

## Advocacy and Professionalism Together Upgrade Our Schools



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One of the attitudes expressed in the recent Harris Poll was the conviction on the part of both members and local presidents that teachers can best be represented by an organization that plays the role of both a professional organization and a union. This attitude appears, on the surface, to be a type of wishful thinking for "the best of both worlds." However, anyone who attended the QuEST Consortium (Quality Educational Standards in Teaching) of the American Federation of Teachers held last weekend in Washington, D.C., saw very clearly that the programs and services of the AFT are designed to meet both the professional concerns of its members and to fulfill the advocacy role generally set aside for a union.

The annual QuEST Consortium is designed to bring together AFT members so that information and advisory reports can be developed and then submitted to the governing bodies of the union. The opinions of individual members are most important in formulating the position of the AFT on educational policy issues and educational action programs and projects. This consortium is truly an opportunity for the members to speak out on their concerns.

The 1976 consortium took on special significance as America enters its Bicentennial Year and as our nation prepares to elect its President. Teachers, over the past few years, have learned very painfully that their professional concerns cannot be separated from the social and economic problems facing our nation. The theme of the consortium, "Education in a Sliding Economy," was aimed at demonstrating very clearly the interdependence which exists among education and the other sectors of our society.

A review of the "professional" topics which were considered at QuEST includes:

- Prospects for Expanded Early Childhood Education
- Improving Teacher Education
- Challenges in Higher Education
- Promising New Programs on Individualizing Education
- Teacher Effectiveness Research
- Reading and Math: the Test Score Decline
- Career and Vocational Education
- Concerns in Higher Education
- Education for the Handicapped
- Competency-Based Teacher Education Quotas
- Student Rights

QuEST did not isolate consideration of professional issues from the social and economic concerns facing teachers. Indeed, the conference widened its focus to include workshops on:

- School Violence: Problem Children and the Schools

- The Contract as a Legal Document
- Issues of Collective Bargaining
- School Finance and the Problems of the Cities
- Legislative Prospects

The advisory reports and recommendations which were the products of these workshops provide many solutions and alternatives to some of the largest problems facing education. But it is essential to note that the cornerstone of each of these solutions is some form of increased funding, either state or federal, for education. And the key to increased funding for education or any social program is an upturn in the national economy.

As the Congress of the United States considers



AFL-CIO President George Meany at AFT QuEST.

legislative proposals to move the nation's economy forward it is reassuring to know that the members of the AFT are actively involved in seeking solutions to this fiscal crisis. George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, came to QuEST to make a major policy statement on the hard times we find our economy struggling through.

Meany clearly stated the condition of the national economy and how this fiscal collapse affects public employees.

"This spring, America's industrial capacity is still hovering around 70 percent. Three out of 10 plants are still dark. Three out of 10 machines are standing idle. Unemployment stands at 9.7

million or 10.3 percent of the workforce, if you count the discouraged workers and the partially unemployed workers who are ignored in the government statistics.

"Millions are running out of unemployment insurance. New York City still totters on the brink of bankruptcy and other state and city governments are near disaster. Social workers, hospital workers, policemen, firefighters, sanitation workers—and teachers—are being laid off.

"All the services Americans have a right to expect from their governments—services they pay for, services they need—are being cut to the bone. The American standard of living is falling. The quality of American life is deteriorating."

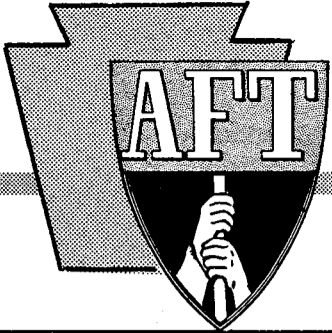
The QuEST Consortium has provided a clear opportunity for our members to be involved in the workings of a professional union.

This activity clearly points out the interest and commitment of the AFT and the AFL-CIO to seek solutions to the problems facing education.

In reality, the real professionalism in teaching is not diminished by professional unionism, indeed it is augmented and enhanced. It has been only through the collective bargaining process that teachers have finally been able to achieve reduced class size, relief from clerical and non-professional duties, and a real involvement in the establishment of curriculum. In the absence of professional unions and the services they provide, professionalism would be little more than an empty cliché applicable only to those individuals willing to submit to the demands of their superintendent.

The professional teacher cannot and should not insulate himself/herself from the social and political realities of our nation. The cultivation of improved professional services in our schools is directly dependent on our ability to convince the state and federal government to adequately fund education. If we neglect that aspect of our professional responsibility, we jeopardize the future of quality instructional programs by allowing a deterioration of standards. One of the traditional hallmarks of a profession is a concern for upholding and upgrading the standards of that profession. All teachers should recognize that an economy unable to adequately fund the needs of its society and diminishing funding for education is harming our profession. The adequate funding of schools and the involvement of teachers in school decision-making are two ingredients which are essential to the improvement of the teaching profession and can only be obtained through the united efforts of a professional union.

