

## The East Detroit Federation of Teachers is a Local with a Rich Heritage (an historical perspective)

Early efforts for organization of professional employees began in **1935** with a small group of teachers backed by some parents. This group attempted to negotiate a salary increase from the existing rate of \$90.00 a month. The failure of this movement initiated the informal organization of a Teacher's Club, which met secretly! Between the years **1935** and **1942**, two Detroit Federation members helped organize a local chapter of the A.F.T in East Detroit Schools. Although salary remained the major factor in organizing, teaching conditions played a close second in importance.

On **February 18, 1942**, the Macomb County Federation of Teachers, A.F.T. Local #698 was chartered. It represented 48 teachers. By **1947** the local had grown to represent 110 teachers. Postwar inflation wreaked havoc with the teachers' paychecks. The School Board ignored their plight. This caused the then dramatic action of all 110 teachers walking out of the district's four schools in early **May 1947**. This group of teachers stayed out, walking a picket line, for one week. The 15 nonunion teachers remaining in school, attempted to take charge of the students but found this impossible. Consequently, the schools were all closed.

An organized group of parents supported the striking teachers. They waited for three hours to meet with the Board, but no Board members showed! An attempt to recall the Board was defeated when parents discovered it was illegal, at that time, to recall school board members.

Soon, however, individual Board members made verbal agreements. The situation began to look hopeful, so the teachers returned to their classrooms. However, the Board would not put in writing what had been agreed upon verbally. Once again, the teachers left their classrooms for another week. This time the agreement was put in writing. **THIS WAS THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL TEACHER STRIKE IN THE UNITED STATES!**

The Hutchinson Act (forbidding teachers to strike under penalty of law) was created after EDFT's **1947** strike.

Much headway was made in the years following the **1947** strike. East Detroit became a tenure district, a dismissal and grievance procedure was established, the sick leave policy was improved, and a Credit Union was established. Teachers worked together to raise money for a scholarship fund. The Citizens' Committee remained active and for the first time the teachers had some input regarding the educational process.

In **1965**, Public Act 379 gave public employees the right to bargain collectively. An election was held in East Detroit for bargaining rights and the Federation defeated the Educational Association 299 to 150.

In **1969**, the East Detroit teachers were once again walking with their picket signs saying "No Contract, No Work." This time, under the leadership of President Hugh Jarvis, the school system was shut down for two weeks. There were ~~now~~ 12 elementary schools, three junior highs, and one high school in the district. Once again, we had a successful strike. On **September 18, 1969**, the EDFT negotiation team reported a settlement.

September of **1974** saw another historic strike for the district. The district had hired a professional negotiator who was also negotiating in several other districts. He was too busy to meet in East Detroit, which forced the union to file unfair labor practices. By the time school was to begin, both sides were far apart on several large items. The membership voted once again to strike. The courts ordered the teachers back to work, but our members defied the order. Once again the signs stating, "No Contract, No Work" were carried by our teachers. In response to this, the judge ordered marathon bargaining, a Fact Finder and a new court date telling the union leaders to bring their toothbrushes if the strike was still in progress by the next court date. Meanwhile, the judge served notice to six randomly chosen building representatives that they return to work or be jailed, stating the jails were not large enough to hold all 522 teachers. The teachers chose not to return to work. **FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MICHIGAN, TEACHERS WERE**

### **PUT IN A PADDY WAGON, TAKEN OFF TO JAIL, BOOKED AND ASSIGNED JAIL CELLS.**

Sue Reynolds, Bill Rouse, Caroline Stobaugh (Reid), Art Miller, Al Torp, and Kathy Slebodnik became known as our "Dirty Half Dozen!" The judge later claimed the jailing was a clerical error and that a court officer had prematurely carted the teachers off to jail. All six eventually had their court records expunged. Both sides accepted the fact finder's recommendation, and a one-year contract was signed.

In **1975**, it was time to begin school and EDFT did not have a contract by fall. The teachers again voted to strike. This time the School Board decided not to go for the injunction because jailing teachers took too long. They stated they were preparing firing notices for every teacher in the district. A 17-hour bargaining session concluded with a new 2-year contract and no teachers fired.

One more strike brought on the formation of the new win-win bargaining philosophy. President Carl Rohloff and the district superintendent created SISS (School Improvement Study Session) which permitted teams on both sides of the bargaining table to negotiate agreements with letters of understanding. Three-year contracts were the norm within the framework of the win-win concept. As President Hugh Jarvis once stated, "This has never been an ice cream local!"

Vicki Barrows became the Federation president upon the retirement of Rohloff and she presided over a very difficult time in district history. Residents approved a bond to renovate many buildings and facilities in the district. A scandal involving many central administrators including the superintendent embarrassed the district and caused a major economic crisis. Several members of the central office team and the school board ended up in jail and only a portion of the funds were recovered. The teachers, children and citizens of the city were left to absorb most of the damage.

