

EDITORIAL

A Commentary on Teachers' Strikes

IAN WINCHESTER
University of Calgary

One of the more puzzling aspects of our present educational scene is that though we are now well into the twenty-first century, teachers' strikes of various kinds are still with us and more prominent than ever. Sometimes the strikes are at universities and sometimes they are strikes within school boards or perhaps, in the Canadian context, province-wide teachers' strikes. One would have thought that education as a social activity, and one largely paid for out of taxation, was so important that the settlement of such disputes would have gone well beyond the means and techniques devised to cope with the often cruel and exploitive aftermath of the industrial revolution: strikes and walkouts in particular. In the case of industrial strikes, in the early days, those who suffered were the workers themselves and sometimes the owners of a factory and their families and perhaps a few other administrative figures. But in the case of teacher strikes at any level, the entire cost is paid by students, their parents and the broad base of taxpayers.

Usually teachers' strikes, in so far as they relate to school boards, have been correlated with the inability of teachers to pay their mortgages as the interest rates were from time to time too high. And although this was often not mentioned by the striking teachers—who usually argued that class sizes were too large, or the expectations of out-of-class activities like coaching a basketball team too onerous—when all was said and done, the strike ended with a school board or perhaps a provincial government agreeing to pay the teachers more money. Class sizes and out-of-class activities were usually never mentioned in the final agreements.

Perhaps it is time that the educational profession began thinking of other more socially useful and effective ways of settling their disputes with school boards, provincial educational authorities or university governance boards. We have of course a few methods that sometimes are invoked in these quarters: third-party arbitration, binding arbitration, appeal to the justice system and the like. But perhaps it is time that we began to think of the importance of what we do as school or university teachers as so important to the society as a whole that we ought to imagine entirely new approaches to working with our governing bodies and our communities who need us as much as we need them.

In future issues of this journal I would encourage authors to come forward with their own thoughts and discussions on this topic. We will also develop a JET conference on the topic for a future issue.

Ian Winchester
Editor

