

“Spasmodic Diary of Chicago School-Teacher”

By: An anonymous Chicago public school teacher

November 1933

[page 515] *April 5.*—It is the [Citizens’] Committee that is our enemy—made up of bank presidents, railroad presidents, packers, and directors generally of the wealth of the second city of the United States. There is no possible doubt of their intention; they are attempting to starve the teaching force into submission to their programme and to cripple the city’s educational system. ...

[page 516] *April 6.*—The strike grows. Communism has been charged, of course. ...

[page 517] *April 9.*—More and more I feel myself being drawn to this more violent form of expression. Something in me cries out that it is bad enough to be poor, worried, and debt-ridden, but far worse to make a spectacle of myself. Nevertheless I am trampling down my pride, if that is what it is, and I too perhaps shall soon join the more radical elements of the teaching force in their demonstrations. With their nuisance technique they are getting results that I am beginning to realize could not otherwise have been achieved. At the least, they are calling attention to the deplorable situation in which we exist. Many of the teachers are actually facing starvation.

April 10.—[T]oday two thousand school-teachers stormed the City Hall and one of the banks. At the bank, guards were hastily stationed and the doors were closed. ... This city is perhaps legitimately two years behind in its taxes. ... [T]he lower and middle classes have been the good citizens in spite of the depression. It is the rich who cannot or will not pay. Appointing their Citizens’ Committees, [page 518] they are dictating educational retrenchment. The schools, they shout, must economize. The sympathetic press runs editorials about a ‘soak the rich’ campaign; yet we know that locally and nationally the poor man pays his taxes while the rich man hires lawyers to defend his plea that he cannot pay.

[page 519] *April 14.*—...To-morrow I shall *parade*. I’ve come to it, at last. I loathe the idea, but the public must be awakened. I feel a little like Joan of Arc. ...

April 15.— ... At a conservative estimate, 20,000 teachers and students paraded, accompanied by high-school bands and flourishing many placards. Some of the signs were clever, some bitter, some only dull; but all of them [page 520] blamed the politicians and the bankers, and, of course, the Citizens’ Committee. ... It appalled me to find myself marching in a parade of protest, but I do think that only such methods will bring results. I’ve been converted. Once I didn’t believe it. But all other methods have failed. Perhaps the bankers and the Board will pay us to keep us off the streets.

[page 525] *August 13.*— ... I feel pretty aged today. No fight left in me. Unless I can recover a little spirit I shall not be fit for another semester of school. The members of the Board appear to represent the thought of all ‘big business.’ The last fight is on. Elementary education for the masses is their objective—and nothing else. ...

August 23.— ... [I]n the afternoon [I went] to a meeting of the Board. ... The whole meeting, incongruously enough, was devoted to plans for obtaining a government loan for the building of more schools. All they want is \$14,000,000! No mention of the wrecking programme; and no discussion of the list of teachers and principals to be dismissed. The *raison d’être* of the School Board becomes increasingly obvious—it is the letting of fat contracts. They talked at length...of the plasterers and carpenters who would be benefitted by the building programme. ... No whisper of the gravy destined to drip into their own mouths when the huge contracts are placed. However, I am not discouraged. I still have faith in the gentleman at Washington. Some part of the loan may go through, but there will be a federal watchdog on the job to keep an eye on expenditures. The days of the grafting politician are numbered. The Board is protecting itself by uniformed policemen, fully armed, and by plain-clothes detectives—an incredible spectacle! The members are in no physical danger. It is their guilty consciences that frighten them.

[page 526] *September 11.*— ... School opens in a week. I feel fairly fit, and I am ready. My finances are still appalling. ... I like to think, thousands of teachers are returning to their classes—prepared to serve, but also prepared to fight for a decent solution of the problems ahead. Heaven send us grace and courage to perform our tasks!

Text excerpted by Adam Mertz, History Department, University of Illinois at Chicago.

From: Anonymous, “Spasmodic Diary of a Chicago School-Teacher,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 152, No. 5 (November, 1933): pp. 513-526.

