

Vocational Instructor

Local 4200A ~ AFT, AFTCT, & AFL-CIO



"It Pays
To Be Taught
By a Vo-Tech
Teacher"

Volume MMXX Issue 8

May 2020

True Appreciation

By Ed Leavy, SVFT President

I recently received Superintendent Jeff Wihbey's Teacher Appreciation Day email. I found it quite good: he recognizes the extraordinary efforts our teachers are making so the distance learning program can be as successful as possible, and he comes across as sincere in his praise of how everyone is supporting their students and each other in these incredibly trying times. Since becoming an officer, I have worked with four Superintendents. Not all of them actually respected the talents and efforts of our teachers. In my time working with Jeff, I have grown to believe he truly does.

It is one thing to express or feel appreciation; it is another thing to put it into action. It was National Teacher Appreciation last Week (and also National Public Employee Appreciation Week and Nurses' Appreciation Week - it's like families who have one party for all the summer birthdays so they don't have to be bothered more than once), and everyone sings the praises of teachers all week, especially this year. Yet we still have a Secretary of Education in Betsey DeVos who has dedicated her adult life to destroying public education. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo asked last week, "Why do we even have school buildings?" and announced he wants to work with Bill Gates to move to permanent distance learning, thereby shutting down all of the social and emotional - and much of the educational - value of school but also saving money by cutting the number of teachers needed. We see the war on public education continue unabated through much of the country.

In Connecticut, the praise for teachers comes amid calls throughout the state to slash education budgets to address towns' reduced revenue. As both teachers and public employees, we get to spend the week reading and hearing about why we need to have more concessions because everyone has to "tighten their belt" - everyone, of course, but Connecticut's 17 billionaires and scores of millionaires who fattened from the recent \$1.5 trillion tax cut aimed at them will continue to loosen theirs and give up nothing. It's hard to feel really appreciated.

One would hope the lesson for everyone at Central Office would be that working with the teachers directly or through union leadership is the best way to create and implement policy. Laurie Pelletier, former CT AFL-CIO President, used to say, "If you want people on the plane when it lands, make sure they're on the plane when it takes off." Instead, some people seemed to decide they won't get everything they want if the teachers, the people who will be directly involved, are given a voice at the start. Instead, they will design a plan and then command the teachers move in that direction, like pawn to king 4 in chess. So curriculums are either assigned to teachers to work on during their "free time" from noon until 3:00 or are designed by a tiny group of people who are guaranteed to cooperate. We see it in some schools, in which the assumption is that if students are not participating, the teachers must not be trying to engage them (to be fair, there are also schools in which the principal has been fully supportive and understanding). We see it in emails that remind teachers their work day "does not end at 11:30," or script what teachers should say to parents.

We cannot feel appreciated if we don't feel respected. We are not well-behaved children; we are professionals. For everyone in the country, the state, and the district who has said nice things about teachers this week: thank you for your kind words. Everyone would be better off if they were put into action.

Labor History: The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

By Ed Leavy

On Wednesday, May 6 sanitation workers in New Orleans, Louisiana went on strike against People Ready, a private company that employs workers who do work for the city. The workers, who make \$10.10 an hour, demanded to be provide personal protection equipment such as gloves and masks, paid sick leave, and "hazardous duty" pay of \$15 per week for working during the pandemic. The company refused to budge.

Instead of standing behind the workers, the City of New Orleans instead contracted with Metro Service Group which uses prison labor because they "have long been an advocate for helping persons who had been incarcerated return to society in a meaningful and productive way." Perhaps not coincidentally, they also pay the prisoners \$1.31 an hour, an 87% savings for the contract.

This is a story that should be receiving a lot of attention but is not – I learned about it when a friend of mine posted about it on Facebook. Abuse of low-wage workers is so prevalent it is not considered news. It reminded me of another sanitation strike in which a Southern city dug in against its largely African American sanitation workers. The Memphis Sanitation strike is only remembered today because Martin Luther King was assassinated after a rally in support of the strikers. I wrote about it in February, 2014, but in solidarity with the workers in New Orleans, it seems appropriate to run again.

The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike of 1968 is remembered today exclusively as the backdrop to Dr. Martin Luther King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech and his tragic assassination the next day. The events of the strike itself say a great deal about that particular moment in history, when the civil rights movement began to fray. It also tells us about today, when some of the issues that caused the strike are still not resolved.

The Problems the Memphis sanitation workers faced were numerous. Salaries were so low that most workers qualified for food stamps and 40% qualified for welfare. The equipment had fallen into such disrepair that the job was extremely dangerous. AFSME organized the workers in 1964, but when they voiced the complaints of the workers – almost all of them African American – the local press responded with blatantly racist editorial cartoons. An attempted strike in 1966 had collapsed when local civic organizations, especially churches, failed to support the workers. A severe storm on February 1, 1968 provided the incidents that spurred the workers into action. Two workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death when their truck malfunctioned. On the same day, twelve workers were sent home without pay because of the weather; the supervisors who made the decision – and, who unlike the workers, were white – were paid for the day. On February 11, the workers voted to strike to protest these events. A peaceful rally the next day was broken up by local police using tear gas and mace. The police violence, more than the causes underlying the strike, spurred local churches and the Memphis African American middle class into action. After a sit-in throughout Memphis, the City Council voted to recognize the union and recommended wage increases. The new mayor, Harry Loeb, was adamant that he would not be the first Southern mayor to recognize a minority-dominated union, and he rejected the Council's recommendation by claiming only he had the power to recognize a union. The strike dragged on.

