

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Summer 2008

Volume 43, Number 2

On Courage and Cowards
The Controversy Surrounding
Macalester College's Neutrality
and Peace Association, 1917

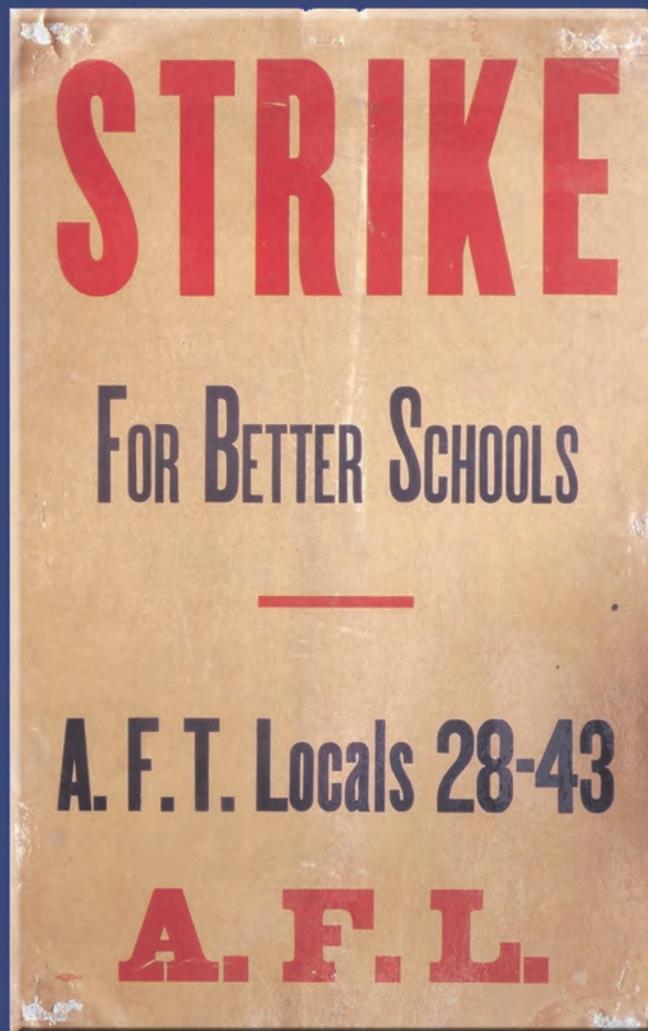
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Strike for Better Schools

The St. Paul Public Schools Teachers' Strike of 1946

Cheryl Carlson

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This strike notice was one of many that St. Paul's public school teachers carried in the 1946 teachers' strike, the first strike by teachers in the United States. It is reproduced here by permission of Local 28, American Federation of Teachers.

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Ramsey County History is published quarterly
by the Ramsey County Historical Society,
323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St.
Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in
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Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758.

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The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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*Publication of Ramsey County History is supported in part by a gift from
Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr.
and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

A Message from the Editorial Board

Sometimes, current events remind us of our own past experiences. But history can provide perspective on the present as well. In these times, confronted with tough school levy and budget issues, we can read Cheryl Carlson's article on the St. Paul teachers' strike of 1946 and see when times were really bad: St. Paul elementary classrooms had up to fifty students and some had no soap or towels in the bathrooms. An outdated and corrupt city-based funding system, an uninterested business community, and families who sent one-third of St. Paul's children to nonpublic schools made a "perfect storm" for inadequate funding. But with the strike, teachers, administrators, and students worked together to apply pressure, leading ultimately to St. Paul's adoption of the current independent school district model. In the same vein, Emily Skidmore's article on the Macalester Neutrality and Peace Association points up a passionate disagreement on the merits of the United States' entry into World War I in 1917, much as the current debate goes on over U.S. involvement in the Middle East. But sentiment quickly turned to strong support once Congress voted in favor of the country joining the conflict in Europe.

Patricia Hampl's *The Florist's Daughter*, along with a number of other recent titles reviewed in this issue, offer a bouquet of books for summer (or fall!) reading: histories of a pioneering Native American interpreter and legislator, the St. Paul Public Library, the German-founded brewing industry, and the streetcar era in the Twin Cities. Diverse, entertaining, and great reads.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Strike for Better Schools

The St. Paul Public Schools Teachers' Strike of 1946

Cheryl Carlson

This article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation. Dr. Carlson is a retired Saint Paul Public Schools mathematics teacher and school counselor. Her hobby is genealogy including collecting old family photographs. In the early 1990s when she was doing research for her dissertation, she interviewed over fifty individuals who had some connection to the strike. One of the individuals whom she interviewed was Virginia Brainard Kunz who at the time was the editor of this magazine, Ramsey County History. Dr. Carlson was fascinated by Virginia's insight into the history of St. Paul during the first half of the twentieth century and how it pertained to the Saint Paul Public School system and the St. Paul teachers' strike of 1946. This article is a memorial to her friend Virginia Brainard Kunz.

The strike of 1,165 St. Paul school teachers, lasting from November 25 to December 27, 1946, startled the nation into realizing that teachers were ready to use the strike weapon as a method to alleviate school funding problems and/or intolerable working conditions. The St. Paul teachers' strike was the first organized teachers' strike in the nation and the only teachers' strike in the history of St. Paul.

In 1946, the national public school picture was grim; the plight of the Saint Paul Public School system was even more serious. St. Paul had a long history of inadequate funding for public education because the local business community continually campaigned to keep property taxes at a minimum and other citizens were unwilling to spend more tax dollars on public schools. At the time of the strike, the city of St. Paul had no board of education. The St. Paul teachers' strike exposed the weakness of a system which gave fiscal controls for education to city officials rather than to responsible educational authorities.

School funding was grossly inadequate. Since 1914, the Saint Paul Public School system had suffered under the restraint of a per capita spending limitation on all city services; without a specifically designated school advocate, the schools

had to compete in the political arena with the other departments of city government for a share of the city budget. When St. Paul failed to provide adequate funds for the proper operation of its schools, St. Paul teachers assumed the leadership needed to initiate charter amendments that eventually passed and improved public school funding.

St. Paul teachers were on strike after long delays, frequent evasions, and outright refusals by city officials responsible for education to provide sufficient financial resources to meet the educational needs of St. Paul public school students. There were no sincere attempts at negotiations before the strike was called.

Underlying Problems that Led to the Strike

The First Seventy Years

From 1843 until 1888 the school board for the Saint Paul Public School system was elected by the voters in St. Paul, and was fiscally independent from the city government. This changed in 1888 when the mayor was given the authority to appoint the school board. In 1891, the school system officially became a part of the city government, which operated under tight financial restraints. These tight financial

restraints would affect the school district for more than half a century.

