ILLUSTRATION BY PAT MORRISON

It's mid-morning on a weekday at an American public school. Time for math class, or English. Maybe even time for a little learning. Odds are, though, that somewhere in the U.S. one group will be playing hooky, and it won't necessarily be students. Bearing placards like "Teachers Care—Do You?" and "We Teach Your Children," Miss McGillicuddy, Mr. Kotter, Coach Reeves and all the rest might well be out on the picket line, showing their students just whom they care about most.

In April of this year, the longest American teachers' strike ever came to an end in Ravenna, Ohio. For five long months, striking teachers threatened "scab" substitutes, harassed a bank that had lent money to the under-funded school district, and forced children to cross picket lines to get into school each morning. But even when strikes are shorter and less bitter, they don't tend to do much for claims that what's good for teachers unions is good for education. The fact is, America's public schools are becoming dominated by the two major national teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and their local affiliates. Their frequent striking (242 last year alone) and vigorous lobbying have given them a large chunk of control over local, state, and national education policy, and their influence is growing every year.

American public schools contain some remarkably dedicated and talented teachers, but too many of the others are behaving like Teamsters. In the last 15 years, their militant demands—more pay, less work, more job security, less accountability—have helped change teaching from a low-paying but honorable profession into just another looking-out-for-number-one kind of job.

Of course if gains by unions actually improved the quality of teaching, as the unions claim, all the agitation wouldn't be so bad. But as it turned out, the same years that saw the triumph of teachers unions also were marked by a virtual collapse of public schools: student performance plummeted, academic standards declined, literacy eroded. That doesn't mean our current woes all can be laid at the door of the unions. There are lots of other culprits, like low-quality

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How Teachers Teach Selfishness

by James Bovard

teachers colleges, unconcerned parents, incompetent administrators, petty-minded school boards, and, as the unions like to put it, "society at large." But it's clear that for the most part, unions are to education what fingernails are to a blackboard.

If you had a little trouble comprehending that last SAT-style analogy, don't worry. You've got lots of company: the teachers. For every bright, inspiring teacher who makes a difference in a student's life there has always been a large number of dunces, but in recent years the situation has reached crisis proportions. ("We are striking for descent wages," read one strike placard in New Orleans recently.) SAT scores for college high school seniors who want to be teachers are a pathetic 418 math and 389 verbal—both 40 to 50 points *below* the paltry national average. Even if many of those Einsteins don't actually end up teaching, such figures have to tell you something about what's happening in that profession.

As you can probably guess, teachers unions don't like standardized tests—for their members or for students. Part of that stems from a legitimate worry about the capriciousness of testing, but it has much more to do with an unwillingness to be held accountable for their failures. That fear of accountability—now so much a part of the mentality of teachers unions—is almost as damaging as the simple selfishness reflected by the unceasing demand for more and more outlandish contract concessions. Together they are helping dig the grave of public education.

There was a time when almost all teachers were grossly underpaid. Now, many get about what they deserve, and strapped localities aren't usually in much of a position to help those who don't. To compensate for the inability of taxpayers to pay high wages, school boards have traditionally offered all sorts of other goodies, including a three-month summer vacation, two weeks off at Christmas, and ten days or so for spring vacation. Teachers have also benefited from the original flexi-time—most have the option of staying for an hour or two after school to grade homework (if indeed they assign it), or to leave at 3:15 and get their work done after dinner in the comfort of their own homes. Overall, the fringe benefits—including the almost uniformly generous pension systems—are nothing to scoff at.

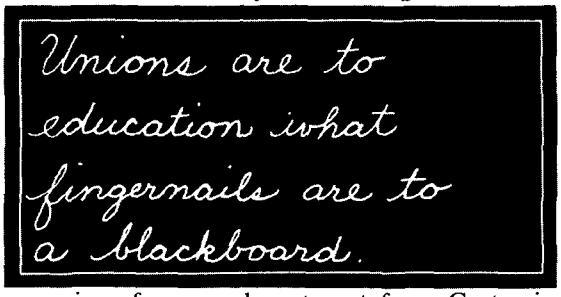
But try telling that to the unions, who continually urge school boards to compare teachers' salaries (average: $16,000 a year) with salaries of people who work a full 12 months. Regardless of how bad teachers' salaries are, the fringe benefits make that an unfair comparison. As long as school districts remain poor, teaching will simply have to remain a profession that attracts people who prefer long vacations to higher pay. The unions can't do much to change that.