DOCUMENT 8.3

Historical Era

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION
AND WORLD WAR II
(1929-1945)**

Document Title:

SPASMODIC DIARY OF A CHICAGO SCHOOL-TEACHERDocument Type: **magazine article**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

This document is an excerpt from a published selection of a diary that belonged to an anonymous Chicago public school teacher, which was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in November 1933.

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by:

Adam Mertz, History Department, University of Illinois at Chicago

SOURCING THE SOURCE

An anonymous Chicago public school teacher published parts of her diary related to strike/protest activity as well as the poor economic situation in Chicago. She published these parts of her diary in *The Atlantic Monthly*, which featured many articles on political and social topics like education and abolition, along with literature and poetry.

Intended Audience: Although this is only the perspective of one anonymous Chicago public school teacher, her thoughts reached a national audience, as she explained the challenges and political scene that she and her fellow teachers faced in Depression-era Chicago.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE **Historical Context:**

As the Great Depression continued, unemployment rose and income fell for many people across the country. Because of this reduced income, most Americans could not afford to pay their taxes, which meant municipalities and states lacked enough funds to run government programs. Since public schools often represented the largest expense for municipalities, politicians across the country—often urged by business organizations—cut school budgets in attempts to save other government programs or just avoid full bankruptcy. “The cuts in the Chicago public school system,” explains historian John F. Lyons, “were particularly severe.” “The Board of Education, under the control of Chicago politicians,” Lyons continues, “had long overspent as it practiced widespread patronage in the granting of contracts for school construction and equipment. Approximately 90% of the funding for the Chicago public schools came from an unequally distributed property tax. Due to declining revenue brought on by the Depression, and investigation of the tax system that delayed tax collection, and pressure from sections of the business community to cut taxes, the Chicago Board of Education curtailed public education expenditures in the early 1930s.”¹ As part of the budget cuts, Chicago’s Board of Education laid off teachers, shortened the school year, cut teacher pay or paid

¹ John F. Lyons, “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers” in *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 23.

teachers late, and reduced or cancelled education-related services. These measures obviously hurt teachers, but they also harmed students and whole communities.

The practice of paying teachers in “tax-anticipation warrants” offers one example of how policies toward teachers connected with their communities—and the whole city. Because the Board of Education had little actual money, it sometimes paid teachers in scrip—basically a voucher or an “IOU”—called “tax-anticipation warrants” (or simply “warrants”), since they represented the money the Board of Education anticipated it would receive after Chicago citizens could once again afford to pay their taxes. Teachers had to pay rent with the scrip or sell it to banks, businesses, or individuals; upon selling the scrip, teachers often received less than the scrip’s worth. The author of the document explains some of this process. Many other Chicago institutions also paid their workers in their own scrip. While those who gave scrip as payment intended this practice as a helpful measure when they were short on cash, it often had negative consequences.

“The sufferings of the Great Depression,” Lyons explains, “changed the political views of many public schoolteachers.”² As a result, many teachers began to believe that engaging in protests and strikes would be the only way to improve their pay and working conditions, which would also improve their students’ learning environment. In fact, thousands of teachers and students in Chicago public schools went on strike on April 5, 1933 to demonstrate their anger at teachers not receiving pay for several months. And, as the author of this document explains, the movement grew to 20,000 demonstrators ten days later.

But many teachers felt that teachers should not engage in protests and strikes because it was improper behavior. Indeed, since the vast majority of public school teachers were women, these teachers—and women in general—were expected to stay out of politics and selflessly serve the public. So when teachers began to engage in protests and other union activity, many opponents criticized these teachers for acting in an inappropriate, “manly” way, charging these teachers as greedy “special interests” or even radicals. The expectations about teachers, therefore, represented significant obstacles. But the author of this document overcame those attitudes and join in the demonstrations. Further, she took the accusations against teachers and turned it around on the wealthy business and bank owners and politicians, charging the wealthy with avoiding tax payments and “dictating” policy while the “good citizens” in the lower and middle classes pay their taxes and suffer the consequences.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Document**

While this document was not nearly as influential or famous as, say, Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” this anonymous Chicago public school teacher’s thoughts and feelings reached a national audience through publication in the widely read *Atlantic Monthly*. The article was designed to inform readers across the country about the challenges that she and her fellow teachers faced in Chicago as a result of the Depression and the budget cuts.

