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## Complicating the Narrative: Labor, Feminism, and Civil Rights in the United Teachers of New Orleans Strike of 1990

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Complicating the Narrative: Labor, Feminism, and Civil Rights in the United Teachers of New Orleans Strike of 1990

A Thesis

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University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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Master of Arts  
in  
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by

Emma Long

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## Abstract

In 1990, over 3,000 of 4,500 New Orleans public school teachers refused to enter their classrooms over a contract dispute with their employer, the Orleans Parish School Board. For three weeks, teachers picketed while the negotiating team for their union, The United Teachers of New Orleans, worked to reach a contract agreement. Using interviews with striking teachers and union leaders, this paper aims to tell this story from their perspective. The interviews shed light on the ways that minorities and women used UTNO, with the incorporated ideologies and strategies of civil rights and feminism, as a platform to combat economic, political, and social inequalities in New Orleans at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An analysis of this strike also aims to complicate the current historiography of the union—filling the gap between its activism in the 1970s to its near dismantling after Hurricane Katrina.

Keywords: Labor, Education, Civil Rights, Feminism, Teachers, New Orleans.

On September 27, 1990, *The Times-Picayune* published a letter to the editor written by second grade teacher Margie Fluitt. Angered by citywide criticism of teachers over the New Orleans teachers strike, Fluitt wrote to express her frustration and explain to readers why she and her co-workers continued to stand firm on the picket line.

It seems to me that I can be insulted and abused by my employer, the Orleans Parish School Board, but I'm expected to continue doing my job without saying or doing anything about it.<sup>1</sup>

Many teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers represented by the United Teachers of New Orleans, or UTNO, shared Fluitt's sentiment towards the Orleans Parish School Board.<sup>2</sup> By the time *The Times Picayune* published Fluitt's letter, the teacher strike had progressed well into its second week without any resolution in sight. The following day, September 28, UTNO president and chief negotiator Nat LaCour, alongside the UTNO bargaining team, rejected a contract offer by the Orleans Parish School Board, referring to it as "an insult and a waste of our time."<sup>3</sup>

Tensions had begun in the summer before the 1990-1991 academic year when UTNO's bargaining team had been unable to reach an agreement with the school board on a new teacher contract. Every three years since the mid-1980s, the teacher union had renegotiated a contract with the Orleans Parish School Board, or OPSB, to reaffirm employment guidelines and benefits, as well as teacher salaries. In the summer of 1990, the union had pushed aside the issue of teacher pay and instead negotiated a salary increase for clerical workers and paraprofessionals, or teacher's aides, as well as a boost for its health insurance fund. The negotiating team for the

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<sup>1</sup> Margie Fluitt. "Why Orleans teachers are walking a picket line." *The Times Picayune*, September 27, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Paraprofessionals represented by UTNO included full time classroom aides, tutors, interpreters for bilingual students, hearing impaired, and deaf students. Clerical workers, also represented by the union, worked primarily in school offices.

<sup>3</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "Union rejects offer; no new talks are set." *The Times Picayune*, September 29, 1990.

financially stretched OPSB had rejected these demands. Margie Fluitt and other union members saw this contract rejection as an example of OPSB's unwillingness to negotiate in good faith. In her letter to the editor, Fluitt wrote, "When the board could not find \$50 dollars a year more for each of us, we decided that we had not received economic justice and so drew our line in the sand."<sup>4</sup> The "line in the sand" meant between 68% and 80% of the public school's 4,500 employees would not show up for work on the strike's first day—September 17, 1990.<sup>5</sup>

With their picket signs, teachers crowded onto school sidewalks while UTNO negotiators retracted all compromised measures of the contract, pushing for a more lucrative deal that added teacher pay raises to their previous demands.<sup>6</sup> In an additional move, union members pledged to work for the recall of school board members. Holding tight to their demands, striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clericals stayed out of their schools for three weeks until October 8, when OPSB and UTNO leaders agreed on a compromise at the bargaining table.

In this three-week period, from mid-September to early October, both the union and school board sought community support. Through the use of advertisements and interviews in local media outlets like *The Times Picayune* and *The Louisiana Weekly*, leaders from the union and school board worked to sway public opinion.<sup>7</sup> The OPSB appealed to fiscal conservatives in the city, saying of the union's demands, "We cannot give what we do not have."<sup>8</sup> Nat LaCour, president and chief negotiator of the UTNO's bargaining team, appealed to the familiarity of New Orleanians with administrative mismanagement and misappropriation of funds. He argued throughout the strike that the school board had the money to meet teacher's needs and claimed

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<sup>4</sup> Margie Fluitt. "Why Orleans teachers are walking a picket line." *The Times Picayune*, September 27, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "Strike to last to bitter end, teachers vow." *The Times Picayune*, September 18, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Formed in 1925, *The Louisiana Weekly* has served as a news outlet for African American and minority readers in New Orleans.

<sup>8</sup> Quote by Dr. Frank Fudesco, chief negotiator of the OPSB bargaining team. Rhonda Nabonne. "Strike won't shut schools, board vows." *The Times Picayune*, September 17, 1990.

administrators had pocketed this money for themselves, or mismanaged it through unnecessary attorney fees and un-refinanced bonds. Members of each negotiating team spent weeks in heated debate, both in and out of the public eye, to reach a contract that did not exceed the budget of the board, while also addressing union concerns.

Beyond the bargaining table, the striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers, who refused to return to work until negotiators penned a settlement, backed up UTNO negotiators out on the picket line. Outside of many New Orleans public schools, the chants and demands on picket lines grew larger and louder. Striking teacher Melanie Boulet remembered calling substitutes “scabs” and screaming, “stay out” or “don’t go in,” in order to, as she put it, “put pressure on all the pressure points.”<sup>9</sup> Mike Stone, a striking teacher from McMain High School, remembered teachers shouting the names of co-workers crossing the picket line, pressuring them to join the strike.<sup>10</sup> Strikers also participated in rallies and marches. In the third week of the strike, teachers staged a mock jazz funeral through the French Quarter for the passing of Ed. U. Cation.<sup>11</sup> For three weeks, on city sidewalks, striking teachers backed up the negotiators at the bargaining table to pressure the school board to compromise and meet union demands.

An analysis of contemporary newspapers, school board records, and strike documents readily reveals the economic goals of the UTNO in the strike of 1990. However, interviews with striking teachers reveal UTNO’s goals extended beyond the economic. As the largest labor union in Louisiana, UTNO, a predominately female and African American union, served as a platform for voices that had often gone unheard in economic negotiations in the Deep South.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Melanie Boulet, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 16, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Stone, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 17, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Teachers turn down \$13 million offer.” *The Times Picayune*, October 1, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Nat LaCour, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, March 11, 2016.



While the union pressured to obtain economic justice for a large portion of the city's African American and female middle class, it also functioned as way to challenge social and political inequality for its members.

The UTNO strike of 1990 also contributes to scholarship on labor feminism. Since teaching in the United States is historically identified as women's work, the strike, and efforts of the majority African-American female rank-and-file of the union, can be argued as feminist in nature. The combined power of UTNO leadership and rank-and-file members serves to, again, disrupt the notion that the American South did not feature labor radicalism and that, although UTNO leadership often featured men during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this power was enforced by women. This paper will argue that UTNO's teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers, predominately female and non-white, used the union as a platform to work towards political, economic, and social equality, and that this push for equity is an example of labor feminism. This paper will also tell the story of the United Teachers of New Orleans from the perspective of its members.

### **Historiography**

While historians have given attention to unions in many American cities, New Orleans teacher associations and unions have received moderate coverage. UTNO is referenced in *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans 1841-1991*, published in 1990, just before the September 17 strike. Donald E DeVore and Joseph Logsdon's text looks at the history of public education in New Orleans, including the work and activism of its teachers. The authors include teachers associations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and discuss UTNO at length in the final chapter "A New and Uncertain Era." Here, DeVore and Logsdon include UTNO's merger and formation, its bid for collective bargaining, and its success in the 1978 teachers' strike.

Leaving off with the UTNO strike in 1978, the authors ignore UTNO's actions in the 1980s; and, due to the publication date of *Crescent City Schools* in 1990, the September 17 strike could not be included in the text.<sup>13</sup>

In her 2015 work *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance*, education scholar Kristen L. Buras included a historical analysis of the UTNO to add to her critique of the city's often applauded educational reform after Hurricane Katrina. She also analyzes UTNO in order to highlight the ways that African-Americans used the strike of 1978 for political, social, and economic mobility—similar to what is argued here. However, because her analysis of the union relies heavily on *Crescent City Schools*, the 1990 strike is omitted in her work as well.<sup>14</sup> UTNO becomes categorized within an era of teacher activism that does not seem to extend into the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While her text acknowledges the existence of the union until shortly after Hurricane Katrina, the omission of UTNO's work in the 1980s and 1990s keeps scholars from understanding the larger power and influence of the union on New Orleans and Louisiana. Through her work, Buras analyzed the 1978 strike to show how minority teachers used the union to combat inequalities in New Orleans, but with the omission of the strike of 1990, a gap exists.

An example of this gap is the story of TFA recruits joining the picket lines with UTNO in 1990. Similar to many local activists' critique of education reform in New Orleans, Buras discusses the ways that veteran teachers were replaced by Teach for America recruits in the city's schools after Hurricane Katrina. The strike of 1990 complicates this narrative because TFA recruits joined teachers along the picket lines. Patti Reynolds, a striking teacher at McMain

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<sup>13</sup> Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841-1991* (Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies, 1991), 271-291.

<sup>14</sup> Kristen L. Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 125-134.

High School, recounted how TFA recruits joined the strike after discussions with union members. Reynolds remembered how the TFA recruits blended in with teachers once on the picket line:

I can't say that all of the Teach for America people struck. I kind of think they did, but certainly the bulk. We probably had three, maybe three Teach for America teachers with us [at McMain High School] at the time—Kennedy [High School] probably had a few more than that. But...they asked, "Why are you going on strike?" And they asked, "What will it be like in the building while you're on strike?" And, "What will it be like to be on strike?" And we certainly encouraged them to go on strike. But they pretty much were like the rest of us on the picket line once they were...on the picket line.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to Reynolds' work with TFA recruits on the picket line, editors at *The Times Picayune* also featured an article about the strike from the perception of several TFA recruits. The newspaper described one recruit as a "fiery crusader"—which may foreshadow the city's relationship with the organization. This detail from the 1990 strike, like many others, can add to the current body of scholarship about the education reform movement in New Orleans.<sup>16</sup>

Except for *Crescent City Schools*, UTNO has been largely ignored by historians, although the union's actions often had far-reaching consequences in its 44-year history. Instead, focus has often centered on the 2005, post-Katrina, decision by the Louisiana State Legislature, through the passage of Act 35, to take over of a majority of the city's schools with a state-run Recovery School District and shift public money towards privatized charter education.<sup>17</sup> With little control over the public schools, the Orleans Parish School Board fired all of its teachers in early 2006. A look at the history of teacher associations and activism in the city may serve to complicate the

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<sup>15</sup> Patti Reynolds, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 14, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Joan Treadway. "Walkout is Keeping Crusader on Sidelines." *The Times Picayune*, October 2, 1990.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the Louisiana State Legislature did not create the Recovery School District as a result of Hurricane Katrina. In 2003, the legislature created the RSD and by the spring of 2005 the district ran five schools. After Katrina, however, the Recovery School District took over 102 of the 126 public schools run by the OPSB. While the RSD has also taken over schools in other parishes in Louisiana, the overwhelming majority has taken place in Orleans parish.

narrative education reformers often present ten years after Hurricane Katrina. Yet, an examination of 20<sup>th</sup> century Southern teacher activism may also shed light on a larger problem facing the historiography of labor in New Orleans.