But don't bet against their willingness to give it a try. Right now, for instance, some local unions are pushing to obtain unemployment compensation for teachers during the summer. At the national level, their power is clear. The NEA is the largest public employees' organization in the country, with 1.8 million members, and the second largest union (behind the two-million-member Teamsters). The AFT has more than 570,000 members and is growing at the fastest rate of any union in the U.S.

Politically, the NEA in particular is a formidable force. Although teacher support for Carter didn't help enough last November (the kids didn't take the message home to mom and dad), it was pivotal in his 1976 election and again during the nomination fight against Kennedy last year. The NEA was by far the most powerful

organization at the 1980 Democratic National Convention, with 307 delegates—one out of every seven Carter delegates, and more than the entire California delegation. With an average of 4,000 members in each congressional district, the NEA is one of the best dispersed and most effective political organizations in the country.

That became especially clear a couple of years ago during the debate over the creation of a new Department of Education. The conservatives opposed it, the AFL-CIO opposed it, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* opposed it; in fact, nobody except the NEA seemed to think it was necessary. But having extracted a



promise of a new department from Carter in 1976, the educators had sufficient clout to hold him to his word and drive the bill through Congress. It was, wrote columnist Richard Reeves, "the biggest political payoff in American history." One NEA staff member boasted to *Newsweek* that "we're the only union with our own Cabinet department." The clout paid off. In the four years of Carter's administration, federal education funding increased by 73 percent—a record.

Some federal aid to education may be worthwhile, of course. But don't be fooled into thinking that the unions' pressure for increased federal per capita student spending has much to do with education. Striking for smaller class size occasionally can be justified in the interest of the kids, but studies have failed to show much correlation between class size and student achievement. According to Frank Armbruster in *Our Children's Crippled Future,* the average ratio of pupils to teachers has declined sharply in the last 30 years. The average per-pupil expenditure in *constant dollars* has tripled since 1950, while the percentage of GNP spent on education has doubled, from four percent to eight percent. It doesn't take much to figure out that these increased expenditures haven't exactly corresponded to improvements in how much students actually learn in the classroom.

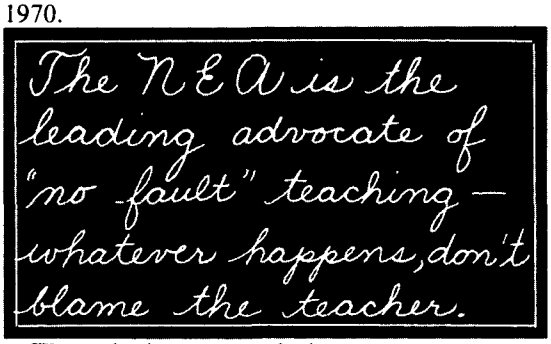
So who is to blame? The NEA is the leading advocate of "no-fault" teaching—whatever happens, don't blame the teacher. Over the objection of the vast majority of the public polled on the subject, the NEA opposes all teacher certification tests. The AFT, meanwhile, approves their use for hiring teachers, but strongly opposes their use for promotion, evaluation, or tenure decisions. At the NEA, officials assert that tests for teachers are unfair to those who might fail after spending a lot of time and money going to teachers college. This is like saying it doesn't matter whether an aspiring doctor knows enough about medicine to pass his certification exams as long as he has been to med school. It points up the worst side of American credentialism, which stresses where you've been educated—and for how long—rather than what you know. One reason private schools are often better than public ones is that private schools care whether their teachers know anything about their subjects and can teach, while public schools are content to ask whether their teachers have a diploma from a teachers college. If someone with a B.A. in math can pass a certification test showing he knows math and can prove in trial teaching that he knows how to teach, why does he need a meaningless piece of paper? The NEA not only insists that he have that piece of paper, it insists that he not be tested to see if the paper signifies anything.

