

Margaret Haley, "WHY TEACHERS SHOULD ORGANIZE," 1904

Margaret Haley, sixth grade teacher and Vice President of the first teacher union in the US (the Chicago Teachers' Federation), gave this speech at the National Education Association convention in St. Louis, Missouri, July 1, 1904. At the time, the NEA was not a union. The NEA was dedicated to advancing the cause of public education. Its members included teachers and administrators from around the country. Haley's speech was also published in the *Journal of Education*.

...The methods as well as the objects of teachers' organizations must be in harmony with the fundamental object of the public school in a democracy, namely to preserve and develop the democratic ideal. It is not enough that this ideal be realized in the administration of the schools and the methods of teaching; in all its relations to the public, the public school must conform to this ideal....

Nowhere in the United States today does the public school, as a branch of the public service, receive from the public either the moral or financial support needed to enable it properly to perform its important function in the social organism. The conditions which are militating most strongly against efficient teaching and which existing organizations of the kind under discussion here are directing their energies toward changing, briefly stated are the following:--

1. Greatly increased cost of living, together with constant demands for higher standards of scholarship and professional attainments and culture to be met with practically stationary and wholly inadequate teachers' salaries.
2. Insecurity of tenure of office and lack of provision for old age.
3. Overwork in over-crowded schoolrooms, exhausting both mind and body.
4. And lastly, lack of recognition of the teacher as an educator in the school system, due to the increased tendency toward "factoryizing education," making the teacher an automaton, a mere factory hand, whose duty it is to carry out mechanically and unquestioningly the ideas and orders of those clothed with the authority of position and who may or may not know how to minister to them.

The individuality of the teacher and her power of initiative are thus destroyed and the result is courses of study, regulations, and equipment which the teachers have had no voice in selecting, which often have no relation to the children's needs, and which prove a hindrance instead of a help in teaching....

A word before closing on the relations of the public schools to the labor unions. As the professional organization furnishes the motive and ideal which shall determine the character and methods of the organized effort of teachers to secure better conditions for teaching, so is it the province of the educational agencies in a democracy to furnish the motive and ideal which shall determine the character and methods of the organization of its members for self-protection.

There is no possible conflict between the good of society and the good of its members, of which the industrial workers are the vast majority. The organization of these workers for mutual aid has shortened the hours of labor, raised and equalized the wages of men and women, and taken the children from the factories and

workshops. These humanitarian achievements of the labor unions—and many others which space forbids enumerating—in raising the standard of living of the poorest and weakest members of society are a service to society which for its own welfare it must recognize. More than this, by intelligent comprehension of the limitations of the labor unions and the causes of these limitations, by just, judicious, and helpful criticism and cooperation, society must aid them to feel the inspiration of higher ideals and to find the better means to realize these ideals.

If there is one institution on which the responsibility to perform this service rests most heavily, it is the public school. If there is one body of public servants of whom the public has a right to expect the mental and moral equipment to face the labor question and other issues vitally affecting the welfare of society and urgently pressing for a rational and scientific solution, it is the public school teachers whose special contribution to society is their own power to think, the moral courage to follow their convictions, and the training of citizens to think and to express thought in free and intelligent action.....

How shall the public school and the industrial workers in their struggle to secure the rights of humanity through a more just and equitable distribution of the products of their labor, meet their mutual responsibility to each other and to society?

Whether the work of coordinating these two great educational agencies, manual and menial labor, with each other and with the social organism, shall be accomplished through the affiliation of the organizations of brain and manual workers is a mere matter of detail and method to be decided by the exigencies in each case. The essential thing is that the public school teachers recognize the fact that their struggle to maintain the efficiency of the schools through better conditions for themselves is part of the same great struggle which the manual workers—often misunderstood and unaided—have been making for humanity through their efforts to secure living conditions for themselves and their children; and that back of the unfavorable conditions of both is a common cause.

Two ideals are struggling for supremacy in American life today: one is the industrial ideal dominating through the supremacy of commercialism, which subordinates the worker to the product and the machine; the other, the ideal of democracy, the ideal of the educators, which places humanity above all machines, and demands that all activity shall be the expression of life. If this ideal of the educators cannot be carried over into the industrial field then the ideal of industrialism will be carried over into the school. Those two ideals can no more continue to exist in American life than our nation could have continued half slave and half free. If the school cannot bring joy to the work of the world, the joy must go out of its own life, and work in the school, as in the industrial field, will become drudgery.....

It will be well indeed if the teachers have the courage of their convictions and face all that the labor unions have faced with the same courage and perseverance.

Today, teachers of America, we stand at the parting of the ways. Democracy is not on trial, but America is.

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