Thomas J. Adams and Steve Striffler argue “If scholars of New Orleans have a labor problem, then it is equally true that scholars of labor have a New Orleans problem.”<sup>18</sup> The authors have observed that the dominant historiography of the city lacks an analysis of the labor question: Who does the work and under what historical conditions? This is not to say historians have avoided writing about labor in New Orleans or Louisiana. Rather, the writings on labor history are rarely featured in the historiography of the city’s history. Adams and Striffler argue that labor history’s canon is to blame. Students of labor history are often confronted with a literature that relies on specific cities to form the bedrock of how labor is discussed in the United States—most notably the cities of New York, Chicago, and Detroit. The implication of this narrowed focus is that historians continue to write about labor while relying on an incomplete definition formed by looking solely at these cities. In *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon show how scholarship on urban and labor studies often ignore New Orleans, mainly because of the emphasis of scholars on what they call the “great manufacturing belt” that connects Northeastern cities—like New York or Baltimore—to major Midwestern railroad stations in cities like Chicago. Due to this connection, the authors argue these cities “became the chief academic laboratories for the investigation of urban life in the United States.”<sup>19</sup> Scholarship on labor in America often overlooks labor as a Southern

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas J Adams and Steve Striffler, “Placing Labor in New Orleans History and New Orleans in Labor History” in *Working in the Big Easy: The History and Politics of Labor in New Orleans*, ed. Thomas J Adams and Steve Striffler (Lafayette: University of Louisiana Press, 2014), xi.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), ix-x.

phenomenon, and because of this omission, scholars of labor continue to study Southern labor through the vantage point of Northern and industrial production.

The spatially narrowed analysis of labor history may then explain why the scholarship on teacher unions is also focused on Northern industrial cities. Most of the writing on the history of teacher unions focuses on New York City unions, like the United Teachers Federation, and on Chicago, where Margaret Haley founded the first local of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In Dana Goldstein's 2014 book *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*, she focuses on the gains made by teacher unions in cities like New York, Los Angeles, Newark and Chicago; Goldstein only notes New Orleans schools once in her text and from the post-Katrina perspective. However, her work completely excludes Southern teachers from the conversation. She writes, in her introduction, "[Teacher] Tenure has long existed even in southern states where teachers are legally barred from collective bargaining."<sup>20</sup> This assessment could not be farther from the truth, as teachers in the South, and specifically New Orleans, have a long history of collective bargaining with their respective school boards.

As early as 1914, white female New Orleans public school teachers formed the Associate Teachers' League, a local of the New Orleans Federation of Labor. While their push for higher wages did not include traditional contract negotiations, they pressured their school board for raises and the elimination of teacher evaluations. In response, the school board dropped evaluations, but offered pay increases based on a "merit plan." Teachers accepted the plan only to later criticize its unequal pay between the sexes. To keep each other motivated and informed, the women started a publication called *The Teacher's Forum*—to discuss issues pertinent to teachers, in the context of women's suffrage. Logsdon and DeVore claim the teachers became

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<sup>20</sup> Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York: Doubleday, 2014), 7.

more militant with the rise of the suffrage movement—which they believed could give them a stronger claim to higher wages.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the scholarship that connects teacher unionism to larger trends in the labor movement, scholars have also highlighted the ways that gendered expectations influenced the teaching profession. In *The Teacher Wars*, Goldstein claims the profession became feminized early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the work of Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann.<sup>22</sup> In 1846, Catherine Beecher helped ignite a moral panic aimed at male teachers. In her lecture, “The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children,” Beecher cited reports from New York schools with the well-known character of Ichabod Crane from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” to define male teachers as incompetent and not committed to a lifelong career in education.<sup>23</sup> In this lecture, Beecher relied upon the image of the missionary teacher who could promote “moral values” rather than intellect to her students. Beecher also argued female teachers could save taxpayers money, saying “[A] woman needs support only for herself [while] a man requires support for himself and a family.”<sup>24</sup> As Horace Mann gained political influence through the Whig party in Massachusetts, he pushed to reform education in a way that would “lead students’ affections outward in good-will towards men, and upward in reverence to God.”<sup>25</sup> Given that women were seen as the virtuous and moral gender, lacking logical intellect, they served as the perfect fit for Mann’s moral reform of education. Women could also be paid less, serving as an anti-tax incentive, as Mann reported in his eleventh annual report as Secretary of Education in Massachusetts, saving the state \$11,000 dollars in teacher pay.<sup>26</sup> When teacher wages fell, many

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<sup>21</sup>DeVore and Logsdon, 147-162.

<sup>22</sup>Goldstein, 15-28

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 20-21.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 26.

men opted for other careers. According to Goldstein, the combination of moral education reform and anti-tax sentiment pushed for the feminization of the teaching profession in the state, and followed as a model for education throughout the United States.

In Patricia A. Carter's *"Everybody's Paid But the Teacher": The Teaching Profession and the Women's Movement*, the author connects the history of women's liberation from the domestic sphere to the history of women's work in the classroom. Her text looks at the ways female teachers have combated unequal pay, the potential for loss of job due to marriage or pregnancy, and women's attempts to enter positions of authority in school systems that are often held by men. In her assessment of this history, she emphasizes the connections between teachers and their efforts in the suffrage movement and later women's liberation in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> While Carter looks at concrete examples of women's work in both fields, her work also attempts to contextualize the work of female teachers in moments where they may be abstractly engaged in feminist activism. She writes:

Whether teachers and their organizations identified as feminist or not, their attempts to make meaning of their lives within the gendered institution of schooling were liberatory.<sup>28</sup>

The connection of teachers and teacher organizations to feminist history aims to complicate history's image of "the feminist."<sup>29</sup>

While historians have documented the struggle for gender wage equality in the teaching profession, additional scholars have noted the pressure exerted by teachers for equal wages among races. In *Crescent City Schools* and Leslie Gale Parr's *A Will of Her Own: Sarah Towles*

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia A. Carter, *"Everybody's Paid But the Teacher": The Teaching Profession and the Women's Movement* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 1-5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>29</sup> The scholarship on labor feminism by Dorothy Sue Cobble has also influenced feminist history by highlighting the class and labor differences of women in the history of the United States. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

*Reed and the Pursuit of Democracy in Southern Public Education*, the authors discuss the ways that African-American teachers in New Orleans fought to achieve equal pay in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>30</sup> In 1938, with the legal aid of Thurgood Marshall and Alexander P. Tureaud, both NAACP lawyers, black teachers in New Orleans fought for equal pay. Their work led New Orleans teachers to a compromise that increased their wages—eventually matching the earnings of white teachers by 1943.<sup>31</sup>

Shannon Frystak adds to this historical dialogue in her text *Our Minds on Freedom: Women and the Struggle for Black Equality in Louisiana, 1924-1967*. Frystak's work assesses how Louisiana women contributed to the civil rights campaigns and grassroots movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her book aims to include women in the historical narrative on the Civil Rights Movement because she argues that much of the history of the movement overlooks the contributions made by African-American women, instead focusing on the works of men. Her strategy to reassess women's roles includes teachers, who, she argues, were instrumental in contesting racial discrimination in the workplace—as similarly noted in *Crescent City Schools* and *A Will of Her Own*.

Frystak claims the efforts of African-American female teachers included collaboration with the national branch of the NAACP to end pay discrimination, and an alignment with white teachers to achieve and maintain equal treatment within the teacher unions.<sup>32</sup> White female teachers also joined various organizations, like the NAACP, to challenge racial segregation and discrimination as well.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, Frystak looks at the ways New Orleans teacher activists,

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<sup>30</sup> Leslie Gale Parr, *A Will of Her Own: Sarah Towles Reed and the Pursuit of Democracy in Southern Public Education* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> DeVore and Logsdon, 208-212.

<sup>32</sup> Shannon Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom: Women and the Struggle for Black Equality in Louisiana, 1924-1967* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



like Sarah Towles Reed and Veronica Hill, in the 1930s and 1940s, navigated legal avenues with law experts to pressure the Orleans Parish School Board when it refused to abide by the Louisiana Supreme Court ruling to grant equal pay to black and white teachers.

Frystak concludes that Reed, like other activists, had seen the success of trade unions during the New Deal era and sought to create similar organizations to effectively pressure her employer, the OPSB, for fair pay and benefits. In 1925, she founded the New Orleans Public School Teachers Association, or NOPSTA, and in 1935, the AFT-linked New Orleans Classroom Teachers Federation, or NOCTF.<sup>34</sup> Reed and her fellow white public school teachers created these teaching associations to combat wage differences due to gender. In 1937, with the aid of both Hill and Reed, the system's African-American public school teachers also became unionized through the League of Classroom Teachers (LCT), American Federation of Teachers, Local 527. Although segregated, this union associated with the all-white NOCTF.<sup>35</sup> In 1937, when African-American teachers continued to pressure the OPSB for equal teacher pay, Reed and Hill remained at the front of the issue. Frystak claims that through their work, these women were able achieve equal pay. Although the teachers' unions in the city remained largely segregated until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Reed made a point to attend meetings of both organizations to make sure each group reached its goals.<sup>36</sup>

Laborers in Louisiana have formed unions in the private sector as well. In the article, "Gumbo Politics: Unions, Business, and Louisiana Right-to-Work Legislation," sociologists William Canak and Berkeley Miller assess the presence of labor in the Louisiana's private sector. Their article provides a context to the formation of UTNO and shows that labor activism in the South had a longer and deeper history than has been reported. Canak and Miller emphasize the ability

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

of local unions to keep Right-to-Work (RTW)<sup>37</sup> legislation from passing in the Louisiana State Legislature in the 1940s and the 1950s.<sup>38</sup> Due to union strength in these two decades and the disunity of the business community, multiple attempts to pass RTW legislation failed. Louisiana's business interests did not form a coalition to combat union influence until 1975 when they unified under the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI).<sup>39</sup> In direct competition with the AFL-CIO's Louisiana State Labor Council, the LABI could mirror the unified voice of labor. Through LABI's influence in the 1975 elections and union violence in Lake Charles, LABI could then, in 1976, successfully lobby for the passage of RTW legislation. This hindered future private-sector union activism.<sup>40</sup>

The formation of UTNO in 1972 and access to collective bargaining rights in 1974 places teachers unions in the political climate of Louisiana before the formation of LABI and passage of RTW legislation in 1975 and 1976, respectively. The political climate that favored unions in the 1940s and 1950s had changed by the 1970s and 1980s to favor the agenda of business. Although UTNO and the Louisiana State Labor Council populated different sectors, UTNO public and LSLC private, "Gumbo Politics" highlights the changing climate in Louisiana politics relevant to unions and their gradual loss of power. As unions in the private sector declined, public unions created during an era of union power remained strong and grew in number.