The almost total lack of teacher accountability is the central problem of contemporary public education. The teachers unions talk as if once teachers serve two or three years and get tenure, they are entitled to a job—regardless of performance—for the rest of their lives. Rejecting that logic doesn't mean you reject the idea of job security altogether—teachers should not, for instance, be fired for their politics. But as the system now exists, tenured teachers have little or no incentive to do a good job. A dedicated few take it on themselves to do a good job anyway, but the unions are striving mightily to protect those who don't. The unions oppose not only sticks, but carrots. The 1980 NEA convention continually denounced any "merit pay" or "performance contracting" ideas, insisting that all teachers should get uniform raises solely according to the number of years spent teaching.

It is here that the natural and otherwise legitimate values of unionism (that is, equal wages for equal work) tend to be inimical to education. When faced with the sobering fact that quality control is a little more important in this industry than in others, the unions respond by demanding "self-governance" first, and accountability later. By self-governance, the

NEA means controlling teacher licensure, continuing education, and professional standards as the ABA or AMA does. Last year's NEA convention resolved to develop a strategy "to see that classroom teachers attain at least majority participation in the governance and review bodies of regional accreditation agencies."

None of this leaves much room for one group with a certain stake in public education: parents and their representatives on the school board. You don't have to be a big defender of school boards to regret how far the unions have gone in creating a maze of legal barriers and due process avenues that have made it virtually impossible for school boards to take action against incompetent or lazy teachers. It's bad enough that the federal government can't fire incompetent or lazy bureaucrats, but at least in the government those characteristics aren't quite as contagious as they are in the classroom. Wasting money or office space is less serious than wasting young minds. With thousands of potentially good teachers out of work, parents should not have to sit back and let the unions decide "who enters, who stays and who leaves the [teaching] profession," which is the way former NEA president George Fischer described that group's goal in 1970.



The principal area of disagreement between parents and teachers in many communities revolves around the so-called back-to-basics movement, which parents support overwhelmingly, according to polls. Many union locals oppose the movement, and they take their cue from the national organizations.

One recent NEA publication denounced back-to-basics as "irrelevant and reactionary." Another stressed that the movement was orchestrated by the "neo-conservative New Right, a mixture of taxpayer groups, fundamentalists, and a few unreconstructed racists. . . ." The publication denounced minimum competency testing for students because it has "sacrificed children who are black and poor on the altar of accountability."

This last comment represents an important element of union strategy—appeal to the poor and minorities and to the liberals who care about them. But the victims are catching on. "For many black and Puerto Rican parents, the teachers unions now represent the 'enemy,'" Mario Fantini argues in *What's Best for the Children.* Liberal columnist William Raspberry has shown strong support for former Washington, D.C., school superintendent (now assistant secretary of education) Vincent Reed's plan to put an end to automatic grade promotions. So did many D.C. parents, who lamented his departure. Jesse Jackson may be an ineffective showboat, but his views on schooling are popular with many black parents. He wonders about "the right to strike for more money when the employer—a taxpaying parent—holds tax receipts in one hand and test results in the other that prove he's paying more and more for less and less."

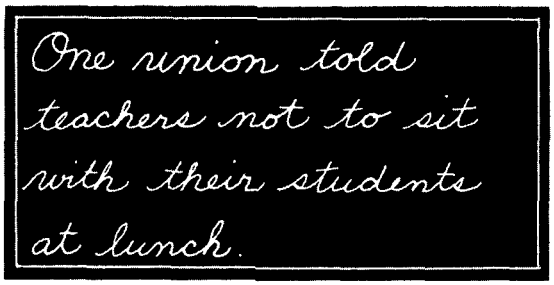
Duty-Free Lunch

The NEA may think that poor blacks who buy the back-to-basics line are just dupes of the reactionaries and racists, but in truth many black parents have simply come to understand that a return to more fundamental educational values is their children's only real ticket out of the ghetto. Right now, few public school parents—rich or poor—have much to cheer about. Paul Copperman reports in *The Literacy Hoax* that "the average student is assigned 50 percent less reading and writing than in the early 1960s. . . . The standard writing assignment in the early 1960s was one logically organized composition a week. By the early 1970s, it was one creative paper, due at intermittent intervals, which would not be criticized." One study suggests average homework assignments have been cut in half in the last 20 years. Reading levels, as everyone knows, often don't advance much beyond comic-book standards, if that.