Parochial Schools

A major factor leading to the 1946 teachers' strike was the lack of support for public education by those taxpayers who sent their children to non-public

St. Paul School Enrollment—Fall 1946

(Total Enrollment: 52,045)

Public schools	34,454
Catholic parochial schools	16,218
Lutheran parochial schools (estimated)	500
Breck School	395
St. Paul Academy	238
Summit School	240

Source: *St. Paul Dispatch*, November 26, 1946

At the time of the 1946 teachers' strike, roughly two thirds of the school-age children in St. Paul attended public schools.

schools. Dr. Steven Schellenberg (interview, July 18, 1995), Supervisor of Student Data Management for the Saint Paul School system, mentioned that until 1968, approximately one-third of St. Paul's school population had consistently attended private schools.

Adoption of the Commission Charter

Another major cause of the 1946 teachers' strike was the commission charter which determined the governing structure of the City of St. Paul and the Saint Paul Public Schools. A related cause was the \$30 per capita spending limitation for public services mandated by the 1919 amendment to the city charter that was still in effect in 1946.

According to a May 8, 1912, extra edition of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, St. Paul voters had voted overwhelmingly the day before for a commission charter. The new charter established a close relationship between the schools

and other municipal services. Every two years, an election was to be held for the mayor and six city councilmen. After the election, the mayor was to assign each of the six councilmen to lead one of the six departments of the city government: education, public utilities, public works, parks, finance, and public safety. One commissioner was to be assigned the Department of Education who was also in charge of the public auditorium and all public libraries in the city. The commissioners were, therefore, legislators in the morning when they met in a city council session and administrators the rest of the day when each of them managed the city department he led.

In St. Paul, the Department of Education had the largest budget, the largest number of employees, and was probably the most complex department to lead. Nolan C. Kearney found that the newest city council member was usually appointed as the Commissioner of Education. He felt that this was probably because the Education Department was the least desirable of the six city departments.¹

Rarely were commissioners chosen because of their expertise as administrators. There were no minimum requirements for the Commissioner of Education job or indeed for any of the commissioner positions, and there was no assurance that trained administrators would be elected. According to former Governor of Minnesota Elmer L. Andersen (interview, February 6, 1995), one of the most effective individuals to head the Education Department was Frank Marzitelli, a St. Paul high school dropout. Fred Truax, the Commissioner of Education during the 1946 strike, was a postal worker. The previous Commissioner of Education, Axel Peterson, was a plumber.

When the Commissioner of Education was appointed, he was given most of the powers usually held by a school board, although in theory, the city council retained the right to exercise authority over the affairs of the different city departments. All commissioners were elected for two-year terms, and the Commissioner of Education was required to appoint a superintendent whose term also ran for two years.

The St. Paul charter also provided for a charter commission, a body of fifteen men,

appointed by judges of the district court. This commission was charged under state law with the duty of drafting and submitting needed charter changes to the voters. According to Michael McDonough, for years, the majority of the members of the

**St. Paul Public Schools
Per Capita and Per Pupil Costs
Compared With Comparable Cities
(1945 costs)**

City	Cost Per Capita	Cost Per Pupil
St. Paul	\$14.05	\$132.83
Akron	20.48	135.77
Columbus	16.99	138.65
Dayton	20.54	155.49
Denver	20.03	134.03
Indianapolis	21.32	168.93
Kansas City, Mo.	16.61	134.93
Oakland	28.68	197.29
Omaha	16.68	129.64
Rochester, N.Y.	21.43	229.15
Seattle	24.13	174.25
Toledo	15.89	144.01
Providence	19.57	181.36

Source: *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 11, 1947

When compared with cities of comparable population, St. Paul had the lowest costs per capita and per pupil in 1945.

charter commission represented big business and real estate interests. He states, "It was very difficult to get them to submit a charter amendment to the people that was favorable to the schools."²

A major cause of the 1946 teachers' strike was the per capita expenditure limitation established by the 1912 city charter amendment. The charter originally set a \$24.00 per capita expenditure limitation on all city expenditures and a \$6.00 per capita expenditure limitation on expenditures for schools. Later, this was amended in 1919 to allow \$30.00 per capita for all city expenditures of which there was no specific limit for the schools. Any change to the charter required a sixty percent affirmative vote by the citizens of St. Paul. The 1919 change to the charter was the only successful charter amendment to affect the school system between 1912, when the charter was adopted, and 1947. The inability to change this per capita amount clearly contributed to the conditions which eventually resulted in the strike.

The School System under the Commission Charter

The July 10, 1935, *St. Paul Daily News* reported budget reductions in the public schools of \$462,603 from 1932 to 1935 even though enrollment had increased by 873 pupils and the teaching staff had been reduced by forty-eight teachers. The number of pupils per teacher in St. Paul had reached the absolute limit tolerated by the Minnesota State Department of Education and the North Central Association.

Between 1919 and 1946, all amendment attempts to raise the \$30.00 per capita funding limit in the St. Paul charter were defeated by the citizens of St. Paul.

**St. Paul 1946 Teacher Salaries
Compared to Cities of Comparable Size**

City	Minimum Salary	Maximum Salary
St. Paul	\$1,300	\$2,800
Birmingham, Ala.	1,260	2,675
San Diego	2,100	3,200
Denver	2,280	3,650
Atlanta	1,020	3,627
Louisville	1,650	3,050
Omaha	1,530	2,880
Jersey City, N.J.	1,800	4,750
Rochester, N.Y.	1,850	3,250
Akron	1,650	3,100
Portland, Ore.	1,800	3,100
Dayton	1,700	3,100
Toledo	1,420	2,850
Oklahoma City	1,400	2,450
Providence	1,300	3,800
Dallas	1,623	2,835
Houston	1,800	3,000
Seattle	2,000	3,200

Source: *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 30, 1946

In 1946 the salaries of St. Paul's public school teachers lagged behind those of comparable cities.

The continuing use of a vote-splitting technique in which two similar charter amendments were submitted at the same time helped in their defeat. In addition, for years, the St. Paul Real Estate Board and the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce budgeted for campaigns to defeat charter amendments which raised taxes on businesses. The business community fought actively against increases in school spending in an attempt to keep its own taxes low.

Due to widespread criticism of how St.