The strike became and battle not just between the City and the union, but within the civil rights movement itself. Acclaimed national leaders such as Bayard Rustin and Roy Wilkins arrived in Memphis to rally workers. James Lawson got hundreds of college and high school students, many of them white, to commit to nonviolent resistance, and the jails were soon full of protestors. On March 18, Dr. King spoke to the largest indoor gathering of his career and encouraged the group to stay united. "You are demonstrating that we can stick together. You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down."

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The reality in Memphis though was that, at least in terms of tactics, the workers and especially their supporters were not united. A group of young people called the Invaders, who were inspired by Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers rather than Dr. King, became part of the marches, and incidents of violence and looting became regular occurrences. These incidents provided an excuse for Mayor Loeb to request and receive 4000 National Guardsmen. The situation in Memphis became so tense that Dr. King was tempted to cancel his return visit. A huge snowstorm delayed a planned event, and Dr. King decided to attend.

His final speech is recalled today for his chillingly prescient recognition that he may not be with us much longer. But his words on the strike, and the need for the community to support strikers everywhere, were no less remarkable: “The question is not, ‘If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?’ The question is, ‘If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?’ That’s the question.”

Dr. King was assassinated the next day. On April 8th, his widow Coretta Scott King led 42,000 people on a silent march through Memphis. On April 16th, the City Council agreed to recognize the union and guarantee better wages. The Union had to threaten another strike to get the City to pay those wages, but labor had perhaps its most tragic victory. Yet some issues that caused the strike have yet to be resolved. Low-income workers, especially in retail and food service, are still routinely sent home without pay when work is slow. I have met with an AFT local of visiting nursing assistants – all of them women, most of them minority – who had just been told that if there was a break of more than an hour in their day, they were to go home without pay during the break. The practice was deplorable in 1968; it hasn’t improved over the last 46 years.



What's Happening from Wallingford

The headline of the article is, of course, somewhat misleading. We do spend some time in the office, but we are mostly working remotely. Here are some of the issues we are addressing you should know about:

- New members – Take a moment to think about our new teachers who have begun their careers in the system while working remotely. They cannot ask for help or advice from the teacher next to them, because they are sitting in their own homes. They do not meet their students in any meaningful way. It must be a really strange way to begin. Paul continues to meet with new hires before they begin, however, so they have some sense of what lies before them in (hopefully) late August. He practices proper social distancing by meeting in parks or remotely. We continue to have all our new hires join the union, in large part because of Paul's tireless work.
- Bob has worked out an agreement guiding remote meetings. Since it is now clear that we will not be back this school year, issues that were unresolved in March now must be addressed. The agreement recommends but does not require the use of video for the meetings.
- Everyone received a letter from Karen Zuboff regarding disclosure of positive COVID 19 diagnosis. This policy is true for all State workers, not just the CTECS. The State will inform the agency leader, site leader (in our case that means the Superintendent and the principal), and the local union president of any positive results, but the name of the person is not revealed for privacy concerns. That process is currently in place, and we have received these notifications. We should assume this process and others will be in place when we eventually return to school next year.
- We received several calls about reports that administration officials met with SEBAC leadership. Those reports were accurate; we had a Zoom call with administration officials. We heard what they had to say, we gave them our reaction, and it ended. There are no plans to meet again.
- The timeframes in the contract to apply for changes in the degree stipend were not written with a pandemic in mind. Please don't send transcripts or ask for the application form yet from Carla Kielbasinski; like everyone else, she is mostly working from home so mailing her transcripts only means they are likely to get lost.



Vocational Instructor

*is the monthly newsletter of the
State Vocational Federation of Teachers*

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SVFT Mission Statement

The SVFT is an organization of professional educators that promotes excellence through the mutual adherence to policies, documents, and procedures negotiated with the CTEC. We work to guarantee that the contract is followed and positive working conditions are maintained. This organization shall be to provide a safe and positive teaching environment for all by:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the contract, the Vocational Technical High School System, and the solidarity of the union
2. Ensuring all members are protected by the contract and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to make them successful
3. Protecting the jobs of our members and strengthening our system
4. Providing members opportunities to further their education and receive quality professional development
5. Responding quickly to the emerging changes to the workplace and technological challenges
6. Handling all interactions with fairness and integrity
7. Striving for productive, open communication between the SVFT leadership and our membership
8. Building and improving relationships with our union affiliates and local labor councils