Sure, public school when you were a kid probably wasn't so great either. It was often boring and petty. But even if all the science and English and history you somehow muddled through was poorly taught, a little of it had to rub off on you by osmosis. Many of today's students can't expect even that. By the time they finish gym and shop and "death education" (a current NEA favorite), the average time spent studying traditional subjects in high school is about two and a half hours a day. *Two and a half hours.*

(continued)

Blame for this should be shared by administrators and school board members, but it is the teachers unions that have pushed especially hard for "relevant" curricula. In recent years they often have prevailed during struggles with school boards over curriculum improvements, teaching techniques, textbooks, and general educational goals and philosophy. Legitimate attempts by parents to influence what their children are taught are sometimes denounced as



"censorship." And a number of union contracts around the country strictly limit the number of times a year teachers must meet with parents. In Washington, D.C., no more than three meetings a year are required.

This is a side of public school life that isn't reported much in the press because it's so commonplace. When the parents go overboard—demanding, say, that books be banned—*that* ends up in the papers, and rightfully so. But when parents just want a little more involvement in what goes on in the classroom, the unions usually have been able to prevent it without anybody paying much attention.

When they do get a measure of control over curriculum, the unions aren't usually bashful about using it for their own ends. The AFT has called for "a campaign to incorporate labor education at all levels of the American educational system." The Dade County, Florida, AFT affiliate, for one, has taken that to heart. It's hard to believe, but the United Teachers of Dade sent out a bulletin a couple of years ago urging music teachers to "order music such as 'Solidarity Forever,'" English teachers to "incorporate short stories, novels, poems, plays, and films depicting labor struggles and conflicts," and math teachers to "use labor and management as specific examples in problems." Another section of the bulletin explained that a new contract provides a "duty-free" lunch period. "Teachers who feel compelled to sit with their students during lunch, i.e., primary, elementary teachers and exceptional education teachers, are doing a disservice to their fellow teachers. By volunteering to sit with your students and possibly receive 30 minutes' compensatory time later, you are 1) diminishing the effect and intent of the contract between UTD and DCPS and 2) are being used and manipulated by the school administration who should see to it that your class is being cared for during lunch."

Naturally, that kind of thinking doesn't apply in every local union, but many locals have negotiated for at least some of these kinds of rules. Teachers unions can't exist just to push for wage hikes; they have to figure out all sorts of other points to negotiate or they wouldn't have much reason for being. For every real safety violation or unfair practice the unions help eliminate, there are lots of other contract items that have nothing to do with safety or fairness or education. What they do have to do with is selfishness.

Selfishness, like other values, can breed remarkably fast when it reaches the classroom. School, we all know, has a lot to do with values. Sometimes teachers transmit values to students not through positive action—teaching—but just by setting the boundaries of adult behavior. The kids might hate school and all of their teachers, but they nonetheless take away some idea of what is legitimate and what isn't, of what matters in life and what doesn't. Given the amount of time children spend in school, that is inevitable; and given the malleability of most school-age kids, it is the kind of opportunity that has traditionally drawn committed and idealistic men and women to teaching.