This document also shows how economic troubles, discontent, and worker organizing also occurred *outside* factories. While industrial conflict represents a key part of the Great Depression and the New Deal, all Americans had to deal with changes and frustrations in their various workplaces.

Decisions about how to address these frustrations involved serious individual and group considerations. Indeed, Chicago’s public school teachers wrestled with the idea of what it meant to be a “professional.” Should teachers come together to participate in protests and strikes to secure greater pay and control over their working conditions? Or should they avoid these behaviors because “professionals” don’t behave in that manner? The author of this document chose to engage in protests or strikes. But compare her attitudes to the decisions of a different teacher contained in “Blank Pay Days,” written by another anonymous Chicago public school teacher.

More broadly, in the article you can see various people—whether they are part of a government institution, a family, or acting as individuals—attempting solutions to the problems brought on by the Great Depression. In fact, you can see the author of this document is hopeful about the new president, Franklin Roosevelt, to help combat the corruption

² Lyons, “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers,” 24.

in Chicago. Yet she also believes that she and her fellow teachers, along with allies in the general public, must continue to fight to preserve quality education and other social services for the city. The author of this document and many of her fellow teachers came to this decision because they achieved many results from this collective action.

GLOSSARY

Citizens' Committee: The Citizens' Committee on Public Expenditures, which was one of the organizations made up of business leaders that focused on decreasing spending on public education.

Communism: In this case, it refers to the dictatorship of the Soviet Union in which the government controlled the society and owned its resources. The teachers' opponents accused the protesting teachers of being communists.

Economize: use money carefully and sparingly

Joan of Arc: a young peasant woman who, believing she was on a mission from God, led French soldiers against the invading English armies in 14th century Europe.

Packers: bosses and owners of meat-packing plants

Patronage: a system in which politicians distribute money and/or jobs to loyal political supporters.

raison d'être: the reason something or someone exists. In this case, the author is saying that the main reason Chicago's Board of Education exists is to grant "fat contracts."

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Document-Specific

- In the entry for August 23, 1933 (on page 525), who is the "gentleman in Washington" the author mentions? What does the author think the "gentleman in Washington" will accomplish? How does the author feel about the "gentleman in Washington"?
- What is the author's attitude toward the Citizen's Committee and the Board of Education? Why does the author hold these views?
- In the entry for April 6, which is one day after the strike began, the author wrote "Communism has been charged, of course." Why does she mention this?
- How do the author's attitude toward striking and protesting change? What reasons does she give for these changes?

Historical Era

- How did the role of government change during the national crises of the Great Depression?
- Why was there a re-emergence of labor militancy during the Great Depression?

Labor and Working-Class History

- Why did working people form or join labor unions?
- Does the inclusion of teachers alongside industrial workers change or add to the story of worker activism during the Great Depression?
- What role(s) have women played in the labor movement?

CITATION & FAIR USE

An anonymous Chicago public school teacher, "Spasmodic Diary of a Chicago School-Teacher." *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 152, No. 5 (November, 1933): pp. 513-526. [excerpt]

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Lyons, John F. "Chicago Teachers Unite," *Chicago History* (Spring 2004): 32-47.

Lyons, John F. *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1929-1970*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

Lyons, John F. "Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers" in *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS US Era 8 Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and **how it affected America society.**

This document provides a window to view what everyday life was like for urban residents during the Great Depression, mainly public school teachers. It also provides some insight into how the Depression affected city politics and how various groups coped with problems brought about by the Depression.

NCHS US Era 8 Standard 2: **How the New Deal addressed the Great Depression**, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state.

This document offers a glimpse of what workers believed Franklin Roosevelt's presidency promised to bring: an end to corruption in Chicago politics through greater oversight. The teacher who wrote this document believes that the corruption of the patronage system held much of the blame for Chicago's poor economic situation.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3](#) Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5](#) Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#) Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.