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<sup>37</sup> According to Canak and Miller, Right to Work legislation works to weaken unions by removing the contract provision forcing workers to join the union: "Campaigns to pass RTW legislation pit the business community against organized labor in a struggle over union security. In order to increase membership and dues income, unions seek contract provisions requiring employees to join the union as a condition of employment. Right-to-work laws make it illegal to include such union security provisions in collective bargaining agreements and therefore are supported by employers to weaken unions." William Canak and Berkeley Miller, "Gumbo Politics: Unions, Business, and Louisiana Right-to-Work Legislation," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 43, no. 2 (January 1990): 259.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 258-271.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 268-9.

## UTNO: 1972 to 1990

Prior to the formation of UTNO in 1972, New Orleans public schools had four teacher organizations. The two largest teacher organizations in the city were the predominately white Orleans Education Association (OEA) and the predominately black American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 527—the remnants of Veronica Hill’s League of Classroom Teachers and the only teacher union in New Orleans.<sup>41</sup> Two other organizations, New Orleans Public School Teachers Association, (NOPSTA), and the Orleans Unit of the Louisiana Teachers Association, remained segregated. In 1958, Sarah Towles Reed’s NOCTF had lost its AFL backing over the issue of integration.<sup>42</sup> Without the national union backing, the one-time union merged with Reed’s other teacher organization—NOPSTA.<sup>43</sup> Seventy percent of the city’s 4,500 public school teachers belonged to one of these four groups, but the majority affiliated with either the OEA or AFT Local 527.<sup>44</sup> NOPSTA and the Orleans Unit of the LTA affiliated with state teachers’ associations, while the OEA and AFT Local 527 affiliated with national organizations—the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers. Due to the stance on integration by the smaller teacher associations, NOPSTA and the Orleans Unit of the LTA could not keep up with the numbers of the OEA and AFT Local 527.<sup>45</sup>

Earlier separate efforts by these teacher organizations and unions to attain collective bargaining had failed. The most notable attempt for collective bargaining rights were the strikes of 1966 and 1969 by the AFT Local 527, both of which achieved little support from non-union teachers and the community. According to DeVore and Logsdon in *Crescent City Schools*, “The

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<sup>41</sup> Frystak, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Gale-Parr, 191.

<sup>44</sup> Emile LaForcade Jr. “N.O. Teachers Approve Merger: New Group Comes Into Being Aug. 15.” *The Times Picayune*, June 6, 1972.

<sup>45</sup> United Teachers of New Orleans, Local 527 Collection (MSS 135), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Box 135-19. Nat LaCour, interview by Beatrice Owsley, New Orleans, April 18, 1988.

two strikes, though unsuccessful because of poor community support and a lack of teacher solidarity, indicated a growing militancy within teacher ranks.”<sup>46</sup> In 1970, the predominately white OEA and the predominately African-American AFT Local 527 tried to form a coalition to achieve teacher pay raises.<sup>47</sup> This effort began to show ties between the OEA and AFT Local 527, especially as OEA leadership started to approve of the idea of collective bargaining. Although their coalition proved unsuccessful, it planted the seeds for the eventual merger of the two organizations.

As of 1972, the predominately white OEA had 800 members, while the predominately black Local 527 listed between 1,200 and 1,500 members.<sup>48</sup> In 1972, members of these two organizations voted to merge to form one union, the United Teachers of New Orleans. Officials of the two largest associations voted to approve—by 90.6 %— the union merger.<sup>49</sup> Those in favor of the merger believed collaboration could put the teachers in a better position to gain collective bargaining rights from the Orleans Parish School Board.

This merger of the AFT affiliate and the NEA affiliate in New Orleans followed a national trend taking place in a period when many local teacher unions and associations in American cities had merged. As teachers unions in cities like New York and Chicago secured bargaining rights from their respective school boards, unions in other cities followed suit. New Orleans teachers believed a merger would aid their efforts to attain collective bargaining rights as well. In a letter from David Selden, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the national union leader remarked that local teacher unions in American cities were merging at a record rate. Selden’s letter, dated January 26, 1970, referenced the formation of the UTLA—The

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<sup>46</sup> DeVore and Logsdon, 278.

<sup>47</sup> “Teacher Units Seek Pay Hike: Two Groups in Coalition on Issue” *The Times Picayune*, April 30, 1970.

<sup>48</sup> Emile LaForcade Jr. “N.O. Teachers Approve Merger: New Group Comes Into Being Aug. 15.” *The Times Picayune*, June 6, 1972.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

United Teachers of Los Angeles—through the merge of the Associated Classroom Teachers of Los Angeles and the AFT Local 1021. The merger, he claimed, gave UTLA the organizational power to negotiate for a collective bargaining agreement for the city’s 25,000 teachers. UTLA leadership argued if their school board would not let them negotiate for this right, they would strike. In reflecting on this trend, which UTNO would follow, Selden wrote, “Teacher militancy is at an all-time high.”<sup>50</sup>

On Monday, June 5, 1972, officials counted the votes that secured UTNO’s place in New Orleans public education. Nat LaCour, president of the AFT Local 527, was elected president of the newly merged union while Cheryl Epling, incumbent president of the OEA, became the new union’s executive vice-president. Within days of the merger, union officials released a three-part political action program to outline the union’s strategy. The first course of action would involve lobbying effort at the state capital in Baton Rouge for legislation to increase the OPSB membership from five to seven members—a strategy to insure a more diverse representation. Then, the union would push for the election of pro-teacher candidates. UTNO officials believed additional members on the school board would bring a diversity of opinions to the group.

In early 1974, UTNO moved closer to gaining bargaining rights from the OPSB. On March 25, New Orleans union teachers voted to decide which organization would represent them at the bargaining table. However, the election would not come without challenge. The Louisiana Teachers Association (LTA), a non-union and statewide organization, opposed UTNO’s attempt to represent New Orleans teachers exclusively at the bargaining table. In a January 7 letter to New Orleans Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Gene Geisert, LTA President Jacqueline Hemstreet wrote,

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<sup>50</sup> United Teachers of New Orleans, Local 527 Collection (MSS 135), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Box 135-1, Folder Merger AFT-NEA.

This association will resist by all legal means and with all its resources any unilateral effort by any school board to establish collective bargaining practices for public school teachers in Louisiana...<sup>51</sup>

The association believed that collective bargaining could lead to teacher strikes—referencing AFT Local 527’s strikes of 1966 and 1969. In *The Times Picayune*, Nat LaCour reminded readers that strikes only formed as a last result, but his connection to the earlier strikes made this argument unconvincing to community members who agreed with LTA President Hemstreet. Months later, in an election on November 12, 1974, UTNO won collective bargaining rights with a 4-to-1 margin of victory.<sup>52</sup>

In the summer of 1978, UTNO, representing teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers, made its demands to OPSB negotiators for a 9 percent raise and fringe benefits. However, as of August 1978, it seemed a compromise was far from likely when Superintendent Gene Geisert would not give in claiming “the board [could not] grant the teachers a pay increase until voters decided to support a tax measure which would support public schools.”<sup>53</sup> To UTNO President Nat LaCour, Geisert’s claim lacked credibility. He argued New Orleans teachers were some of the worst paid teachers in the South.<sup>54</sup> On August 26, 1978, representatives from the two organizations met one final time to try to compromise before the first day of school on Wednesday. The OPSB offered to increase teacher pay by a total of \$1 million, but Nat LaCour saw this offer as an “insult,” pointing out that the amount translated to an increase of \$1 a day per teacher.<sup>55</sup> LaCour and UTNO negotiators refused the offer and held strong to their request for a 9% raise, while privately agreeing that through compromise they could go as low as a 5%

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<sup>51</sup> Newton E. Renfro. “UTNO to Seek Teacher Vote.” *The Times Picayune*, January 17, 1974.

<sup>52</sup> Newton E. Renfro. “UTNO: What’ll Be Its Role?” *The Times Picayune*, November 17, 1974.

<sup>53</sup> Ava Roussell and Ben Young. “UTNO Getting Teachers Set for Walkout.” *The Louisiana Weekly* August 19, 1978

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Talks Collapse, Teacher Strike Appears Certain.” *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 2, 1978.

increase—but, as union negotiators said, not a percentage point less.<sup>56</sup> When OPSB negotiators claimed union demands could not be met due to tax shortages, LaCour reminded newspaper readers, union members, and New Orleanians that Superintendent Gene Geisert sat as the second highest paid school superintendent in the South. One hundred and fifty union delegates voted unanimously to approve the strike, set to begin on the district’s first day of school, Monday, August 30, if the OPSB refused to meet union demands.<sup>57</sup>

While OPSB and UTNO negotiators met at the bargaining table, striking teachers picketed along sidewalks outside their schools. They led marches and ignored pleas for their return to the classroom. On Labor Day, September 4, 1978, UTNO staged a march from the Superdome to City Hall.<sup>58</sup> This march, in addition to mass picketing outside neighborhood schools, attempted to highlight teacher demands on a holiday created in tribute to the labor movement in the United States. This march began as a rally at Lafayette Square with more than 2,500 attendees. Here, President Nat LaCour declared to spectators that the union would not be moved by school board intimidation. His speech responded directly to a letter penned by Superintendent Geisert posted at all of the city’s 140 schools that had said:

Any teacher who returns to his or her duties no later than Wednesday Sept 6th, will not be subjected to disciplinary actions but will lose pay for days not worked.<sup>59</sup>

In an attempt to get teachers back into the classroom, Geisert used the threat of disciplinary action, knowing this statement would clear any confusion regarding the board’s attitude towards

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ava Roussell and Ben Young. “UTNO Getting Teachers Set for Walkout.” *The Louisiana Weekly* August 19, 1978.

<sup>58</sup> “Schools Kept Open; Strike Continues.” *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 9, 1978.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

striking teachers. Yet, as teachers remained out of the classroom, the superintendent extended the cutoff date for disciplinary action farther into the month of September.<sup>60</sup>

UTNO organized with other unions, like state chapters of teacher unions and local trade unions like the Teamsters Local 270, to form a network of organizational strength. While threatened by the Orleans Parish School Board, UTNO received support from many prominent groups in the community, including the New Orleans chapters of the NAACP and the Urban League.<sup>61</sup> The strike gained additional strength as other groups of OPSB employees, including the system's bus drivers, members of the Teamsters Local 270, refused to cross picket lines.<sup>62</sup> Without bus drivers, the school board felt additional pressure—the strike not only denied students a teacher in the classroom, but showed the Board could no longer provide students also a reliable and safe way to get to class. The system's bus drivers struck in solidarity with teachers and to raise their own salaries as well.