The New York State United Teachers offers the "best of both worlds"—a strong alliance with 14.2 million other unionists supporting the programs and legislation that will uphold and upgrade our profession.



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*Professionalism*

## "Professionalism": The N h!

"We are not workers; we are professionals, and because we are professionals we don't need nor do we want a Labor Union to represent our interests."

What you have just read is a composite statement of the feelings and attitudes which have, for a century or more, served as a staple item in the propaganda of the National Education Association.

As analysis will show, the statement itself is more than simply a composite of feelings; it is a caricature of common sense and a rebuke to the truth.

We need first, however, to examine the soil in which the attitudes first took root and by doing that we will have explained, at least in part, what, even to this day, the NEA is all about.

### Association Origins

The NEA began as an expression of the values of rural and small town America; an America of the white clapboard church and the little red school house; an America separated by thousands of miles and seemingly hundreds of years from the burgeoning urban centers that had recently begun opening their doors to the "crude" and "ill-mannered" dispossessed of Europe; a veritable mass of humanity that would, before long, literally alter the face of the nation; a throng that would, by dint of determination challenge the assumptions of those who ruled America and the presumed values upon which America had been founded: "rugged individualism," the "survival of the fittest" doctrine, the hegemony of racial and ethnic chauvinism, the unassailable power of the Robber Barons; these notions, these myths and so many more which had been wrapped in the cocoon of apparent permanence,

were swept aside by the onrushing aspirations of those who would wait no longer for economic and social justice that had first pointed them toward our shores.

### America's Changing Face

Swept aside, as well, was the political domination of what we talked about before: small town and rural America. William Jennings Bryan and the "God fearing" fundamentalist politics he represented were eclipsed by the Social Gospel of Franklin D. Roosevelt's urban oriented New Deal; a gospel that would, within certain limits, permit and even encourage "boat-rocking" challenges to worn out authority; a gospel that would shake our land to its very foundations even as it ushered in the "era of the Common Man."

### We Are What We Are

What, you might ask has this to do with the NEA? Much indeed, since it was a rural past that gave birth to the NEA so it has been that its rural composition, and all that that implies is what continues to sustain the NEA even to this day. That rural base, now focused particularly in the South, is historically and hysterically anti-union which is, even after the most cursory of examinations, not really very surprising since as every true son and daughter of the Confederacy knows, the Union beds are filled with Bolsheviks and we would know it too if only we would take the trouble to look. That the crowd that calls the tune in the NEA is, by social convention, required to be somewhat circumspect explains the constant harping upon the "there's nobody here 'cept us professionals" routine; and as it was that the word "professional" was what occasioned this piece, let's look at what it means and to whom it properly applies:

- A "professional" is one largely in control of the conditions that govern his or her work life.
- This self control or autonomy applies not only to the time spent working, and the time set aside for leisure, but also to the rate of compensation to be charged for services rendered.
- Since it is service that we are talking about, in the category of professionals belong the following: attorneys, physicians, artisans, writers, etc.

Given these guidelines, surely no one who comprises the staff of the public and private schools of the nation can, with accuracy, be said to be a "professional":

- Who, for example, is foolish enough to believe and then to suggest that teachers and other school personnel determine their own working conditions and set their own rates of compensation?
- And who is so naive as to suppose that the gradual improvements we have achieved through the years are in any way related to our standing as "professionals"?

In point of fact, self governance or autonomy, upon which the very concept of "professionalism" rests is altogether nullified by the very existence of autonomy's opposite: an EMPLOYER/EMPLOYEE relationship.

In point of fact, that this relationship has in any way been altered to the benefit of the teachers has been due entirely to the COLLECTIVE STRENGTH we enjoy through the organizations that represent us in our

relationships with our employing Boards of Education.

In point of fact, there be people left who don't yet understand that the entire category of educational employees, including teachers, are White Collar Workers, in need of the help that only a militant, fighting Union can provide, then when next they find themselves up to their necks in difficulty, let them approach the moment of truth before the Board of Education alone, and clothed only in the warmth of their precious "professionalism."

Soon enough they will find that the rights that teachers enjoy originate not at all with our employers; and they do not exist simply because they have been enumerated in a contract. Rather our rights exist only and because they have become an ingrown habit and any attempt to curtail their practice will meet with our concerted and collective resistance. So also will it be discovered that teachers and all other public employees who cling to the belief that a "professional" self-image can in some way be translated into respect from our employers, are, to be frank guilty of the worst kind of deception and self delusion. One compels respect from others, including one's employers when one learns how to defend one's dignity as an educator and as a human being.

When we return to this discussion in our next issue, we will show that such concepts as "dignity," "defense," "rights," "progress," "justice," and all other concepts which speak to the human condition are inextricably linked to a free Union Movement. For now, let us be content to say that learning how to protect and preserve one's dignity and sense of self worth begins with a clear understanding of who and what we are.

*(To Be Continued)*