Paul operated its public schools, in 1944 the city council decided to conduct an extensive survey of the public schools, appropriating \$10,000 for this purpose and appointing a Citizen's Committee to manage it. The Citizen's Committee members were Dr. Martin Graebner, president of Concordia College; Dean C. E. Ficken, professor at Macalester College; Rev. Vincent J. Flynn, president of St. Thomas College; Ramsey County District Judge Gustavus Loevinger; and Dr. Edward C. Roeber, professor of education at Hamline University.

In early 1945 the Citizen's Committee published *Your Schools and Their Needs*. The 195-page report recommended sweeping changes to St. Paul's public school system. The survey recommended that the governance of the city's schools be transferred to an autonomous public corporation armed with all authority but the taxing powers and ruled over by a seven-member, citizen-elected board of education.

Further, the report also strongly criticized the school district for not buying textbooks for students. It recommended that textbooks be provided cost-free to students and that additional funds be provided for library books and periodicals in both elementary and secondary schools. The survey also classified fifty-five percent of the elementary school buildings in the city as poor or inferior. It recommended that the city adopt a comprehensive and continuous long-range school program.³

Corruption in Saint Paul

St. Paul had a national reputation for corruption during the 1920s and '30s. According to Virginia Brainard Kunz in *St. Paul: Saga of an American City*, beginning in the 1920s, arrangements were made with the St. Paul police that allowed criminals to "not be molested in St. Paul as long as they did not commit any crimes there. A self-serving accommodation, it ignored the danger to people elsewhere in return for assurances that St. Paul's citizens would be safe, but it had the support of the city's administration and civic leaders."⁴ Kunz maintains that civic leaders supported this system because gangsters purchased expensive clothes, bought luxury automobiles, and rented fancy houses and

**THE BEST BUY YOU'LL EVER MAKE!
THE V-5 AMENDMENTS**

\$14 IS ALL IT COSTS

The Average Home Owner (now paying taxes of \$110) would pay only \$14 more next year under the V-5 amendments.

\$14 Is a Pretty Low Price for:

- Good schools
- Improved fire protection
- Sufficient traffic lights
- Free school textbooks
- Reopened playgrounds
- Juvenile police service
- Adequate garbage collection
- School health service
- Sidewalks in repair
- Decent streets
- Good street lighting

And Remember! This additional tax would be for one year only!

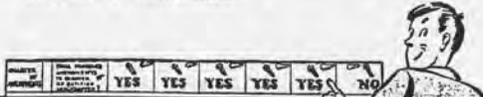


AFTER 1947 TAXES START TO GO DOWN!

Three factors will force taxes down in 1948 and thereafter:

1. **THE CITY ON A CASH BASIS.** When you borrow money, you have to pay it back... plus interest! St. Paul's City Debt is terrific. Interest alone on this debt has amounted to over a million dollars a year for the past twenty years. The Third Amendment proposes to STOP this idiotic borrowing and to put the city upon a cash basis... thus saving a million dollars a year for the taxpayers of the city.
2. **MONEY FROM OTHER MEANS THAN TAXES.** The V-5 Amendments will make it possible for the city to raise money by other means than direct taxation on the general public. The First Amendment provides this authority.
3. **ADDITIONAL BUILDING.** There will soon be a big building boom. Any additional property will add to the city's income and subtract from individual taxes.

*The V-5 Program is an economy program!
It provides for spending the money that is necessary!
It provides for saving the money now being wasted!
It provides for a fair distribution of taxes—BIG PROPERTY OWNERS PAYING THEIR SHARE!*

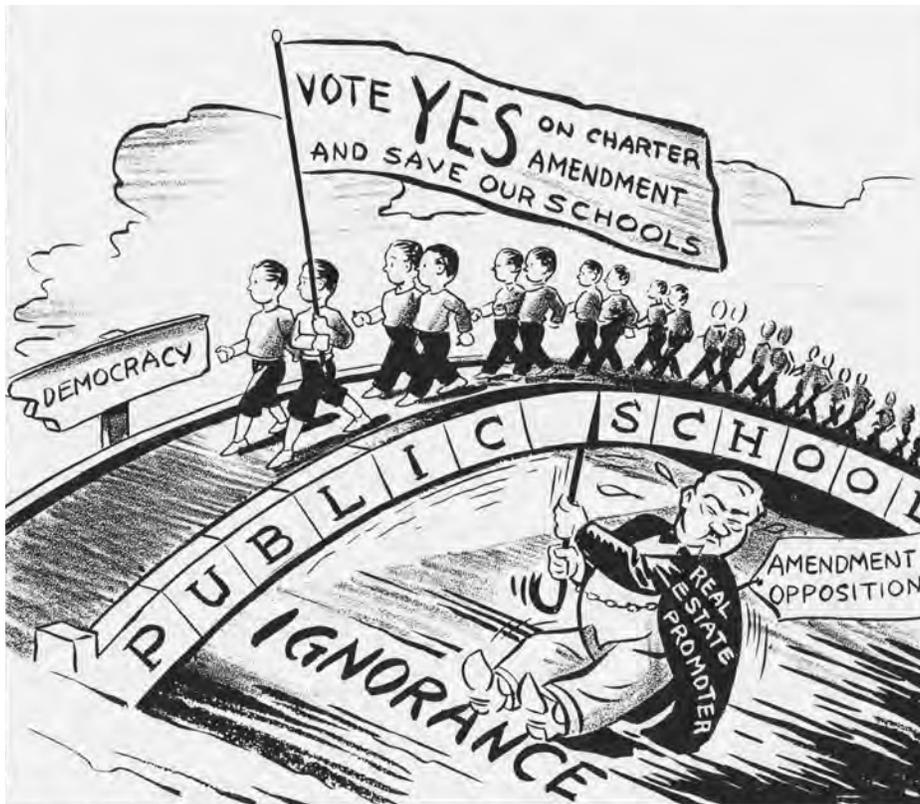


VOTE "YES" ON THE FIRST FIVE CHARTER AMENDMENTS
VOTE "NO" ON THE SIXTH

The V-5 Committee published this advertisement in the St. Paul newspapers encouraging citizens to vote for the five amendments to the city's charter in an effort to improve the St. Paul schools. Ad courtesy of the author.

apartments. During this period, substantial amounts of money changed hands between gangsters, the St. Paul police, and city government officials. Kunz (interview, May 8, 1995) said that Homer Cummings, U.S. attorney general under President Franklin Roosevelt, called St. Paul the "cesspool of the country," because of rampant corruption.

During the first half of the twentieth century when the city council controlled the public schools, corruption was also common in the school system. Several interviewed teachers confirmed that during the 1920's and '30's some teachers, including themselves, paid money to the comptroller or the city clerk in St. Paul in order to be hired. During the Depression years, when



A St. Paul teacher drew this cartoon that the Joint Council of Men and Women Teachers circulated in support of the V-5 charter amendments. Cartoon courtesy of the author.

there were more teachers than positions in large cities, paying to get a teaching job was the only sure way of being hired unless one had other connections.