Through skillful negotiations with the new administration Barrows' team and the EDFT were able to help formulate a path to lead the district to a strong recovery in a matter of only a few years and ahead of schedule. Problems still existed though, as the size of the district had been declining and buildings had been closing for a number of years. Members endured tremendous sacrifice through these tough times, but subsequent contracts made significant progress in creating fair and equitable working conditions for everyone in the district. The inclusion of Alternative Education teachers and school nurses to the bargaining unit and better treatment of paraprofessionals were important improvements during this period.

Upon Barrows' retirement, Dara Knill was responsible for leading the EDFT. During her tenure, the district began to see a more aggressive posture from administration and less openness to the SISS concept of managing the district. Contracts and negotiations became more protracted and difficult as administration moved to eliminate some of the hard won equitable working conditions provided for in the contract. Dara and her team stood strong in defending the contract and working to keep good relations with administration.

Also during Dara's terms in office, the EDFT moved from its longtime offices near 10 mile and Gratiot just down the street to a newer and more professional office complex. Along with our Roseville officemates, EDFT representatives carted tons of boxes and files down the street to the new office. Many historic documents and records were donated during this time to the Wayne State Labor Library to add to their collection of labor history.

Dara left the presidency in 2007, but remained on the negotiating team to help usher in new leadership under Lincoln Stocks. That contract took aggressive steps at addressing disparity, which was created during the scandal of the late 1990's, as compared to neighboring districts.

Economic disaster was, however, right around the corner. Administration undertook an aggressive construction program creating ninth grade segregation at the High School and connecting the old and new sections of the building with a bridge. The Great Recession coupled with Schools of Choice legislation in the early 2000's led to a massive exodus of students to surrounding communities and out of the State of Michigan. This in turn created a significant shortfall in expected State revenue to

the district. Adding to this, were increased spending and inaccurate accounting practices by the district's Director of Finance leaving an approximate \$3.2 million shortfall and a continuing budget that placed the district at a projected \$11.2 million deficit.

Upon the reorganization of most of central administration staff, the Union and the district began to work together to build a Deficit Reduction Plan finding a way to resolve the shortfall. Administration promoted a "right-sizing" program, which closed several buildings and laid off many EDFT members. Attrition helped to alleviate some of the lay-offs, but the staff took tremendous cuts in numbers and increases in class sizes.

Further changes realigned the grades of the buildings creating upper and lower elementary programs at the four remaining elementary buildings and a 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade structure at the remaining middle school. Significant changes in fringe benefits and salary schedules were also made to create a more sustainable cost structure for the district. New administration worked with the EDFT to restore more cooperative and inclusive decisionmaking.

The difficult times led the EDFT to undertake the "American Values Campaign", which is designed to create a tangible link between the teaching staff and the community. Economic crisis in the state, coupled with new calls for school reform made teachers and unions the scapegoats for all that has failed in public education. The campaign focused on connecting with the community in many different ways and promoting the school district as the center of the community.

It is essential in this environment that Eastpointe residents recognize how grateful the EDFT is to be able to serve this community and in turn for it to be able to recognize how important we are to their well-being. EDFT members continued the many fine traditions of community involvement that they have always participated in, but they have also made a more conscious effort to be visible contributors to the residents and school of choice families assisting in their recovery from this Great Recession.

From Clothes Closets and free shopping days, turkey and Christmas food packages to an innumerable number of volunteers supporting community programs, EDFT members are continuing to make themselves an indispensable part of this community.

Everyone in the district is facing more tough times ahead, but the upgraded technology and refurbished buildings that came with the new alignment and curriculum improvements promise a bright future for everyone in the EDFT.

Continued cuts in State support forced the district to become an active participant in Schools of Choice across county lines. East Detroit became a preferred district for students seeking a quality education. Unfortunately, poor academic performance and problems that accompany economic hardship followed many of the students leading to several schools within the East Detroit district to post failing State assessment scores as compared to previous years and with districts across the State. All of the schools placed on the State's priority list are implementing intervention strategies and increasing time in class.

The EDFT stepped up to meet the immense challenges by working with students, parents, administrators and State moderators to use data-driven decisionmaking to transform their teaching to reflect the most effective current techniques promising improved student achievement. These changes are not easy and are being done with the reality of yet another massive pay reduction in 2013 to make certain the district is able to remain out of receivership.

As the EDFT struggles to keep pay and benefits at a level that attracts and keeps quality teachers, other unions in the district are facing elimination. Local 120 custodians were outsourced in the summer of 2013 and all experienced EDFT coaches were removed from the bargaining contract and

suffered a 60% pay cut. Secretaries and other support employees have taken significant cuts in pay and benefits to try and remain employed.

In 2013, the State of Michigan reversed more than a half century of labor progress by making Michigan a Right to Work “for less” state. Employees now have the option to be freeloaders on the coattails of union activism and enjoy the benefits fought for by union members, but pay none of the dues. Automatic dues deduction was made illegal in an attempt to defund the union and bankrupt Republican Party opponents. The EDFT was a leader in the State by forming an alliance with the Eastpointe Community Credit Union to open individually owned separate accounts which allow members to direct a portion of their check to the credit union and have the credit union make their dues payment without an inconvenience to our members. The EDFT continues to demonstrate an incredible solidarity to stick together through the toughest of times and keep a professional approach to education the top priority.