That's why the selfishness and abandonment of duty reflected by so many teachers union demands is even more disheartening than the selfishness that shows up in so much of the rest of society. It proliferates in the classroom. Actions speak louder than lectures, even if class is on "value-endowment training" or some such newfangled subject—and kids naturally learn to do as their teachers do, not as they say. The values children absorb from strikes at their schools and missed school days aren't so hard to figure out. Students see emphasis placed on money, leisure, and insulation from the judgment of others. In scattered cases, they see encouragement of violence. In most cases, they realize that despite what they're told, their teachers' first concern may not be teaching at all. For kids, then, all of this represents a cruel introduction to the world of selfishness; for teachers, it represents a cruel concession to that world; and for public education, it has come to represent a repudiation of some of its nobler ideals. □

WHO'S WHO in the Administration

With four months' perspective on the new administration, it's getting easier to separate important players from staff chaff. One of those White House aides who fall into the latter category right now is **Martin Anderson,** by title the Assistant to the President for Policy Development. With all the policy changes afoot under Reagan, it was expected that Anderson, a well-regarded conservative intellectual, would call some shots on domestic policy. But it hasn't turned out that way. He has considerably less influence than his predecessor in that job, Stuart Eizenstat. The best sign of Anderson's freeze-out is that he has little contact with OMB. An activist domestic policy director would be in constant touch. Anderson's wife, Annelise, has a high-level job at OMB, but that hasn't helped matters. She is considered the weakest link in **David Stockman**'s lineup. . . .

A more subtle reason that Anderson might have less power than expected is that the Reagan crowd has changed the normal formulation of domestic policy. Traditionally, an administration sets policy goals, then OMB cuts or increases the budget to conform to the policy. But in this administration, with the budget-cutting mania on, policy has become a product of the cuts instead of the other way around. That helps explain why the powerful triumvirate of **Meese, Baker,** and **Deaver,** while phenomenally successful in bringing a disciplined approach to the administration's program, has not been much involved in policy *initiation.* Neither has Anderson. On policy, Stockman's the man, and he's getting the credit. This may eventually alienate Meese and Baker. . . .

Another power within the administration who has staked out an activist role on policy formation is Secretary of the Interior **James Watt.** That has been widely reported. But the press has missed the fact that Watt is now virtually in charge of *two* federal agencies, the other being the Environmental Protection Agency. Since her appointment, **Anne Gorsuch,** Reagan's nominee for EPA administrator, has worked out of Watt's office, and lived temporarily in his Washington-area house. Worse, according to EPA sources, Gorsuch has agreed to let Watt interview and approve all high-level EPA appointments. . . .

Another agency under assault is the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which falls under the Department of Health and Human Services. HHS Secretary **Richard Schweiker** fired NIOSH director **Anthony Robbins** in March—four days after an article appeared in a Chamber of Commerce publication charging Robbins with being a "social activist" with a "radical anti-business posture." Robbins, who is well respected in the health field, was also relieved of his duties as assistant surgeon general, an action taken previously only in cases of gross misconduct. . . .

The good news for those who were worried about the administration totally unleashing the CIA is that it probably won't. The director, **William Casey,** may be a little confused—the joke is he's developed elaborate plans to drop agents behind enemy lines to help the French resistance—but some of his appointments have been solid. Deputy director **B. R. Inman** hinted that he would resign if a proposal to allow domestic spying went through (it didn't). And the new general counsel, **Stanley Sporkin,** won high marks as a dogged director of enforcement at the Securities and Exchange Commission. When Nixon administration officials wanted him to pull back from an investigation of Maurice Stans's links to Robert Vesco, he refused. There's reason to hope he'll do the same should he encounter any CIA charter-busters. . . .

Speaking of Maurice Stans, his name, once floated for ambassador to Sweden, seems to have submerged again. . . .

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WHITE HOUSE

Executive Associate Director, Office of Management and Budget—**Glenn R. Schleede** has been senior vice-president of the National Coal Association.

Associate Director, Office of Management and Budget—**Frederick N. Khedouri** served as legislative director to Representative David Stockman.

Associate Director, Office of Management and Budget—**Donald W. Moran** was a legislative assistant to Representative David Stockman, specializing in federal health policy and budget matters.

Associate Director, Office of Management and Budget—**William Schneider, Jr.,** has served on the minority staff of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense.

Associate Director, Office of Management and Budget—**Harold I. Steinberg** was a partner at Peat, Marwick, Mitchell and Co., an accounting firm.

Staff Director, National Security Council—**Allen J. Lenz** is a former chief of the Commerce Department's East-West Policy and Planning Office.