Gordon Miniçier (interview, March 17, 1995), retired St. Paul assistant superintendent, felt that the Saint Paul Public School system was “full of corruption” during the 1920’s, ’30’s, and into the 1940’s. He said that it was common practice for several years that as part of their jobs and/or to be promoted, St. Paul school administrators were expected to deliver political pamphlets door-to-door and to hand out political pamphlets on street corners during election years for city council members and other city officials.

The Spark

Following the release of the 1945 school district survey, *Your Schools and Their Needs*, and under the financial restraint of the \$30.00 per capita limitation, the Saint Paul Parent Teacher Association (PTA) became increasingly more active in its attempts to bring about needed administrative and financial reforms. After months

of research and deliberation, the PTA, along with representatives from the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, the firemen’s union, the Trades and Labor Assembly, the College Club, and the League of Women Voters, drafted what was called the V-5 program. The V-5 program stood for victory for five amendments. To promote this program, these organizations formed the V-5 Committee with Mrs. Matilda Kramer as its chair. According to former Governor Elmer L. Andersen (interview, February 6, 1994) with the exception of the St. Paul teachers themselves, Mrs. Kramer did more to facilitate the change of the St. Paul schools to an independent school system than any other St. Paul citizen.

The benefits of the amendments were detailed in *The People’s V-5 Report*, an eight-page newspaper written by Mrs. Kramer and published in 1946 by the V-5 committee. The fifth amendment proposed in this report pertained to the public schools and was intended to separate the schools from politics. It also gave the Superintendent of Schools an improved

salary with greater authority over instructional matters. It indicated that the superintendent would not have to “play politics” to hold the job.⁵

The Parent Teacher Association decided against submitting the program directly to the charter commission for approval because they feared immediate refusal. Instead, it submitted petitions signed by almost 27,000 voters to the charter commission and asked that the five proposed charter changes be submitted directly to the voters at the July 8, 1946, primary.

All the publicity forced the charter commission to submit the V-5 charter amendments to the voters; however it submitted a sixth amendment as well. Eight of the fifteen charter commission members voted to include this sixth amendment, an amendment that would negate the previous five amendments by continuing the crippling \$30 per capita restriction.

The V-5 committee sought to impress upon the voters that as costs had risen, the city had been forced to reduce its services to the people in order to stay within the \$30 per capita limitation. Shortly before the election, the *People’s V-5 Report* was distributed throughout the city under the sponsorship of the V-5 Committee. It contained pictures of playgrounds and school buildings that were in a “disreputable condition.” Some schools still used individual coal stoves in each room for heat. The newspaper claimed classrooms were overcrowded; it was not unusual to have fifty students all day in an elementary classroom. It published a photograph of several boys using the one sink in the only boy’s restroom at Gutteresen Elementary School, a school with more than 180 boys. The photograph showed the boys wiping their hands on their shirts because the school could not afford to supply paper towels for the restrooms. Many schools had no soap, no towels, and no toilet paper in any of their lavatories. Many St. Paul schools in 1946 did not have modern toilet facilities.

The real estate and business community spent thousands of dollars to defeat the V-5 amendments because they had even more money at stake if the amendments passed as their property taxes

would increase. In 1946, a full-page ad in the *St. Paul Dispatch* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* cost \$600. That cost apparently did not deter the opponents of the charter changes because the newspapers ran full-page ads daily calling for the defeat of the V-5 amendments.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for Tuesday, July 9, 1946, announced that the city charter changes had all been defeated by wide margins. Lettisha Henderson, chair of the teachers' negotiating committee during the strike, mentioned in her October 29, 1970 interview with Dennis East, archivist, Wayne State University Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, that immediately after the defeat of the V-5 charter amendments, many teachers who never would have thought about striking before said, "We have to strike!"⁶

Dr. Marjorie Neihart (interview, January 25, 1995) said the teachers had tried everything. They had gone to the city council; they had gone to the mayor; they had gone to the legislature; and they had tried to pass the charter amendments. All of these efforts had failed to result in improvements for the Saint Paul Schools. A strike seemed to be the only remaining recourse.

Preparing to Strike

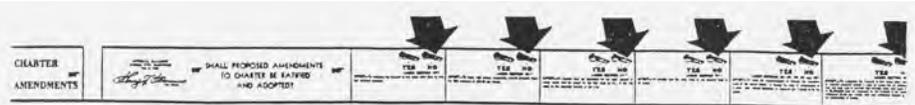
In a public letter distributed to all professional staff in St. Paul, dated October 29, 1946, the Joint Council of the men's teachers' union and the women's teachers' union stated that for nearly a generation, the quality of public school education in St. Paul had been deteriorating. Schools had been understaffed, inadequately equipped, and poorly maintained. Instructional salary schedules were so low that many capable teachers had resigned, capable new teachers had not been hired, and shamefully low living standards were being forced upon those who remained. They asked for support of the program, which was outlined in the Joint Council's 1946 pamphlet, *The First Step Up*, to advance public education.⁷

To promote the program outlined in their pamphlet, the Joint Council called for a mass meeting of teachers to be held on October 29, 1946. According to the October 30, 1946, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, more than 900 professional staff attended

the meeting. Three resolutions were unanimously adopted. The first resolution demanded funds totaling \$1,700,000 for school improvements. The second resolution called for a new salary schedule with a minimum of \$2,400 for an annual teacher's salary and a maximum eventually approaching \$5,000. The third resolution called for a \$50.00-a-month cost-of-living bonus for the last four months of 1946.

A fourth resolution gave the Joint Council authority to be the teachers' bargaining agent and to take whatever course of action was necessary to achieve

the first three resolutions. A standing vote was taken and only six teachers opposed the motion. Helen Arbes (interview, February 7, 1995) said that she had no idea before the meeting that there was any possibility of a teachers' strike. She voted "no" because her initial reaction was that teachers should not strike. After talking to others about the conditions in the schools, however, she decided a strike was the only way to force changes in the school system. In the 1946-1947 school year, Ms. Arbes had fifty students in her crowded eighth grade classroom.



The Saint Paul City Charter might be termed the "rule book" for the operation of the city government.

For many years it has been especially helpful in the limitations it places on spending of public funds . . . and in the safeguards it sets up in directing the operations of the city government.

Now, changes have been requested.