Under these new pressures, the school board capitulated; UTNO and the OPSB agreed to a new contract. After receiving help from federal mediator Don Doherty, the two organizations agreed upon an 8% pay raise for the city's teachers.<sup>63</sup> The majority of the raise, 7%, would go towards financing teacher pay, while an additional 1% would go towards additional hospitalization coverage—as part of the employee's total health coverage.<sup>64</sup> UTNO leaders then took the compromised contract to a gathering of 3,000 of the city's teachers who voted to approve the measure. After the completion of the UTNO contract, the district's bus drivers also received a 7% pay increase, in addition to improved health coverage and hospitalization measures, noting to the school board that they deserved similar wage increases as UTNO

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ava Roussell. "4 Schools to Close in Settlement." *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 16, 1978.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



members had received. On Monday, September 11, 1978, striking teachers returned to their classrooms.

The 1978 UTNO strike, which lasted a little over a week, is an example of a larger trend towards teacher unionism in the United States in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just as UTNO had formed through a merger, petitioned for bargaining rights, and struck, so did many other teachers unions across the United States. As neoliberal and anti-union agendas came to the forefront in the 1980s, marked by Ronald Reagan's heavily publicized decision to fire air traffic controllers, United States citizens started to question the role of unions in society.<sup>65</sup> Unions in the coming decades struggled to maintain the same political and economic influence they once had. Although membership in public unions rose as private unions declined, both began to receive growing criticism from fiscally conservative members of the American public.<sup>66</sup>

The 1978 UTNO strike served as a model for the 1990 strike. In press releases, OPSB meetings, and interviews, both union and board leaders commented on their experiences in the 1978 strike for guidance and to justify decisions in the new situation. For high school English teacher Mike Stone, who served on the negotiating team for the 1990 strike, his experience in the 1978 strike helped prepare him for the new strike.

So, the first strike was all educational to me. It was more stressful to me. It only lasted about a week or two, seven days or something, but I had a small child, a wife, a mortgage, a car payment, and so forth and so on, and I was worried how long this was going to last and so forth. Then the second, the '90 strike, which was much longer, was less stressful for me. For one thing, by then I was divorced and living on my own and I was contributing to my daughter's education, but just because I had been through it before and because I was single, the second strike was much less stressful, personally. It was much more difficult, as a strike and settling the strike, than the first one, but I didn't worry much in the second one.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Philip Dray, *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 616-674.

<sup>66</sup> Melvin W. Reder, "The Rise and Fall of Unions: The Public Sectors and the Private," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 2, no 2 (Spring 1988): 89-110.

<sup>67</sup> Mike Stone, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 17, 2015.

Stone's experience in 1978 allowed him to work confidently later in the 1990 strike. Stone's experience with financial hardship in the earlier strike also gave him empathy towards those teachers who were not financially able to join the 1990 picket line. While some teachers referred to their non-striking co-workers as "scabs," Stone and other veteran teachers expressed an understanding of their situation, while also being critical of their position on the other side of the picket line. The success of the 1978 strike also served as a source of confidence moving forward—knowing that despite hardships, if teachers held tough, the strike could succeed, as UTNO would eventually do in 1990.

Carmen James, who served as the building representative for the union at Dibert Elementary School during the 1990 strike, recounted that her fears in 1978 were much different from the confidence she would later feel on the picket line in 1990.

The '78 strike was my first strike and I was nervous. I was a young teacher, and I was having bills to pay and everything else. But, I knew that what we were striking for was necessary. And so, I went on—I struck. But, I really depended on the rest of the faculty to pull me through because I was scared. I was scared in '78. You know, and they always said "In '78 we stood straight." [laughter] I don't know if all of us were standing straight, but we were all there.<sup>68</sup>

Veteran teachers like James who expressed fear on the picket line in 1978 had grown in confidence by 1990. This reliance on the 1978 strike was not specific to teachers.

Woody Koppel, who served on the school board in 1978, relied on his experiences from the previous strike to criticize the board's decision to reject a contract agreement in 1990. On the first day of the strike, after failed negotiations, Superintendent Dr. Everett Williams recommended the school board adopt a resolution that condemned the UTNO strike and outlined specific strike procedures, such as substitute pay. When the vote came before members of the OPSB to adopt the resolution, Koppel was the lone dissenter. Rather than adopt the resolution,

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<sup>68</sup> Carmen James, interview by Emma Long, Harahan, March 15, 2016.

he felt the strike could be settled with a quick rearrangement of funds. Koppel argued the board should prioritize a contract agreement over the anti-strike resolution, relying on his belief that the 1978 strike divided the teachers and harmed the public's perception of the school board.<sup>69</sup>

When board members reacted with shock and disappointment to Koppel's dissent, it became clear to New Orleanians that the 1990 bargaining disagreement between UTNO and the OPSB would evolve into a heated dialogue amongst city officials and public workers—similar to the labor conflict in 1978. However, with the OPSB featuring a majority African-American membership by 1990, the rhetoric on civil rights transformed to fit the economic and political climate of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Contract Negotiations and Talks of Strike in 1990**

After 1978, contract negotiations between the union and its employer had gone without much controversy.<sup>70</sup> The end of the 1989-1990 school year meant UTNO and OPSB bargaining teams would meet again to draft a new contract of employment, as they had every two years since the 1978 strike and every three years since the 1983 teacher contract. Each contract that came out of these negotiations contained new provisions for employment. The provisions included, but were not limited to, responsibilities of teachers in and outside the classroom, salary information, and information regarding health benefits.

As one of the UTNO's negotiators, Mike Stone spent part of the 1989-1990 school year, beginning as early as April, gathering input from union teachers to prepare for the contract talks.<sup>71</sup> Stone met frequently in 1990 with teachers from across the public school system to put

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<sup>69</sup> Orleans Parish School Board Collection (MSS 147), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Orleans Parish School Board Minutes – Volume III September 3, 1990 through December 20, 1990-- Book Number 84. Minutes from Meeting on September 17, 1990.

<sup>70</sup> UTNO leaders renegotiated teacher contracts every two years until the 1983 contract. The 1983 contract marked the shift to three year contracts.

<sup>71</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "Board, Union Standing Firm." *The Times Picayune*, September 18, 1990.

together contract proposals that met their specific needs. In these meetings, teachers would suggest provisions for the new contract, such as longer preparation time and smaller class sizes. Stone and other negotiators took down the suggestions of union members, and reported them back to President Nat LaCour in order for him to draft the proposals into contract language. With the draft contract completed, UTNO's negotiating team then met with OPSB negotiators to deliberate and work out a compromise on a final, official contract for 1990-1993.<sup>72</sup> As negotiations between the OPSB and UTNO continued into the summer months of 1990, building representatives of the union kept in touch with union members in their schools through meetings and flyers called *UTNO Updates*.<sup>73</sup> Teachers, already back in the classroom to prepare for the upcoming year, could find the flyers in their mailboxes.

At first, UTNO negotiators decided not to push for increased teacher wages and instead sought raises for the lowest paid of their membership—the paraprofessionals and clerical workers. New Orleans teachers had received pay raises from state funding for the previous three years, 1988-1990. However, the clerical workers and paraprofessionals represented by UTNO had not received a raise since the last time the union renewed their contracts in 1987.<sup>74</sup> As of 1990, paraprofessionals in the city's public schools made only \$11,000 a year, and most clerical workers made only \$16,800 a year.<sup>75</sup> Teachers received, on average, a salary of \$21,068.<sup>76</sup>

UTNO negotiators believed this request for raises for the non-teaching staff, and a boost to the

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<sup>72</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>73</sup>The union produced *The UTNO Updates* to relay information to its members. It included issues like upcoming union meetings, information on contract negotiations, and social gatherings.

<sup>74</sup>Orleans Parish School Board Collection (MSS 147), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Labor Contracts: Box 1 Folder "Agreement between OPSB and UTNO (Clerical) July 1, 1983 – June 30, 1986" and Folder "Agreement between OPSB and UTNO (clerical workers) Sept 27, 1987 – June 28, 1990." And Orleans Parish School Board Collection (MSS 147). Labor Contracts: Box 2 Folders "Paraprofessionals agreement between OPSB and UTNO July 1, 1983 through June 30, 1986" and "Agreement between OPSB and UTNO (paraprofessionals) Sept 27, 1987 – June 30, 1990."

<sup>75</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "Strike Won't Shut Schools, Board Vows." *The Times Picayune*, September 17, 1990.

<sup>76</sup> Orleans Parish School Board Collection (MSS 147), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. OPSB – 147 Labor Contracts Box 3 Folder "Agreement between OPSB and UTNO (teachers) Sept 27, 1987 to June 28, 1990"

overall employee health coverage, fit within the OPSB budget and that the negotiations would go smoothly. However, contract negotiations in the summer of 1990 showed that the demands from UTNO and the recalcitrance of OPSB—led by chief negotiator Dr. Frank Fudesco—found little room for compromise.

In total, UTNO President Nat LaCour had estimated their contract would cost close to \$2 million.<sup>77</sup> When the negotiating team for the OPSB would not accept the contract, UTNO lowered its offer and requested \$1 million to cover shortages in health care and agreed to wait a year to ask for clerical and paraprofessional raises. Again, negotiators for the board claimed the school budget could not fund the contract, even after the removal of salary increases. The school board offered \$600,000 towards health care, but claimed it could not come up with the additional \$400,000 necessary to reach the million-dollar compromise offered by the UTNO. Of the fiscal shortcoming, OPSB lead negotiator Fudesco said, “We cannot give what we do not have.”<sup>78</sup> Instead, the board pushed a counter offer to fund paraprofessional and clerical raises through excess tax revenues. But LaCour was not persuaded by the offer. He argued union members could not rely on the promise of excess tax revenues, especially when that excess might never materialize.<sup>79</sup> When OPSB negotiators would not agree to meet UTNO’s reduced demands, UTNO leaders suggested a strike.

The possibility of striking for the sake of the non-teaching staff was a first for UTNO. Teacher strikes often include issues of teacher pay, but union leaders wondered how their union could claim credibility if they only pushed the cause for one group within the union—the teachers. They decided to strike for all the union members—teachers and non-teachers alike.

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<sup>77</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. ““N.O. Teachers Strike Likely as Talks Stall.” *The Times Picayune*, September 16, 1990

<sup>78</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Strike Won’t Shut Schools, Board Vows.” *The Times Picayune*, September 17, 1990.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Many, both inside and outside the city, questioned the sanity of this move. According to Stone, national news sources called the UTNO office and expressed shock over the union's proposal to strike for paraprofessional and clerical salaries. Stone, unlike the national press, had confidence that LaCour was working within the budget of the school board and that striking would, in the end, be beneficial.

*The Detroit Free Press, The New York Times*—people were calling up Nat [LaCour] and saying, “Is it true y’all are on strike for the teacher assistants? I mean, they were just flabbergasted...Nat was very good at studying the budget—how much money they had coming in, what they could afford to do and so forth. We knew that we could get our money back in the three weeks [of a strike]; that over the course of a year or two of a three year contract, somewhere in there, you would get those three weeks back.

