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Book Reviews

Teachers and Power, The Story of the American Federation of Teachers. By Robert J. Braun. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972. Pp. 287, \$7.95.

If more testimony to the politicization of public education is needed, Robert J. Braun provides it in this cautionary account of what the Nation's principal teachers' union is and wants. Much to his own alarm, he finds that the "American Federation of Teachers is determined to control the public schools of the United States. And someday it will. Just as the American Medical Association controls American medicine and as the American Bar Association controls the legal profession." (10)

Because of its critical relationship to the public good, education is always a legitimate object of political concern. Even the desire to keep politics out of the schools and the schools out of politics, which dominated the teaching profession in most of this Century, must ultimately be realized, if at all, through political acts. The past decade has produced a marked increase in education's political involvements, as a function of efforts to ease the school's financial crisis, achieve equal educational opportunity, and enhance community control. Hence, the importance in this as in so many other areas of public interest that politics be practiced with integrity—which is to say, with proper respect for its own purpose and responsibility, and a diligent observance of the standards such respect demands.

To accept this principle is to abhor the use of political opportunity for narrow ends, whether organizational or personal, and the employment of means that corrupt politics and the substantive areas of its concern. Such practices well deserve the harsh judgments of those not yet convinced that error, like fools; must be suffered gladly. The plea is not that men become angels. They cannot—and precisely because of that must be measured by the choices they do make and the actions they do take, in politics or anywhere else.

This order of principled, pragmatic judgment comes readily to Braun, who combines a healthy moral sense with an abundance of facts. A committed professional journalist, education editor of the Newark *Star-Ledger*, he has witnessed a full measure of today's politics in education. Of particular note with respect to *Teachers and Power*, he has viewed at first hand the works of teacher unionists from Minot, North Dakota, to New Orleans, and from Los Angeles to Newark and New York. A veteran observer of teacher strikes, including New York City 1968 and Newark 1970, he has also had considerable direct involvement with leaders and staff of the American Federation of Teachers (A.F.T.). All of this is in the crucible from which the book emerges with an outraged cry that A.F.T. is seeking *at any price* dominance over the Nation's schools:

Because it is a union first and foremost, [A.F.T.'s] organization is geared to war, to

serving strikes, to collecting new members, to protecting teachers—whether or not they deserve protection—never considering the possibility that teachers, as surrogate parents, should really derive their true protection from the pure love they provide for their children and the respect they earn in a community, a neighborhood or a town. A.F.T. leadership behaves like the leadership of any other established union—that is, with an eye to staying in power as long as possible. . . . Although it pays considerable lip service to local autonomy and union democracy, the national trains its reps to mold opinion, to exploit fears, if necessary, to promote paranoia and hysteria and even racism among its teachers, for the war must be won. (252-3)

Braun's story of the A.F.T. deals only in sketchy fashion with the first fifty years. It begins, as it properly should, with Margaret Haley, who started the struggle for teachers' rights in Chicago in the 1890's. Her Chicago Federation of Teachers, finally formed in 1897, led the way to affiliation with the American Federation of Labor and subsequent establishment of A.F.T. in 1916. The vicissitudes of the next thirty years—related to the shifting fortunes of the labor movement, the growing pains of professional education, and various romances with communism and anti-communism—are briefly recounted, bringing the tale quickly to the 1950's, when the union was "stagnating" and a poor representation of the militant social idealism that John Dewey, George Counts, Reinhold Neibuhr and others had once inspired it toward.

The bulk of the book concerns A.F.T.'s modern era—the time of David Selden, its president, of "Fighting Charlie" Cogen, first president of its strongest affiliate, New York's United Federation of Teachers (U.F.T.), and of Albert Shanker, now president of U.F.T. and sometimes described as the strongest man in the movement. It presents a selective history, bent more on revealing the essence of these men and the dynamics within their organization and between it and the world than on providing a definitive record. There is ample detail on what is covered—the Newark strike, for example, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville affair, or the abortive strike in New Orleans—but many things are not treated at all. Despite this, however, Braun's presentation is honest and his overall judgment that the union's pursuit of power threatens the public interest is difficult to contest.

In our tradition, possession of power carries the responsibility to harness it with principle, drawn to the public interest. A.F.T.'s leaders appear without regard for this standard, holding instead that power's legitimate purchase is its own increase and benefits for its possessor. As Braun well knows, power so poorly governed is bound to produce mischief or worse, "particularly when there are no inner mechanisms for accountability to the public. . . ." (219) The strategic and tactical records of the A.F.T. repeatedly confirm this, but probably nowhere quite so clearly as in its manipulation of the judicial system and its disregard for legal and court judgments inimical to its immediate aims. True to their claim to be at war, the leaders operate on the principle of "all's fair. . . ."

There might be some hope if there was a definite indication that A.F.T. adhered to high professional standards in education, itself. Unfortunately, in the last ten years the union has been all but silent on the matter. Its one educational contribution has been the More Effective Schools program, which Braun cor-

rectly describes as "a collection of the most generally agreed-upon and, until lately, unchallengeable educational improvements: small classes, extensive psychological care, team teaching and so on." (252) With good reason, he declares A.F.T. educationally "bankrupt," asserting that if it did manage to gain control of the schools it would hardly know what to do with them.

If doubts remain about the incompatibility of professions and unions, Braun's evidence helps lay them to rest. Professions are expected to fulfill a public responsibility according to the moral and technical standards inhering in them. They are granted broad rights to govern themselves in recognition of a public interest in their independent stewardship of a public trust. Unions, on the other hand, their origins in guilds notwithstanding, are primarily the economic agents of their members. This is the rationale for their creation and the measure of their success. To claim more or expect it is foolish and unfair.

There is no disputing the teachers' need for organized representation of their economic interests. It becomes all the more crucial as school systems and their bureaucracies grow and the public concern with education gets more intense. Even the A.F.T.'s rival, the historically "established" National Education Association, has been pressed to such duty and is now far more of a teachers' organization than ever before. The issue is not in whether or not there should be teachers' unions, but in the tactics employed, the ends pursued, and the power they should be permitted to have. It is in whether they can be good unions and also represent well the profession of education.

The aim of politics is the establishment of law that is in the public interest. If school law is made by the kind of power politics characteristic of the A.F.T., what will be its quality? If union contracts assume more and more of the function of law in the governance of education, circumventing regular political institutions, who will protect the public interest?

Braun illuminates the corruptions power has wrought in the A.F.T. and warns that the infection already spreads to the politics of education and to education, itself. His deepest fear is that the A.F.T. may succeed, and in so doing "destroy public education in order to 'save' it, according to its own parochial lights." (275) He is not alone.

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