The teachers, asking for salary increases . . . and the firemen, hoping to gain a two-day work week . . . have carried on an aggressive campaign to back their demands.

In addition, to gain the cooperation of other groups interested in obtaining the power of "blank check" spending, and to make their demands appear more acceptable to the people of Saint Paul, they have included provisions to attract votes, many of which are not clear in their intention.

The result has been nothing but confusion . . . carefully compounded to give the impression that all changes they suggest are good for Saint Paul.

The background of these suggested changes is their weakness. They were not written to solve the financial problems of the city—but rather to meet the demands of special groups.

Should they come into effect, the immediate result will be a two million dollar property tax increase . . . with no improvement in school or other municipal services.

On top of this, the amendments would authorize the city council to establish a city income tax, a payroll deduction tax, a sales tax, a cigarette tax or almost any other kind of tax it desires and raise any amount of money without any limitations whatever.

but . . . there is hope!

Sponsors of changes in the City Charter have painted a black, dreary picture . . . perhaps in the fury of their desire, have over-stepped themselves a bit.

Saint Paul is not a "hick" town as they have said in their advertisements . . . in fact, is a progressive city of great importance in the Northwest. It is a city of homes . . . of good living . . . good business . . . and good common sense.

The organizations sponsoring this advertisement recommend rejection of all changes in the Saint Paul City Charter at this time.

In doing so, they wish to open the way for city-wide planning and action . . . and will co-operate with groups representative of all the people . . . with the thought in mind that special attention be given to the care of school children.

Common sense . . . calm judgment . . . unified action . . . can be a strong force - for constructive betterment of the city.

★ CITIZENS COMMITTEE FOR A BETTER SAINT PAUL

★ SAINT PAUL ASSOCIATION OF COMMERCE

★ BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH ★ MIDWAY CLUB

★ SAINT PAUL REAL ESTATE BOARD

★ CITIZENS' TAX RELIEF ASSOCIATION

In the war in the newspapers over the V-5 charter amendments, the opposition published this advertisement in the St. Paul newspapers. Ad courtesy of the author.

On Wednesday, November 13, 1946, the Joint Council sent a letter to State Labor Conciliator Leonard Johnson. This letter declared that under the provisions of the Minnesota Labor Relations Law, the St. Paul teachers were giving the required ten-day notice of their intention to strike against the St. Paul Education Department on Monday, November 25, 1946.

On November 18th, the city council voted to dismiss students at noon the next day, November 19th, in order to discuss the threatened strike with the teaching staff at a 2:00 P.M. meeting at the city auditorium. The Joint Council had scheduled a pre-strike mass meeting with the teachers at 4:00 P.M. that same day.⁸

According to the November 20th *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, at the teachers' meeting with the city council on November 19th, Commissioner of Education Fred Truax and Superintendent James E. Marshall warned teachers in great detail that if they struck, they would jeopardize their tenure rights, their state teaching certificates, and would be subject to discharge. Grace Benz (interview, September 15, 1994) said that no one asked questions, and no one responded to the speakers. At the end of the meeting, the teachers got up and silently left the auditorium. Ms. Benz characterized it as a "very dramatic happening."⁹

On November 25, 1946, the *Minneapolis Star* reported that in his sermon on Sunday, November 24th, the Reverend M.L. Frank of Olivet Congregational Church in St. Paul declared that the city's public school teachers were the victims of an outmoded and inadequate method of financing and administering the schools. He also placed responsibility directly on the voters and indicated that too much was at stake to let fears of increased taxes or selfish interests obstruct the proper functioning of the city.

Strike Leadership

All the striking teachers who were interviewed as part of the research for my dissertation identified two people as the strike's leaders: Mary McGough and Lettisha Henderson. Ms. McGough was frequently named as the most important leader, an intriguing fact, as she actually had no official strike leadership position.



On November 30, 1946, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* published this cartoon capturing the dilemma that St. Paul faced regarding funding of its public schools. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

During the strike, she was the principal at Jefferson Elementary School and had started teaching in St. Paul in 1903. During the strike several of the principals in St. Paul were members of one of the two teacher unions. This changed in 1971 when the Minnesota State Legislature passed collective bargaining legislation which no longer allowed teachers and administrators to be members of the same bargaining unit. Lettisha Henderson (interview, October 29, 1970) indicated that during the strike, Ms. McGough participated regularly in radio interviews, ex-

plaining to citizens why St. Paul teachers were striking and answering their questions about the strike. She was a strong, articulate woman and her radio interviews represented a major contribution to efforts to settle.

Lettisha Henderson was the chair of the teachers' negotiating committee during the strike and a vice president for the American Federation of Teachers. The other two members of the negotiating committee were Arthur C. Anderson, a teacher at Central High School, and Mollie Geary, the chair of the Joint Council. A "tell it

Strike Leaders Mary McGough and Lettisha Henderson

In 1946 Grace Benz was the president of the women teachers' union local in St. Paul. When asked about the strike's leaders (interview, September 15, 1994), she emphasized that without Mary McGough and Lettisha Henderson, the strike would have "fizzled." Other teachers who were interviewed reinforced this opinion.

When the strike began, Mary Ellen McGough was a principal at Jefferson Elementary School. She had been born in 1885 and began teaching in St. Paul in 1903. A founding member of the American Federation of Teachers local,



Lettisha E. "Tish" Henderson. Photo courtesy of the author.

McGough had served as its vice president in the 1930s. She had also served as president of the St. Paul Federation of Women Teachers. Thus by 1946 she had considerable experience in union organizing and in representing the teachers with public officials. A skilled public speaker, McGough's dress, demeanor, intelligence, and knowledge of parliamentary procedure had earned her considerable respect from public officials who had dealt with her over the years. In the words of Muriel Korthage (interview May 26, 1993), McGough had a lot of "clout" with officials at city hall.

Lettisha E. "Tish" Henderson, on the other hand, was younger. She had been born in 1902 in Superior, Wis. Henderson earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota and had done graduate work in the field of special education at the University of Chicago and Columbia University. In 1937 she became the supervisor of all special learning classes in St. Paul. When Dennis East interviewed her in 1970, Henderson stressed that a major factor in her decision to take a role in the strike was the deplorable physical condition of so many of the school buildings. She felt these deficiencies seriously undermined students' learning and judged they were totally unacceptable for health and safety reasons. The defeat of the V-5 charter amendments convinced Henderson that the teachers in St. Paul had to go on strike. She subsequently chaired the three-person teachers' negotiating committee, a subcommittee of the Joint Council of the individual women and men teachers' locals. Teachers who were asked in interviews about Henderson's role in the strike commented that she had a no-nonsense personality. Her honesty and caring attitude coupled with her passionate concern for the needs of students won people's confidence in her. She was also a skilled negotiator. Both women were intelligent, assertive leaders, but "Tish" Henderson's outgoing style effectively complemented Mary McGough's formal manner.

