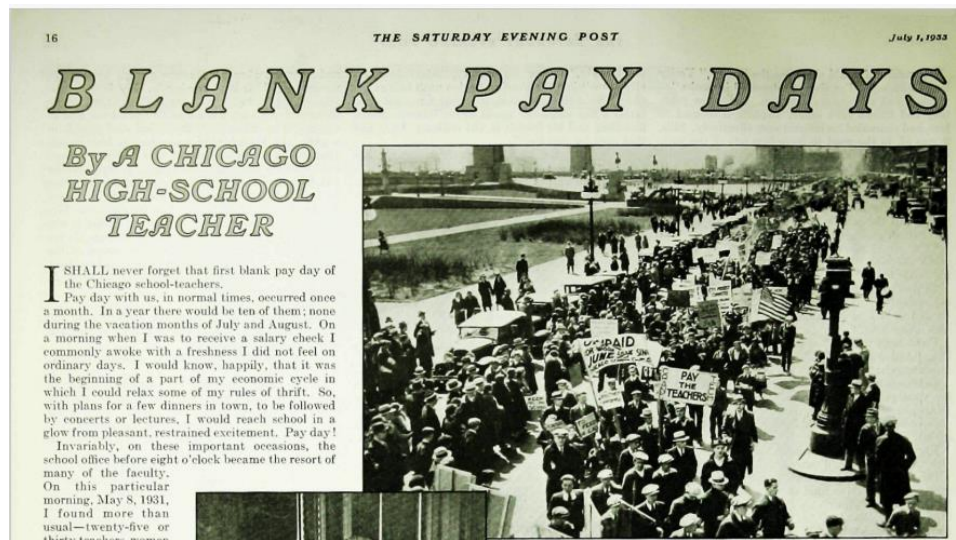


BLANK PAY DAYS, 1933
By: A CHICAGO HIGH-SCHOOL TEACHER

This excerpt is from an anonymously written article by a Chicago school teacher about her work and personal life. It was published during the depths of the Great Depression, in *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 1, 1933. *The Saturday Evening Post* carried stories on current events, human interest, and editorials, and was one of the most widely circulated magazines in the United States in the 1930s.



[Page 16] I shall never forget that first blank pay day of the Chicago school-teachers. Pay day with us, in normal times, occurred once a month. In a year there would be ten of them; none during the vacation months of July and August. On a morning when I was to receive a salary check I commonly awoke with a freshness I did not feel on ordinary days. I would know, happily, that it was the beginning of a part of my economic cycle in which I could relax some of my rules of thrift. So, with plans for a few dinners in town, to be followed by concerts or lectures, I would reach school in a glow from pleasant restrained excitement. Pay day! ...

[Ed. Note: The author explains how, after not receiving a pay check in four months, she moved from her own apartment into an apartment she shared with her brother, her sister-in-law, their two children, and her sick mother to help save on expenses.]

[Pages 68-69] Plenty of other families have had to double up [by moving in with friends and/or family members], to get along without conveniences and aids which they had come to look upon as necessities. Across the street from where I live there is a tiny apartment occupied by six persons instead of three. The father, mother and unmarried son have received the daughter, her husband and child. ... Thousands of these family mergers have occurred. I suppose these account for the vast number of vacant apartments. I suppose the vacant apartments in a measure account for the unpaid tax bills. I know the unpaid tax bills are the reason my brother and I abandoned one of the two apartments we formerly occupied. Here the thing begins to resemble a circle vicious enough to be muzzled.

Lest someone accuse me unjustly of putting too much emphasis on the troubles of school-teachers, I want to point out that five days in each week I am in intimate contact with about 350 high-school students. They come swarming into my room thirty and forty at a time. They stay for the best part of an hour and then make way for another group. It is part of my job to understand them. If a girl in my class begins to grow thin and turns an ever paler face toward me, more than human sympathy requires me to know why. It is my job. If a boy—a normally well behaved and sensitive lad of fifteen—is transformed into an ill-tempered daydreamer, I can sometimes read the answer in the patches on his clothing. In these stern years when I look searchingly into the eyes of a student, often it is as revealing as if I had peered through the window of a Chicago home.

Sometimes I actually go to those homes. In my division there are forty-odd pupils. Naturally, I am closest to those in this group. Lately, in tracing the cause of one girl's absence, I went to talk with her elder sister. "No carfare," she explained. "A lot of students and teachers walk farther than Grace would have to," [the teacher replied.]

...

That young woman had to fight with her pride to confess as much as that. I had to fight back my tears. Happily, I mustered enough tact to make it possible for the absent girl to report to school earlier in the day, when, with funds provided by the teachers, a simple breakfast is fed to students who would otherwise attend their classes with empty stomachs.

In my school, about one-third of the students are the offspring of parents born in America. The rest are the sons and daughters of immigrants—Germans, Swedes, Irish, Poles, Italians and an occasional Mexican. There are two or three Negroes in each class. I do not wish to exaggerate the amount of suffering among them. Actually, most of them are comfortably sheltered, adequately fed and warmly dressed.

Two of the youngsters in my division are from homes where there is no wage earner. They are subsisting on the Illinois equivalent of the dole—family relief. We have lost about a fifth of our student body, youngsters who were obliged to go to work or to remain at home to take over household chores of some other member of the family who had to go out to work. When we discovered that some were dropping out of school because they did not have shoes or stockings, we teachers began to bring for secret distribution what garments we could round up among our friends. ...

[page 70] I have been singularly fortunate in disposing of all my tax-anticipation warrants at par. The Board of Education, about eight times in the last two years, has paid us with warrants. ... Then brokerage establishments were opened in La Salle Street where this paper was traded in actively. Prices fluctuated widely. Altogether there are hundreds of varieties of tax warrants now outstanding in Cook County. ... [I]n the stores and shops all over Chicago, this paper was being bartered by teachers frantic to get hold of a little cash. ... Some teachers have hung on to the warrants, and then, in sudden emergencies, have taken absurdly low prices for them. ... I have disposed of mine at par by paying the rent with them. The landlord uses them to pay his tax bill. ...

Some weeks ago, when I was eating my midday sandwich and apple in the chemical laboratory, one of the younger teachers came bustling in. "You'll march in the protest parade Saturday, won't you?" There was no doubt in her voice. "No," I said, "I won't march." "Why not?" She was mightily indignant and glared at me. ...

"Well," I said, "I am afraid of mob psychology. I do not propose to act like an incorrigible child because I have been treated unfairly by my employer." She slammed the door and I heard her whispering to another of the younger teachers when I left the building.

Plenty of other teachers did march. I'm not sure now that, if they march again, I may not march with them...

Just before the spring vacation, a group of pupils clustered around my desk. They had some plan under way. Then one, in the whisper of a conspirator, asked me a question. I shook my head from side to side. "You mean we must not?" His voice suggested he could not believe his ears. "You don't want us to strike?" "I'm here at my desk. Isn't that your answer?" Then I smiled and ordered them to hustle back to their seats and get to work. I believe that three-quarters of the teachers I know feel the same way.