The union believed a strike over the issue of paraprofessional and clerical salaries could be successful. They also believed the lost wages from a strike, no matter the length, could be made up through raises in the contract. Members in the UTNO office began to set up phone banks of volunteers to call teachers with a message: “If the negotiating team recommends a strike, will you strike?”<sup>80</sup> Through the phone bank, union leaders could gauge an approximate number of teachers who would honor the picket line. UTNO called a mass meeting on the night before the first day of school to take the recommendation to strike to the union's members for a vote.

In the New Orleans Lakefront Arena, UTNO members met *en masse* as the negotiating team urged union approval of LaCour's recommendation to strike if talks broke down. LaCour advised the teachers to go to work on the first day of school and continue for two weeks. If negotiators did not reach a contract settlement by September 17, he suggested that UTNO should then strike. Teachers, clerical workers, and paraprofessionals present at the meeting voiced their opinions on the proposal. But, the energy in the room grew once a female teacher—identified by Nat LaCour and UTNO Director of Organizing Connie Goodly as Betty Sapp—rose to give an

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<sup>80</sup> Stone, interview.

alternative suggestion to the union: present members of the OPSB should be recalled from office. LaCour remarked how the overall mood toward the strike changed. Although a board recall was not an idea by the UTNO executive council, it was an idea that literally came up from the floor and changed the fate of the strike.

One of our teachers went to the mic and she said, “I recommend that we recall the board.” And when she said that, the members erupted in support. I mean, they were just screaming. This is an instance where we followed the will of our members. We then started—we launched the campaign through the course of the strike—to recall the board. So, sometimes you have to get behind your members. That came really from the floor of the membership, as opposed from the leadership—a lady by the name of Betty Sapp. She just said, “I think we ought to recall the board.” And everybody erupted in support. I had the sense enough to know I had better go along with her.<sup>81</sup>

The decision to recall members of the school board gave striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers an added intensity to their demands. According to UTNO member Mike Stone, the slogan “Erase the Board” became a war cry for striking union members.<sup>82</sup> At the end of the meeting, union members voted to approve the strike. As suggested by LaCour, the union would continue to negotiate a contract with the OPSB. If the groups could agree on a contract that featured raises for paraprofessionals and clerical workers, UTNO would settle without a teacher raise and without a strike. However, if the board refused a raise for the paraprofessionals and clerical workers, not only would the union go on strike, but they would also demand raises for teachers as well, and work to remove the members of the school board.<sup>83</sup>

According to LaCour, the philosophy of solidarity influenced UTNO negotiators’ decision to add teacher wages to the contract. LaCour questioned whether teachers would strike

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<sup>81</sup> Nat LaCour, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, March 11, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

for the raises of paraprofessionals and clerical employees, although they organized behind the same union. As a strike tactic, union leaders decided to add teacher pay to the requests.

UTNO did a pretty good job of communicating with its membership, so we knew the feeling of our members. But, what we also knew is that it would be extremely difficult to get people to strike for raises for other people... We did not have the confidence that you could get teachers to strike for raises for other people, even though in a union—the union’s different groups of membership—we talk about solidarity, we needed to make sure that there would be solidarity. The best way to do that is to say to the board, if you don’t come through with raises for our support personnel, we are now going to strike for raises for everybody. With the feeling being that if the teachers knew they were going to get something too, they would be striking for teachers, clericals would be striking for clericals, and paraprofessionals for paraprofessionals. It was a solidarity situation; that we were feeling very confident that we could pull all three groups together.<sup>84</sup>

UTNO leaders believed adding teacher wages to the contract could bring additional bodies to the picket line. In their effort to expand solidarity, the contract became more expensive if, on September 17, the union voted to strike.

UTNO members showed up for the new school year in early September, knowing that a strike might be called in two weeks. While each side of the bargaining table remained firm, New Orleans public school teachers focused their energy on teaching. Many teachers believed negotiations would conclude before September 17. For example, Patti Reynolds never felt anxiety going into the school year because she thought the OPSB and UTNO would agree on a contract. By the second week of school, her classes had settled down and entered a routine.<sup>85</sup>

Teachers across the city began to establish solid relationships with their students within the first few weeks of teaching in the 1990-1991 academic year. Middle school teacher Melanie Boulet remarked, “I remember just diving right into teaching. By September [17], I remember

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<sup>84</sup> LaCour, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Patti Reynolds, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 14, 2015.



kids knew me well enough that they actually wrote me letters when I was on the strike line.”<sup>86</sup>

With the aid of their building representatives, who served in the line of communication between UTNO leaders and each building’s rank and file, teachers remained informed about the ongoing negotiations and confidently worked without much concern about the upcoming strike.<sup>87</sup>

However, for most union members, the moment UTNO called the strike, their commitment to the classrooms switched to a commitment to the picket line. Schools with high union activity, like Live Oak Middle School and Dibert Elementary, would have issues keeping teachers in the classroom.

With the board and the union unable to reach a compromise, on September 16, the night before the strike, UTNO President LaCour spoke in front of a room of teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers. He referred to the strike as regrettable, even stating that it should not have taken place. LaCour laid blame for the strike on the board members, referencing their inflexibility in negotiations and unrestrained spending. On the first day of the strike, UTNO withdrew all proposals that included raises for paraprofessional and clericals and increased health coverage. On September 17, UTNO instead pushed for a \$45 million contract that added to the original demands, plus a 10 percent raises for teachers for each of the next three years.<sup>88</sup> The first day of the strike also meant the beginning of the recall efforts to remove members of the school board. For many in the union, the inability for each side of the negotiating table to come to an agreement came as a surprise.

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<sup>86</sup> Melanie Boulet, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 16, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> According to Patti Reynolds, who served as a building representative at McMain High School during the 1990 strike, a “building rep” is a union teacher whose responsibilities included: communicating information from UTNO to union members in the building, holding meetings regarding UTNO issues—not necessarily on a regular schedule—and listening to concerns of union teachers. If union teachers had an issue with their principal or other administrator, the building rep could serve as a middle figure and speak to the administration on behalf of the teacher.

<sup>88</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Strike Won’t Shut Schools, Board Vows.” *The Times Picayune*, September 17, 1990.

Union members and leaders had believed that demanding a raise for the paraprofessionals and clerical workers would not set their contract over the budget of the school board. In fact, UTNO negotiators saw the raise for non-teaching staff as an affordable compromise. Many teachers had believed a strike would be avoided and they could continue teaching. Like Nat LaCour, UTNO negotiator Mike Stone found the strike regrettable from the beginning.

It was always unbelievable to me that they would be so stupid they would shoot themselves in the foot and cause a strike because they were not willing to pay the lowest paid people in the school system better. So, I was not really surprised when we struck, but on the other hand, I kept saying, “They can’t possibly be this stupid.” But, it was pretty much like in ‘78 you didn’t really know ‘til the very last minute.<sup>89</sup>

UTNO members went to bed Sunday night knowing that on Monday, September 17, they would not enter their school of employment. Regrettable or not, the union moved forward with its plan to picket for paraprofessional, clerical, and now teacher raises, improved health coverage, and to recall members of the school board.

### **The UTNO Strike of 1990**

At 9:00 A.M. on September 17, 1990, members of the OPSB met to discuss the strike. In his opening statement, Dr. Carl Robinson, OPSB president, reiterated the board’s stance against union demands: “There was no money yesterday, there’s no money today, and there probably will be no money tomorrow.”<sup>90</sup> He expressed his disappointment in the union’s decision to strike. Dr. Everett Williams, Superintendent of Schools, requested that the members of the board adopt an official resolution that condemned the strike and outlined procedures for dealing with teacher absences and shortages. Two board members, Paul Sens and Dwight McKenna, moved that the resolution be adopted—until Woody Koppel announced he could not support the

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<sup>89</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>90</sup> Orleans Parish School Board Collection (MSS 147), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Orleans Parish School Board Minutes – Volume III September 3, 1990 through December 20, 1990-- Book Number 84. Minutes from Meeting on September 17, 1990.

resolution. Drawing on his experience in the 1978 UTNO strike, Koppel argued that the strike would be detrimental for the community. Koppel said there was enough money in the budget to meet UTNO's final compromised offer of \$1 million for improved health care, with a one-year delay for paraprofessional and clerical pay raises. Koppel claimed that the board could have found ways to cut spending, citing unnecessary attorneys as an example. Koppel said, "Three months ago during budget hearings, [I] had recommended that school board attorneys agree to a reduced hourly rate which would have saved \$300,000."<sup>91</sup> He referenced purchased cars and checks of hundreds of thousands of dollars made out to investment bankers. Koppel said he could not support what he called the "reckless" behavior of the school board.<sup>92</sup>

Board members, including Gail Glapion, responded with shock at Koppel's suggestion that the school board wanted a strike. The remaining members of the board expressed their disappointment in the lack of unity among OPSB members as they moved forward with a resolution to condemn the strike. Dr. Frank Fudesco, chief negotiator for the board, claimed Koppel's remarks served as propaganda from the union. Fudesco argued \$300,000 would not calm the labor issue, and salary raises for non-teaching personnel would eventually make way for raises for everyone, resulting in a cost closer to \$3 million. Paul Sens, another member of the school board, said "it was unfortunate Mr. Koppel had to make this a political issue for his campaign," referencing Koppel's attempted congressional run on October 6, 1990.<sup>93</sup> The majority of the school board agreed with Fudesco and approved Robinson's resolution. As the morning meeting concluded with Woody Koppel as the lone dissenter on the board, teachers walked up and down the sidewalks, carrying picket signs, outside their classrooms.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

On the first day of the strike, school records reported that 68 percent of the city's 4,500 teachers did not show up for work, although UTNO claimed more than 80 percent honored the strike.<sup>94</sup> For many of the striking teachers who joined the picket line, this protest over wages served as another example of their long commitment to activism in the city. Dr. Raphael Cassimere, Jr, professor emeritus of history at the University of New Orleans, picketed alongside his wife, Inez, at her school of employment—Dilbert Elementary School in Mid-City. The Cassimeres relied on their experiences from the Civil Rights Movement and previous teacher strikes—in the 1960s during the AFT Local 527 strikes and in 1978 during first UTNO strike—as motivation for 1990. Both Raphael and Inez Cassimere had served as leaders in the NAACP Youth Council in the 1960s, as the president and secretary of the New Orleans chapter, respectively.<sup>95</sup> UTNO President Nat LaCour also connected his and other union members' efforts in the Civil Rights Movement to their picket line in 1990:

At the time of the 1990 strike, the district teaching force was overwhelmingly black and most of those blacks, I'm sure, had come through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s...I cut my teeth, so to speak—I was part of the big demonstration at my university, which was Southern [University]...So, most of the teachers who were in the system at that time too were actively involved. So, we came along with the Civil Rights Movement. We were part of it...The fact that the union was majority black and black people were concerned about improving their conditions, just belonging to the union and working to make education better, was all part of the civil rights struggle.<sup>96</sup>

Through their history of activism in past civil rights and labor movements, UTNO strikers repurposed rhetoric and tactics from these efforts for their period on the picket line in 1990.