The strike thrust McGough and Henderson into important roles. Both, however, had the education and experience as teachers and administrators to handle dealing with their fellow teachers and public officials throughout the strike. Even though McGough was not a

member of the teachers' Joint Council, or a member of the negotiating committee, or even an officer of the women teachers' union, she became the public voice for the teachers. She regularly took part in radio interviews in which she articulately explained to listeners why the teachers were on strike and deftly fielded questions from her radio hosts. As one retired deputy superintendent later put it, no one was willing to take on Mary McGough "one-on-one." Henderson, in contrast, was adept at



Mary Ellen McGough. Photo courtesy of the author.

working behind the scenes as a member of the negotiating committee. In late November she was able to persuade the Minnesota attorney general to authorize the finance committee of the Joint Council to serve as the bargaining agent for the teachers and then was a key participant in the bargaining that ultimately produced the strike settlement.

Other than St. Paul teachers and their supporters at the time of the strike, few people are aware today of the contributions that Mary McGough and Lettisha Henderson made in 1946 to improve the public schools. Without their leadership, the strike might not have succeeded.

like it is” leader, Lettisha worked long and hard to improve working conditions for teachers.

Most of those interviewed recalled that the majority of leadership positions during the strike were held by women. Only 229, or fewer than twenty percent, of the 1,165 professional teaching positions in St. Paul, were filled by men and a significant number of these men taught vocational classes. Dr. Myron Lieberman (interview, February 14, 1995) a national union expert, called the St. Paul teachers at the time of the strike a “petticoat local” because of the heavy involvement of women.¹⁰

In 1946 the Saint Paul Federation of Men Teachers Local 43, and the Saint Paul Federation of Women Teachers Local 28, were separate union locals. The Joint Council of Men and Women Teachers was the governing body for the two unions. The two unions subsequently merged on September 30, 1957.

Strike for Better Schools (November 25— December 27, 1946)

According to the November 25th *Duluth Herald*, picket lines were established that morning at each of St. Paul’s seventy-seven elementary schools and high schools and three or more were on the line at the larger schools. The temperature was three degrees above zero when picketing began at 7:30 A.M., the coldest day so far that fall.

According to the November 25th *St. Paul Dispatch*, throughout the city, parents, business people, private citizens, and students carried coffee and doughnuts to the picketers or invited them into homes or buildings to eat, drink, and get warm. Parents of students at Maxfield, Crowley, and Marshall Schools set up their own picket lines in sympathy with strikers, and in many instances students carried banners alongside their teachers. Few students expressed opposition to the teachers’ stand in calling the strike. The article described picketing teachers walking on the picket lines as early as 6:30 A.M., bundled in sheepskins, overshoes, stadium boots, and wool scarves. PTA groups prepared lunches for picketers and offered their homes as rest sta-



Shortly after November 25, 1946, when the teachers went on strike in St. Paul, the Associated Press published this photograph of Sara Ryder, left, who taught English at Central High School, with two of her students, Ben Brattner, center, and Harvey Mackay. The photo appeared in hundreds of newspapers across the country and helped give the teachers’ strike national attention. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

tions. The Jewish Educational Center opened its doors to striking teachers on picket lines at Marshall High School and Webster Elementary School.

Former Governor of Minnesota Elmer L. Andersen (interview, 1995) stated “I remember the strike keenly because it is inconceivable to people today what a shock it was then to have teachers go out on strike. Teachers just didn’t do that—it would be like a priest picketing a church or cathedral. It was just absolutely unheard of. Everybody was in a state of turmoil over the strike.” He said that on the first day of the strike he stopped at his daughter’s school, Guttersen Elementary to talk to the picketers. He asked his daughter’s teachers why they had gone on strike. They realized that it was the only way they felt they could get attention. The situation was desperate, they said. They told him to look at Guttersen School; they needed a new school. In fact

St. Paul needed several new schools. They also needed smaller class sizes and many other things necessary to do an adequate job, but nobody was paying attention. In the teachers’ opinion, city commissioners were more interested in streets than in schools. The teachers pleaded for Andersen to understand that they didn’t want to strike. Making children stay at home and disrupting their education and family life was unheard of, and it was tearing them apart, they said. Governor Andersen recalled that it was a traumatic and emotional situation for teachers.

Mabel Surratt remembered Elmer L. Andersen’s visit with Guttersen teachers on the first day of the strike. At the time of the strike, he was president of the H. B. Fuller Company and a well-respected businessman in St. Paul. She felt that the backing of Andersen and his wife was a tremendous boost to teachers’ morale.¹¹

Harvey Mackay (interview, April 5,

1995) was a ninth grade student at Central High School at the time of the strike. The Associated Press took several pictures of Mackay helping his teachers, pictures which appeared in hundreds of newspapers throughout the country. He remembered that nearly everyone was sympathetic to the teachers and cheered them on. The strike was unprecedented, he said, as before that time, the idea that teachers would strike was unheard of.

According to the November 26th *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, on Monday evening, November 25th, radio station KSTP discussed the teachers' strike during a public forum program. Professor Walter W. Cook of the University of Minnesota's College of Education said that most of the public schools in St. Paul were in deplorable condition. Only in cities in the Deep South were conditions equally as poor, he said, a direct result of the fact that St. Paul had no board of education and that the schools were not financially independent from

city government. He felt that no permanent improvement to St. Paul schools would come until these changes had been made.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of December 7th reported that the city council had agreed to support an amendment separating school finances from the city activities. The agreement was applauded by the striking teachers as a great step toward the reopening of the city's schools, but the teachers also asserted that the proposed amendment must be certified by the charter commission and returned to the city council for submission to the public in a referendum before they would agree to return to work.

According to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of December 10th, the St. Paul Charter Commission met on Monday, December 9th, in a two-and-a-half hour session to review the proposed charter amendment which had the unanimous approval of the city council. Members of the PTA and labor organizations, parents, pastors, stu-

dents, and school officials appeared before the Charter Commission to urge the approval of the proposed charter amendment which would then be submitted to the voters to end the teachers' strike. Rev. Alton M. Motter, executive secretary of the Saint Paul Council of Churches, was one of those who spoke at the meeting. He pointed out that the membership of the Protestant churches of St. Paul had an especially strong interest in settling the strike since nearly all Protestants in the city sent their children to public schools. The chairman of the charter commission announced that it would take some time to draw up an amendment and study its effects.

