitterly cold winter, but coteries of educators arrived at dawn to picket outside their schools. Strangers showed their support with gifts of snacks and coffee. In February the arrests peaked, and holding cells became overcrowded. The running joke: Jail contained more educators than perpetrators.

At the time of her arrest, Mom was a building representative for the union. She helped organize meetings and conduct elections within her school. After picketing at his junior high, near Temple University, Dad would drive over to Mom's elementary school. Together they attended meetings and rallies, processed the day's events and anticipated the end of their rebellion. A regular "Les Miserables" love story.

The sheer scale of the strike attracted the attention of activist Albert Shanker. Since 1964, Shanker had headed teachers' unions in New York City and state, and nationally. He also contributed to the *New York Times* with his column, "Where We Stand." To this day my parents are impressed by Shanker's participation in their imbroglio. "He was the epitome of a negotiations champion," says Mom. "He was charismatic, and brought the negotiations to a different level than was ever seen before. We owe a lot to him."

The strike was finally settled by March 11, much to Mayor Frank Rizzo's elation. The teachers received their contracts with new (albeit slight) adjustments to salary, benefits and class size. My parents married three years later. Such is compromise.

Now it's happening again. These two ex-strikers are retired and watching funds being stripped from Philadelphia's public schools. For the schools that remain open, budgets have nixed counselors and secretaries, not to mention pension plans and seniority for educators.

Once more there are hundreds of protesters, and once more arrests have been made. But if we don't look back to the past and the strength that citizens had to fight for their community, we'll continue overlooking our classrooms' basic needs. And if that happens, the educators, students, families and city will all suffer together.

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