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<sup>94</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "Strike to Last to Bitter End, Teachers Vow." *The Times Picayune*, September 18, 1990.

<sup>95</sup> Dr. Raphael Cassimere, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, February 4, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Nat LaCour, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, March 11, 2016.

On the picket line at Live Oak Middle School, Melanie Boulet remembered the use of sandwich boards, printed by UTNO, which said “No Raise, No Work,”<sup>97</sup> and individually crafted signs that “said something poignant about the strike.”<sup>98</sup> She also remembered the use of singing and chanting:

I think I was one of the very few white teachers at that school and I remember thinking, “We have a great choir.” There were a lot of teachers who could really sing at the school, and we sang a lot on the picket line. That created a real sense of unity, I think.

At this time, the UTNO had a largely female and majority black membership. For many women and minorities, the teaching profession served as the initial step from the working class into a white-collared work environment. As teachers and public figures in their community, these women continued to challenge injustices—carrying on a tradition of challenging authority. In his recollection of the strike, Mike Stone pinned the success of UTNO strike tactics on its largely African-American membership:

I think one reason we had two such strong strikes was because the majority of our members—and a majority of the active membership—were African-Americans whose friends, relatives, parents, and some cases themselves, had been active in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>99</sup>

As Nat LaCour and fellow members of the union bargaining team worked to end the strike by negotiating with the OPSB, the teachers’ presence—picketing, singing, and chanting slogans on city sidewalks—provided a public display linking the strike to a wider dialogue on injustice in New Orleans.

In addition to chanting along the picket line, teachers made behind-the-scenes efforts—stretching the union’s limited resources—to ensure the success of their pickets. To push their initiative to revoke members of the school board, teachers made pins resembling chalkboards

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<sup>97</sup> Susan Poag, Image: “Picket Line Heckling” *The Times Picayune*, September 21, 1990.

<sup>98</sup> Melanie Boulet, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 16, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Stone, interview.

with the words “Erase the Board.” Teachers also sold “Dignity” buttons for union members to wear, another link of the strike to civil rights protests. Strikers used proceeds from these buttons to keep their ice chests filled while on the picket line.<sup>100</sup> Boulet welcomed the cold water on the hot September picket line.<sup>101</sup> Members of the community also stopped by the picket lines to bring food to the strikers. Goodly remembered that other unions in the city, although they did not officially join the strike, brought food for UTNO members to eat while picketing.<sup>102</sup> Although building representative Carmen James remembered the communal sharing of food on the picket line, she also remembered how it attracted additional criticism to the Dibert picket line. Some members of the community thought James and her teachers would rather be outside than in the classroom:

One particular day a husband came and he brought his grill and we were out there grilling hamburgers and everything and people were saying “Oh you all are really enjoying this strike.” It’s not about enjoying it. We’re doing what we have to do. And, if this is some of the results of it, then I don’t have a problem with my people participating in that. They’re not causing anybody any harm.<sup>103</sup>

Although outside unions and spouses attempted to assuage the strains of the picket line for striking UTNO members, teachers still faced criticism for seeming as though they enjoyed the strike.

Another behind the scenes effort to strengthen the picket line involved the Flying Squad of the union. UTNO leaders incorporated the strategy of moving pickets in order to ensure an equal number of strikers at the city’s many schools. Patti Reynolds, a member of UTNO’s executive council and a building representative at McMain High School, helped move teachers to

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<sup>100</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Boulet, interview.

<sup>102</sup> Connie Goodly, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, March 14, 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Carmen James, interview by Emma Long, Harahan, March 15, 2016.

buildings with fewer strikers.<sup>104</sup> According to Mike Stone, the union's area coordinators drove through various neighborhoods to check on schools and their picket lines. Coordinators reported their results back to the strike headquarters, and a group of volunteer teachers—known as the Flying Squad—were sent to dwindling picket lines.<sup>105</sup> The purposes of these “flying pickets” were to provide emotional support for teachers on weak picket lines, and to present an even and unified image of the striking union.<sup>106</sup> The union's activism behind the scenes and on the picket line presented a unified front to the community—especially to those parents picking up their children at the public schools.

At the end of the strike's second day, September 18, 1990, UTNO members cleared their picket lines to gather at a rally for updates on the negotiations, as well as motivation and support. At the rally, striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers met to provide each other with collective inspiration—relying, again, on tactics from the Civil Rights Movement and the picket line. Rhonda Nabonne, education reporter for *The Times-Picayune*, described the scene to the newspaper's readers:

In a show of solidarity, more than 3,000 teachers wearing “Dignity” buttons packed a ballroom at the Hyatt Regency Hotel for a rally Tuesday night. The floor of the ballroom looked like a national convention, with teachers from each school sitting together with placards. Teachers cheered, clapped and sang songs ranging from old spirituals—including “We Shall Not be Moved”—to a rap song with strike lyrics.<sup>107</sup>

Mirroring the rhetoric employed by activists decades before, the union's senior members repurposed the strategies they had used themselves during the era of civil rights.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Patti Reynolds, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, July 14, 2015.

<sup>105</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>106</sup> *Flying pickets* were first used *en masse* in the UK Miner's Strike of 1969. Striking miners made the tactic famous, due to its ability to spread strikers in a short period of time.

<sup>107</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Two Thirds Teachers Staying off the Job.” *The Times Picayune*, September 19, 1990.

<sup>108</sup> There are multiple versions of “We Shall not be Moved.” While it originally served as an African American spiritual, participants in labor and civil rights movements, like the People's Songs, repurposed the song to

UTNO rallies continued throughout the three-week strike to keep teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical works energized on the picket line and informed about the status of negotiations. Rallies served as a space to spread information, ask questions, and release anxiety. The union did not hold rallies every night after picketing, but the occasional gathering served to regroup its members. The messages of inspiration to keep going, and the communal support of all the system's striking public school teachers in one space were especially important for teachers like Carmen James.

The strike also marked the beginning of the effort to recall members of the OPSB. As Director of Organizing, Connie Goodly spent much of her time during the strike organizing the recall movement. While many in the community, including many teachers, found the effort impractical, other teachers found themselves most passionate about this issue of the strike. According to Goodly, teachers were not the only ones who got emotional about the recall movement:

Naturally the board members were furious with us. They were really, really upset that we would do something like this. But, we did. We got our petitions organized and we went out and we started collecting [signatures].<sup>109</sup>

Teachers brought petitions to churches, crowded sections of the city like Canal Street, and community functions.<sup>110</sup> UTNO leaders strategically sought out a day when signatures would be easily verified and collected—October 6, 1990, the day of a state-wide election in Louisiana. Union members who collected signatures could, on that day, ask voters leaving their polling stations to sign using the same name on their voter identification card. This provided less room

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meet their needs. "Hymns and spirituals were sung in their original forms as "people's songs" of peace and brotherhood. They also served as "zipper" songs; in a simple folk tune, built on repeated lines, the singer could "zip" on a word or phrase to make a new song. In this way, for example, "We Shall Not Be Moved," "Jesus is my captain" had become "The union is our leader." Robbie Leiberman, *"My Song is My Weapon": People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 119-120

<sup>109</sup> Goodly, interview.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



for error, as some union leaders worried signatures could be deemed invalid if they did not match legal documentation.<sup>111</sup> As measures to recall OPSB members progressed alongside rallies and picketing, some union members expressed excitement over their recent on-the-ground activism. The strike was not all song and dance, however. As the days continued, rifts began to form between the non-striking and striking teachers, in addition to conflict between the teachers and the administration.

Many striking teachers expressed disappointment in some co-workers' decision to continue in the classroom. Striking teachers at Dibert Elementary were worried by the decision of two teachers to cross the picket line.<sup>112</sup> Rifts also formed at Live Oak Middle School where striking teachers verbally assaulted substitutes and one teacher who tried to enter the building. When substitutes crossed the picket line to enter their schools, striking teachers used tactics, like shouting, to remind them that they were not on the side of the teachers in this struggle.<sup>113</sup> Name calling on the picket line was particularly loud at schools with heavy union activity. One non-striking teacher at Dibert asked Carmen James to ask the striking teachers to stop heckling her.

One of them stopped me one day on—during the strike, and she said, “Ms. James could you please tell them not to harass me. I have to go to work.” I said, “So do we.” She said, “Yeah, but you know, I have a Macy’s bill. I lost 300 and something dollars that I have to pay.” I said, “Darlin’ I have teachers on this line who can’t pay their public service bill, some of them are renters who can’t pay their rent, and you want me to go tell them that you have a Macy’s bill that you can’t pay? I think you better leave before I’m the one that’s harassing you.” So she went back in the building.<sup>114</sup>

Rifts between striking and non-striking teachers grew as the strike progressed into late September. These kinds of acts formed the divisive rifts predicted by OPSB member Woody Koppel in his dissent on the first day of the strike.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> James, interview.

<sup>113</sup> Boulet, interview.

<sup>114</sup> James, interview.

In response to criticism of this tactic, Nat LaCour argued that teachers had the right to heckle substitutes and teachers who crossed the picket line.<sup>115</sup> UTNO members believed that substitute teachers, as well as non-striking teachers, kept the strike from a quick ending. Substitute teachers assuaged the pressure faced by administrators when teachers had left the building and with their aid, the strike could last longer. On the other hand, the administration could take relative comfort in knowing that adults were supervising classrooms, and substitutes relieved the pressure to get the teachers back into the classroom as soon as possible.

However, teachers held conflicting opinions of those who crossed the picket line. Patti Reynolds did not refer to substitutes as “scabs.” Rather, she saw them as people who may have needed a quick job, possibly in desperate need of income. Looking back, both Reynolds and Stone sympathized with co-workers who for economic or personal reasons—like going through a divorce—found they could not strike, despite agreeing with UTNO demands.<sup>116</sup> Goodly recounted how some teachers crossed the picket line because of pressure from their partners. “You have some people who don’t go out because of spouses. You know, that tell them, you can’t do this, you can’t afford it, you would embarrass me, some things like that.”<sup>117</sup> Although teachers held varying perceptions of substitutes and non-striking co-workers, heckling served as an effective union tactic to keep teachers motivated while picketing. Union members on the picket lines could remind non-striking teachers why they were on strike, in order to try to get them to join their cause. Heckling and shouting also built on the sense of unity of striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers. By identifying the opposition, union members could see each other as a part of a collective unit working towards a common goal.

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<sup>115</sup> Christie Harrison “Name Calling Gets Louder on Picket Lines at Schools.” *The Times Picayune*, September 21, 1990

<sup>116</sup> Reynolds, interview.

<sup>117</sup> Goodly, interview.

While administrators relied on substitutes to ease the commotion in their schools, it was clear that teachers were needed to make the school run as usual. School administrators asked teachers to rethink their commitment to the union, causing additional rifts. In the first week of the strike, Boulet received a call from her friend and principal of Live Oak, Armand Devezin, who also served on the OPSB negotiating team, to ask if she might return to the classroom.