Thousands of letters of encouragement, many containing checks for St. Paul teachers to help them finance the strike, were received from all over the nation. According to the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers records, more than \$20,000 was donated by organizations and individuals throughout the country to help with strike expenses. Some of this money was used to make loans at no interest to teachers who needed money for basic necessities, as they received no pay checks for five weeks.¹²

The December 14th *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported that the charter commission studied the proposed charter amendment for nearly four hours on Friday, December 13th. The commissioners heard city officials discuss municipal financial needs at length and decided to meet again on Monday, December 16th. On Monday, the commission hoped to draft a plan for a charter amendment aimed at giving the city more money to spend. Unfortunately on Monday, the commission deferred action on the proposed charter amendment. The commission decided to seek further information about the exact cost to the city of raising teachers' salaries as requested. The commission also voiced objections to being "put in the middle" as negotiators in the teachers' strike.

On December 20, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported that the Saint Paul Ministers' Association, representing twelve denominational bodies and seventy churches, had issued a statement giving full support to the Citizens Committee for School



This photo of strikers and their supporters appeared in the *Minneapolis Star* on November 25. The picket was in front of Maxfield Elementary School and shows (left to right) Earsel Neal, a student at the school; Earl Neil (rear), another student; Grace Carlson, a member of the Parent Teacher Association; Rev. Clarence T.R. Nelson, pastor of Camphor United Methodist Church and a member of the PTA; Milton Siegel, field representative of the United Packinghouse Workers (CIO); and Leona McGibbon, the principal of the school. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



The Minneapolis Tribune printed this photo of another group of picketers at Maxfield Elementary School. It shows neighbors Mrs. Raymond Sizemore, third from the left, and Mrs. Eugene Grant, far right, serving coffee to teachers Anne Senzer, center left, and Frieda Robe. The two people on the far left are unidentified. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Improvement headed by the Reverend John Edward Thomas. The Citizens Committee was preparing to draw up a petition to amend the city charter, a petition which would be submitted to voters if the charter commission failed to formulate its amendments. The ministers offered their services in circulating the petitions.

The December 21st *St. Paul Dispatch* reported that hopes of ending the strike had been high for several hours the previous day after the charter commission and four representatives of the teachers met at City Hall to discuss plans for putting school finance changes to a referendum. These hopes were dashed, however, when the teachers objected to a no-strike pledge requested by members of the commission.

On December 27, 1946, unofficial negotiations between Clarence B. Randall, a charter commission member, and teacher representatives overcame the negotiating impasse. The two sides agreed on a

charter amendment that would increase the existing \$30 per capita expenditure to \$42, with the schools receiving \$18 and the balance being allocated to other city departments. The December 28th *St. Paul Pioneer Press* subsequently reported that on the previous evening, St. Paul teachers had suspended their strike after the charter commission approved an amendment based on these new spending limits that would permit the expenditure of \$18 per capita for schools and \$24 per capita for other city departments. In effect, this proposed amendment ensured that the resulting new tax revenues would be spread across all city departments rather than just providing an increase in tax dollars to the public schools and the teachers, most of whom were women.

After the Strike

According to the Monday, December 30th *St. Paul Dispatch*, public school children

in the city and their teachers streamed back to their classrooms on the coldest day so far that winter. The newspaper stated, "Despite the bitter cold, there was a holiday spirit about the students as they walked toward their school buildings and this persisted in the corridors where they had not gathered since November 22." The newspaper went on to say, "Both the students and the teachers were obviously delighted to return to the school routine and teachers welcomed their pupils enthusiastically."¹³

After two tries and on April 15, 1947, St. Paul voters passed a charter amendment. This amendment, supported by the teachers, provided the necessary short-term relief to alleviate, at least for a time, the financial crisis in the St. Paul schools. More importantly, the amendment separated expenditures for education from those of other city departments, a key issue for teachers throughout the strike.

According to Dr. Marjorie Neihart (interview, January 25, 1995), due, in part, to the lobbying efforts of Lettisha Henderson and the St. Paul teachers, the 1947 Minnesota legislature passed legislation which required school districts to buy textbooks for students in order to receive state aid. This was a tremendous victory for both St. Paul teachers and students because for years St. Paul students had been required to buy their own books.

In 1949, former Governor Elmer L. Andersen, who was a state legislator at the time, prepared legislation that authorized an election in St. Paul to establish a school board. The first attempt in 1949 to establish a school board was defeated, but a second attempt in 1951 was successful; as a result, in January 1952, St. Paul established its first school board. Unfortunately, the board had no fiscal powers. In 1959, State Representatives Karl Grittner and Lyle Farmer drafted legislation whereby the school board could initiate a vote to convert St. Paul to an Independent School District, a move which was defeated in 1960 but approved in 1964. On July 1, 1965, nineteen years after the St. Paul teachers' strike, Independent School District 625 finally became a reality.

When I interviewed participants of the strike, my final question was, "What

was the legacy of the strike?" The overwhelming response to this question was that the strike had led to an independent school district for St. Paul. An independent school district was not established immediately, but during the strike the seeds were planted to strive for granting the public schools in St. Paul fiscal and political independence from city government.

Another common theme among striking teachers who were interviewed was that the strike made them feel empowered. During the strike, for the first time, they felt that they had power as a group. Teachers felt that their strike had made a positive difference in the way St. Paul educated its public school students.

Former Governor Elmer L. Anderson (interview, February 6, 1995) stated that because of the strike, the citizens of St. Paul paid more attention to the public school system. He maintained that as a direct result of the strike, funding for public schools in St. Paul dramatically improved.

Strike Ripples Outside of St. Paul

According to Karl Grittner (interview, January 20, 1995), the St. Paul school strike had national significance in that many school boards throughout the nation as well as in Minnesota gave unsolicited salary increases as a result of the strike. Mr. Grittner is a retired St. Paul School principal and retired state legislator. Agnes Searl (1983) remembered a close friend teaching in East Chicago, Indiana, whose yearly salary was raised by \$1,000 after the St. Paul teachers' strike. Ms. Searl also felt that many other teachers throughout the country benefited financially from the St. Paul strike.¹⁴

Even before the strike began, the debate in St. Paul had had some influence in other Minnesota cities. In November 1946 Albert Lea teachers were given a \$300-a-year raise. All school employees in Stillwater were granted cost-of-living increases of \$15 to \$25 per month. The school board in Sauk Centre granted teachers pay raises ranging from \$100 to \$200 per year. Although the teachers in these cities might have received these increases anyway, the newspaper report im-

plied that the negotiations in St. Paul indirectly influenced the decisions in those communities.¹⁵

During the St. Paul teachers' strike, Karl Grittner was teaching at St. Claire, a small town near Mankato, Minnesota. He remembered that the Mankato newspaper printed daily updates on the St. Paul teachers' strike. He said that for the duration of the strike, it was the talk of almost all school districts. Dr. Marjorie Neihart (January 25, 1995) remembered seeing weekly national news updates on the St. Paul teachers' strike at movie theaters before the feature movie began.