I got a call from the principal the first week of the strike—I can’t remember what night it was—begging me. “Melanie, please come back in. It’s terrible in here.” And I said, “I can’t.” And he said, “I knew it.”

Boulet recalled that she and Devezin had a good relationship—they had begun working at Live Oak at the same time and could rely on each other for professional encouragement—yet, her friendship with Devezin did not outweigh her commitment to the strike and to her fellow teachers.<sup>118</sup>

Just as principals tried to sway teachers to come back into the building, both the school board and the union tried to influence the public’s opinion of the strike. The OPSB and UTNO used *The Times Picayune* to court public opinion through paid advertisements. In newspaper ads, both groups tried to sway readers to agree with their position on the strike. In one advertisement, UTNO used an image of an African-American female teacher, representative of the organization’s mostly female and minority membership, to remind readers of union demands. The photograph shows a teacher, smiling, as she interacts with her students—below her are the words “Teachers care about children and their schools.”<sup>119</sup> The advertisement attempted to combat rhetoric from the board that claimed striking worked against the students. In a newspaper article, Fudesco had been quoted, “We truly want to appeal to teachers to weigh

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<sup>118</sup> Boulet, interview.

<sup>119</sup> United Teachers of New Orleans, “Our Teachers Care About Children and Their Schools” (advertisement), *The Times Picayune*, September 27, 1990.

loyalty to union against loyalty to students.”<sup>120</sup> Administrators did not see striking as beneficial to students in the city’s public schools. To challenge the rhetoric of the OPSB that teachers were hurting children and those critical of the teacher strike, the union advertisement tried to reinforce to readers that the strike was not anti-student or anti-school.

Although most of the teachers were African-American, New Orleans’ black newspaper, *The Louisiana Weekly*, wrote very little about the strike in 1990, despite actively covering the 1978 strike. What they did cover critiqued the strike and teachers’ decision to join it. On September 29, 1990, the newspaper featured a photo of a substitute teacher leaving school grounds in a van, surrounded by heckling teachers. With little information to contextualize the image, the photograph painted teachers in a limited, and arguably negative light.<sup>121</sup> There are possibly two reasons for the limited coverage of the strike by the newspaper. *The Louisiana Weekly* often relied on freelance writers and contributors from national publications to fill its pages, unlike the stable newsroom of *The Times Picayune*. Simply put, there may not have been enough writers to cover the 1990 strike. However, it also seems the conservative climate in this era, with the growing critique of unions, caused a drop in coverage of labor activities for local African-Americans. According to Raphael Cassimere, the 1990 strike caused a rift between classes in the New Orleans African-American community:

I thought the union had come pretty close to fighting a losing battle because the community, the black community, I know, was not solidly behind the strike... which kind of surprised me. There was some concern, you know, because it was not a black and white [issue]. The mayor of the city was black, the superintendent was black, the school board was predominately black, the school president was black, and there was some people who had more selfish motives. You know, if you provide more benefits, it’s going to cost somebody some money. That means you’re going to have to raise somebody’s taxes and there were people who looked

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<sup>120</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Strike won’t shut schools, board vows.” *The Times Picayune*, September 1990.

<sup>121</sup> Untitled Image. *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 29, 1990.

at it from that way... So, they didn't have the kind of unanimity that they had, I thought, in the '78 strike.<sup>122</sup>

Without coverage from *The Louisiana Weekly*, and facing more middle class hostility than experienced in the 1978 strike, union members experienced a more difficult battle for community support than in years before.

UTNO also received mixed criticism from members of New Orleans labor community, including unions that had joined UTNO on the picket line in 1978. In most years, UTNO contracts affected all additional negotiations between the OPSB and its employees not represented by UTNO. According to LaCour, three different unions represented seven groups of employees in the New Orleans Public Schools.<sup>123</sup> Often, UTNO contracts would serve as the blueprint for other unions, like the Teamsters Local 270, that represented the city's school bus drivers. Unions who negotiated with the OPSB waited to see what UTNO would get before moving forward with their own negotiations. Connie Goodly, who also served on the UTNO negotiating team, recollected how the labor community intertwined:

When UTNO negotiated, they, in essence, negotiated for all of the other unions. We were always a mutual co-op for our parish because the other unions always waited and what they would say is whatever you gave them, you give us too. So, in essence, when we were at the table, we were negotiating not only for our members, we were negotiating for all other unions.<sup>124</sup>

This put additional pressure on UTNO negotiators at the bargaining table with the OPSB. Rather than negotiating only for teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers in the schools, union members at the bargaining table, in effect, were negotiating for the other unions who represented school employees as well. However, 1990 again proved different. On September 29, 1990, amid the UTNO strike, the OPSB met with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal

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<sup>122</sup> Dr. Raphael Cassimere, interview by Emma Long, New Orleans, February 4, 2016.

<sup>123</sup> LaCour, interview.

<sup>124</sup> Goodly, interview.

Employees, Local 1879 and Local 872, and the Teamsters Local 270 to ratify contracts. After ratifying the contracts, Dwight McKenna expressed thanks to the unions “for their understanding of the Board’s fiscal plight and dire straits.”<sup>125</sup> The progression of the strike into the end of September marked a growth of combative rhetoric on either side of the picket line and the bargaining table. UTNO faced critiques from the African-American and labor communities that had not appeared during the 1978 strike. Yet, the union continued to hold strong to its demands.

On three fronts, members of both the school board and the union worked to end the strike: negotiators tried to reach a compromise, strikers picketed in their communities to pressure for higher wages, and paid advertisements tried to sway public opinion in the city. But, as the strike continued, a settlement appeared unlikely. While awaiting a final contract, UTNO members continued to picket, rally, and stage marches in the city. These opportunities to organize worked to keep members motivated and to remind the public why the teachers remained on strike. On September 31, 1990, as a nod to New Orleans’ traditions, UTNO members staged a jazz funeral, instead of a march, for the burial of “Mr. Ed. U. Cation.”<sup>126</sup> This symbolic gesture represented what striking union members saw as a death to the education system. As the days went by, students continued to receive sub-par education, which concerned the city’s teachers. But striking teachers would not return, believing that in the long run, the raise on teacher pay would help education in the city. In addition to the symbolic message of the jazz funeral for Ed U. Cation, the gathering served as a moment of play for strikers. Similar to the skits performed at UTNO rallies, the jazz funeral worked to spread the message of strikers while promoting a sense of unity and amusement. Some striking teachers recounted that while striking could be

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<sup>125</sup> Orleans Parish School Board Collection (MSS 147), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. Orleans Parish School Board Minutes – Volume III September 3, 1990 through December 20, 1990-- Book Number 84. Minutes from Meeting on September 29, 1990.

<sup>126</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Teachers Turn Down \$13 Million Offer.” *The Times Picayune*, October 1, 1990.

stressful, it could also be an enjoyable space for teachers and their co-workers. Mike Stone claimed:

The union was fun. After that first strike [in 1978], looking back on it, the first strike was a lot of fun and the second strike really was a lot of fun. I lost three weeks' pay, I worried about bills and stuff, but my life would've been less interesting if I had never struck.<sup>127</sup>

However, not all striking teachers felt like Stone. Some teachers began to worry about their financial stability waiting for a new contract. Building Rep Carmen James listened to the concerns of many teachers on her picket line at Dibert Elementary. As Building Rep, teachers would come to her for assistance—including financial advice. Without a steady paycheck, teachers' bills sometimes went unpaid.

This is people's lives we're talking about. Somebody could lose out on their home. They could've lost out on an apartment, if they were in an apartment paying utilities...Anything could've happened. People—one chick did lose a car because she didn't get her note in and her husband had to go and plead with the people for that, so there was a lot of circumstances that people don't realize. That when you strike, you know, yeah, you're out there for the group, but you're also putting yourself into a very precarious situation.

To deal with tight financial situations, James recommended teachers seek a loan through the union, which was provided through funds from the AFT. There were also instances when teachers on the Dibert picket line came together to pay a bill—each chipping in to help their co-worker.<sup>128</sup>

Financial concerns were also heightened by the uncertainty of when the strike might end. Middle school teacher Melanie Boulet compared her outlook at this point of the strike to the uncertainty experienced during hurricane evacuations, a feeling familiar to residents of Southern Louisiana—"You'll never know. How long will you be away? What should I bring? Should I

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<sup>127</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>128</sup> James, interview.

plan to come back to work quickly?”<sup>129</sup> Other than picketing at the start and end of each school day, many teachers found themselves without much to do, except wait and make their financial circumstances work. But, it was also in these moments of strain that Carmen James claimed the striking teachers at Dibert felt like a family—which made her feel strong as a leader on the picket line.<sup>130</sup>

In an attempt to end the strike, a federal negotiator offered to mediate between the opposing sides, but the school board refused.<sup>131</sup> Instead, the board offered a \$13 million dollar contract, which the union rejected because it did not include pay raises for the 1990-1991 school year.<sup>132</sup> Union leaders demanded that members receive an immediate pay raise to make up for the wages lost over weeks of striking. By October 6, 1990, members on both sides of the bargaining table had not met for over a week.<sup>133</sup> This day also marked the major push by UTNO members involved in the recall movement to gather signatures. The state-wide Election Day to vote on new amendments and US Senators from Louisiana also provided UTNO members with an additional 10,000 collected signatures to recall two board members.<sup>134</sup>

While union members stood outside polling stations, UTNO’s negotiating team met again with Dr. Frank Fudesco and the other OPSB negotiators. That weekend, negotiations went around the clock. Mike Stone, who served on the negotiating team, remembered how the negotiators would meet, negotiate, go back to their respective rooms to redraft their proposals, and meet again until a final draft could be agreed upon. Negotiators took turns napping in the

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<sup>129</sup> Boulet, interview.

<sup>130</sup> James, interview.

<sup>131</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “Teachers Offered 3% Raise This Year.” *The Times Picayune*, October 6, 1990.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. “School’s in as teachers accept pact.” *The Times Picayune*, October 8, 1990.



building. Finally, LaCour and the union came up with a contract that both sides could agree on.

That is when the negotiators received a call from a fellow UTNO member, Connie Goodly:

We had taken a break and Connie called the room we had for the union and said, “Uh, how’s it going?” Nat says, “I think we’re just about through.”—we had just about agreed on everything—and she said, “Well don’t give up the recall.” And Nat said, “Too late, I’ve already told them that if we get this—we hadn’t even capped off and signed off and agreed yet—but I told them if we get this, we’ll stop the recall.” ... And she says, “Oh Nat, we got an office here full, stacks of petitions.” ... His plan for recalling [members of the board] had worked like clockwork.<sup>135</sup>

However, the decision by the negotiating team to drop the recall became a contested issue among UTNO members once the negotiators presented their final contract to the union at a meeting to vote to end the strike.