In the 1940s, the Associated Press political reporter for Minnesota was Jack Mackay whose wife was a substitute teacher for the Saint Paul Public School system and whose children, including Harvey Mackey, attended public school in St. Paul. Jack Mackay gave extensive international wire service coverage to the struggle in St. Paul to provide adequate public education to the city's students.

Conclusions

The St. Paul teachers' strike exposed the weakness of a system which gave fiscal controls for education to city officials rather than to responsible educational authorities. At the time of the strike, St. Paul had no board of education. The complexities of the needs of public education demonstrated the need for a board of education that could focus exclusively on educational funding, budgets, and policies.

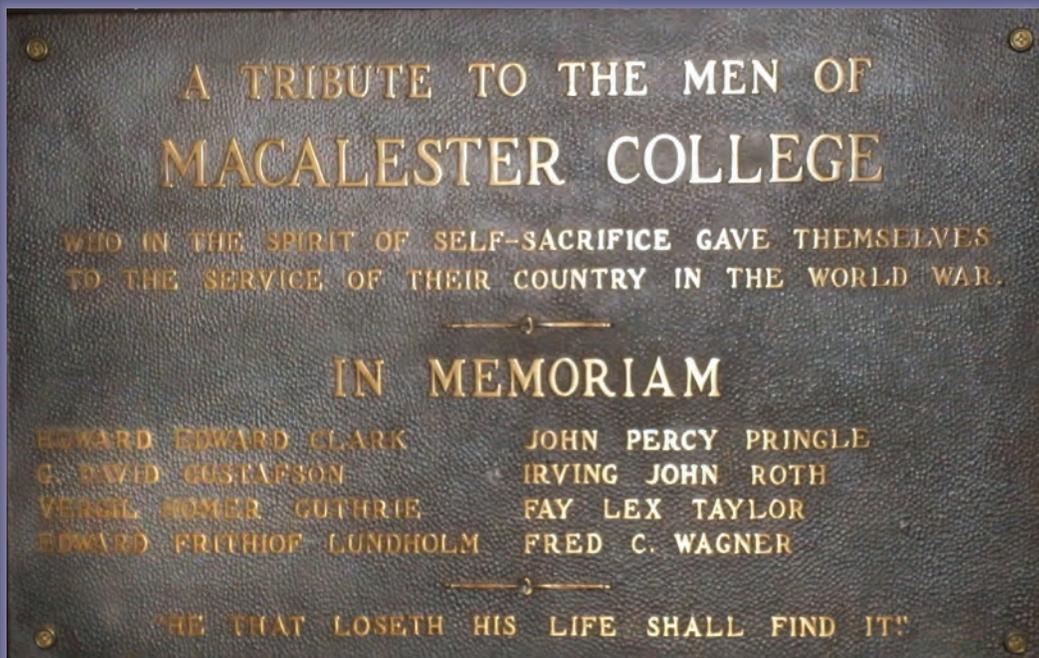
Unfortunately, the nation's first teachers' strike was needed to awaken the St. Paul community to the reality that their public schools were grossly underfunded compared to those in the rest of the state and the rest of the country. The strike was a result of the failure of St. Paul government officials to address the city's educational needs as uninformed St. Paul voters failed to see the needs of education. St. Paul voters defeated several charter amendments aimed at improving educational conditions for St. Paul school children before they were educated by the St. Paul teachers who planned and organized the first teachers' strike in the nation.

Fortunately, the strike caused many St. Paul citizens to begin to examine the in-

adequate funding of their public schools and to see a need for change. As the strike went on, more and more citizens pledged their support to the striking teachers. Finally, with extensive support from St. Paul citizens, St. Paul teachers were successful in *striking for better schools*.

Endnotes

1. Nolan Charles Kearney, *The Development of Administrative Control in the St. Paul Public Schools* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1948), 130. For more information from Nolan C. Kearney, see his *Report of Public School Survey* (St. Paul: City of St. Paul Bureau of Public Schools, 1938).
2. Michael McDonough, *St. Paul Federation Teachers: Fifty Years of Service 1918-1968* (St. Paul, Minn.: St. Paul Federation of Teachers, 1968), 11-12. During the strike, McDonough was the chair of the teachers' picketing committee.
3. Millard D. Bell, Paul A. Rehmus, Eugene S. Lawler, George W. Rosenlof, director, under the Authority of the Citizens' Committee Appointed by the City Council of the City of St. Paul, *Your Schools and Their Needs: The Report of a Survey of Selected Areas of the Public Schools of the City of St. Paul, Minnesota* (St. Paul, 1945).
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7. Fred Strong, *The First Step Up* [special bulletin] (St. Paul: Teachers' Joint Council, October 1946).
8. "Warning Against Intimidation," *The Federationist*, November 19, 1946 [special issue], p. 1.
9. For information on the strong support that the teachers received from organized labor in St. Paul before the strike began and while it was underway, see *Minnesota Labor Review*, November and December 1946, and Cheryl Carlson, *Strike for Better Schools: The St. Paul Public School Teachers' Strike of 1946* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of St. Thomas, 1995), 94-95, 122-23, 128, and 131-33.
10. Myron Lieberman, *The Future of Public Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960). Dr. Lieberman is an expert on teacher unions and during 1948-49 was a teacher in the St. Paul public schools.
11. Mabel Surratt, *Voices from 1920-1930*, in A. Fisker, A. Gilsdorf, and M. Golden, eds., *A Collection of Memories from 1910-1960 as Volunteered by St. Paul Educators* (St. Paul: St. Paul Retired Teachers Association, 1983), 69-70.
12. Carlson, 130.
13. *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 30, 1946, p. 1.
14. Agnes Searl, in A. Fisker, A. Gilsdorf, and M. Golden, eds., 116-121.
15. Carlson, 102-03.



Sometime after the Armistice of November 11, 1918, Macalester College honored those members of its community who gave their lives in the service of the United States during World War I. The college mounted this bronze plaque in Old Main hall. Photo courtesy of Emily Skidmore. See Emily Skidmore's article on page 14.

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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
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