On the night of October 7, striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical workers represented by UTNO met *en masse* to vote to end the strike. The negotiating team presented the final contract to its members. But, when they asked union members to vote for its approval, many wanted to stay on strike and expand the recall. Goodly remembered a fraction of the membership who expressed disappointment in negotiators’ decision to drop the recall. Goodly recalled, “I can remember one guy yelling and screaming—‘That was not a bargaining chip. You shouldn’t have done that.’”<sup>136</sup> However, to many negotiators the decision to drop the recall effort is what ended the strike and made the end contract so powerful. Of the recall movement, Nat LaCour said:

That was the first time that that type of leverage had been used and it was pretty effective. And, in my belief, nobody may believe this but me, that became part of the leverage for getting the school board members to ultimately agree to the terms that we agreed to in ending that strike. What started off as a suggestion by Betty Sapp to recall the board, ended up being the leverage that we needed to conclude that strike successfully.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Stone, interview.

<sup>136</sup> Goodly, interview.

<sup>137</sup> LaCour, interview.

Betty Sapp, who came up with the idea, however, was not happy with the union's decision to remove the recall effort. Sapp left the meeting telling reporters from *The Times Picayune*, "They blackmailed the union. (UTNO President) Nat LaCour has sold us out. We're political hostages for the next three years." In a vote that evening, a third of the teachers voted to continue to strike.<sup>138</sup> Teachers like Patti Reynolds, tried to persuade this faction of teachers to consider removing board members in the next election. She reminded union members that the efforts to recall members of the board could be continued in future elections, saying, "This isn't the end of that story."<sup>139</sup>

Negotiators tried to explain that if the strike continued for a month, even two months, the strike would no longer be economically beneficial. With the contract presented by the negotiators, striking teachers, paraprofessionals, and clericals would eventually earn the difference from the strike's three weeks without pay. At the end of the evening, UTNO voted to approve the contract, without recalling members of the board. While teachers across the city experienced mixed feelings about the outcome of the strike, many teachers expressed their gratitude to reenter the classroom.

After three weeks, the OPSB and UTNO negotiating teams found compromise at the bargaining table, ending the longest strike in the school system's history. Teachers returned to their classrooms on October 8, 1990 after accepting a three-year, \$15.7 million contract.<sup>140</sup> The contract included a 3 percent pay raise for all OPSB employees for the 1990-1991 school year, a \$50 per employee increase towards health benefits in the 1991-1992 school year, and a 4 percent

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<sup>138</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "School's in as teachers accept pact." *The Times Picayune*. October 8, 1990.

<sup>139</sup> Reynolds, interview.

<sup>140</sup> Rhonda Nabonne. "School's In as Teachers Accept Pact." *The Times Picayune*. October 8, 1990.

pay raise for the 1992-1993 school year.<sup>141</sup> A majority of the striking teachers saw this compromise as a victory, while some were critical that the pay increases also included administrative leaders who had opposed the strike.<sup>142</sup>

On the outcome of the strike, teachers were overwhelmingly pleased with the results. Boulet, remarked how pleased she felt to get anything from OPSB, and described the experience of striking with her fellow teachers as unifying.<sup>143</sup> “To tell you the truth,” she said, “I think that was a benefit of the strike—that we were unified and we went back in [the school] strong.”<sup>144</sup> The conclusion of the strike, and its mostly positive outcome for UTNO members, reaffirmed the power of organized labor for the city’s teachers, who were mostly African American women. Their pressure for economic gains, through raises and benefits, and political activism, as reflected in their attempt to recall members of the school board, reemphasized the influence of the union in achieving teacher goals.

## **Conclusion**

While the UTNO strike of 1990 took place more than a decade after the height of teacher militancy in the 1970s, it demonstrates one way teacher unions navigated the conservative and anti-union political environment as organized labor, in both the private and public sectors, began to decline. UTNO served as a union that not only pressed for economic and employment related outcomes, but also worked to amplify voices that citywide dialogue often overlooked—the voices of minorities and women. Its successful three-week strike in 1990 exhibited the power of UTNO in New Orleans, as well as the commitment of its members towards union goals.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Boulet, interview.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

Through the work of UTNO negotiating teams at the bargaining table, union members played an active role in challenging what they saw as economic inequality. Teachers relied upon a chain of communication through building representatives up to the executive council of the union to address wage and work related issues. In the years when OPSB and UTNO negotiators met at the bargaining table, members of the union relied on their representatives to negotiate in good faith to achieve a better economic standing.

Through the events of this strike in 1990, New Orleans teachers also entered the political process by collecting signatures in an attempt to recall members of the school board. Connie Goodly, UTNO Director of Organizing, believed the effort to recall members of the OSPB in 1990 prepared the union for future political work, such as the 1991 effort to elect Edwin Edwards over former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke in the Louisiana gubernatorial race.<sup>145</sup> In election years, hundreds of rank and file UTNO members, predominately African-American females, took to the streets to work for union-backed candidates.<sup>146</sup> Many people in the community waited to see which political endorsements were made by the union before casting their vote. According to Nat LaCour, the union played a large role in the city politically.

UTNO was a major political player in New Orleans. There was nobody who ran for public office that did not seek the support of our union. And, in the 1990 campaign when David Duke, in the primaries had finished first and Edwards was second, we got very much involved politically. I put hundreds of teachers on the streets and not only in New Orleans, but throughout the state. And, particularly in the black community, in that election, New Orleans cast 100,000 more votes for Edwards than was received by Duke and that is what led to the defeat of David Duke. So, we built political power, which went into our negotiating power, so we were a factor to be reasoned with.<sup>147</sup>

The political power of the union also coincided with its longstanding commitment to civil rights because a defeat of David Duke represented a defeat of a political figure who aimed to push

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<sup>145</sup> Goodly, interview.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> LaCour, interview.

ideas and policies of white supremacy. This on-the-ground work collecting signatures and endorsing candidates represented an avenue for traditionally suppressed communities to express political opinions through the platform of a well-known union.

The combined efforts by the union and its members to combat economic and political inequality highlight, lastly, the social importance of the union for members of the teaching community in New Orleans. In many ways, improved wages reflected the worth of public school teachers to New Orleans society.<sup>148</sup> Pay increases and additional medical benefits, granted by the Orleans Parish School Board, reflected an understanding that these teachers conducted work deserving of such benefits. Finally, as represented through the communal experiences of the picket line, the union provided a space where women and minorities could come together to share experiences and identify as part of a larger organization—UTNO.

A feminist analysis of UTNO and the teacher strike of 1990 brings to light the ways that UTNO members used ideologies of gender equality, although abstractly, to affect labor outcomes. In this look at the teaching profession—which has historically received lower wages due to the gender of its employees—the strike of 1990 serves as an example of how members of the predominately female union challenged their employer for higher wages and medical benefits, or face a potential recall. New Orleans public school teachers used feminist and civil rights ideas as a tool—with the union—to challenge economic, social, and political inequalities in New Orleans. The teaching profession also created a space where teachers could continue their intellectual and professional pursuits, as exhibited by teachers like Connie Goodly:

I got my master's degree from Tulane University. When I went to Tulane, I, you know, I was in a classroom with—some of them were just there because their husbands were in there too...As soon as their husbands, or their spouses finished,

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<sup>148</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 1-5.

they were going to be gone. That was not my ambition. My ambition was to become a teacher and to become a good teacher because I wanted to stay in the profession. That's what I wanted to.<sup>149</sup>

Goodly found her passion in teaching, and later as a leader in the union. While her classmates left school when their domestic life called, New Orleans public schools, and the union, provided Goodly a space where she could proudly work.

Members in the community also saw the 1990 strike as indicative of pursuits towards equality that had yet to be fully realized—like racial and gender equality. Dr. Raphael Cassimere, who joined the picket line with his wife, Inez, claimed that while the strike suggested a route towards economic equality, it also challenged larger, structural inequalities for minorities and women.

Most of them thought of it ... as bread and butter issues and eventually began to see it was a struggle for ... racial minorities, but especially for women because most of the key administrator positions that were held men. And, you know, you kind of see things that you grow up with and kind of accept it, but then when you're sensitized to it, you begin to perceive it a little bit differently.<sup>150</sup>

The union served to aid those sensitive to inequalities in New Orleans. With UTNO, many teachers who were predominately African-American and female could actively combat the inequalities experienced in the political, economic, and social realms of New Orleans. UTNO had become the largest union in the state of Louisiana. Then Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005.

Months after the storm, the Louisiana State Legislature passed Act 35, which allowed for the state-run state run Recovery School District to take over the majority of the public schools in New Orleans. Weakened by Act 35, the Orleans Parish School Board fired all 7,500 of its teachers, essentially gutting UTNO of its membership. When the rebuilding effort began, RSD

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<sup>149</sup> Goodly, interview.

<sup>150</sup> Dr. Cassimere, interview.

leaders opted to hire new, often uncertified teachers to fill its schools. Veteran teachers and union members believed they were purposefully left out of the system's rebuilding effort.

UTNO member Mike Stone expressed his outrage one month before the ten-year anniversary of the storm:

From my viewpoint, the teachers were just fired after Katrina. When they made no effort to set up a process to bring teachers back and try to be faithful to the contract we had had before the storm, I basically felt like I'd been fired and the public and the politicians had a low opinion of me. And so, I just retired ... ironically after I had been retired for about, I don't know, maybe 6 months, I got a letter, I think his name was [Cecil J.] Picard, who was head of the State Department of Education at that time, saying that there was a shortage of teachers in Orleans parish and that if I would come out of retirement and help improve the Orleans Parish Schools, that I would be able to keep my retirement check every month plus they were going to pay me more than I had ever made as a teacher before I retired...I found this exceedingly insulting so I composed a letter to education Superintendent Picard saying ... "Six months ago you thought I was the problem. You in effect fired me, and now you're willing to pay me, counting my retirement and all, you're now willing to pay me twice as much to come back, when, if you could or would have tried, you could have just and me for my regular pay. And I said, "Am I alone in finding this insulting? Nonetheless, all I can say is in the words of the great Johnny Paycheck, you can take this job and shove it."<sup>151</sup>

Many veteran teachers in the city exhibited a similar frustration with the state and with the OPSB. While some teachers found employment in the city's charter schools or other parishes, the decision by the OPSB to ignore its contract with teachers remained a painful memory.

Through lawsuits against the state and local school board, UTNO members attempted to define the legal decisions, like Act 35, as a union-busting move. The power of UTNO, and its influence in the community, it could be argued, was a motivation for state takeover of New Orleans public schools.

The strike of 1990 enhances the current historiography of The United Teachers of New Orleans. This paper attempts to add to the current scholarship on UTNO that predominately

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<sup>151</sup> Stone, interview.

focuses either on its relevancy during the period of the New Left or on its subdued role in New Orleans educational policy following Hurricane Katrina. As a case study, the strike of 1990 shows the ways this Southern teacher union, made up of predominately minorities and women, navigated the conservative climate of the New Right, while also combating the social, political, and economic inequalities experienced by many union members. Through interviews with teachers and union leaders, it also becomes apparent how past commitments to labor issues, like the AFT 527 strikes of 1966 and 1969, and the UTNO strike of 1978, commitments to the Civil Rights Movement, and a commitment to the pursuit of gender equality, influenced the actions and rhetoric of this strike.



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## Vita

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