

Substantial Disruption



Walking the Line

By Mike Tully

"There is an old saying that the course of civilization is a race between catastrophe and education. In a democracy such as ours, we must make sure that education wins the race."

--John F. Kennedy

A half dozen dawns before most of the world celebrates [International Workers' Day](#), Arizona teachers will [walk the line](#) instead of walking into their classrooms. They will not only join a [growing national movement](#) of teachers, students, and parents fed up with politicians who starve our schools for political gain, they will track the cairns of a trail blazed by known and unknown heroes who organized in pursuit of a higher cause.

The trail can be treacherous. International Workers' Day was born from an event in Chicago in 1886 known as "[The Haymarket Affair](#)" when a peaceful protest turned violent. Workers were striking for what most of us take for granted: an eight-hour workday. The protest began peacefully on May 1st but took a dark turn on the 3rd when several strikers were killed in a clash with police. The next day somebody tossed a bomb into a group of police officers, who responded with gunfire. Several policeman and demonstrators were killed. Three years later, May 1st was declared an international holiday for labor.

In 1978, when my teacher wife and I were newlyweds and I was in my second year of law school, teachers walked out in the Tucson Unified School District, thanks to a disintegrating relationship between the union and a dysfunctional school board led by a new superintendent who was in over his head. It lasted a week – one of the longest weeks of our lives – but ended with a result generally favorable to the teachers. ([You can read about the 1978 strike here.](#))

In 1966, the Typographical Union struck the local newspapers, despite a reasonable contract proposal. The union's new president, finally elected after years of defeats, called a strike for the worst possible reason: ego. The strikers walked the line for weeks, joined by other unions, including teamsters and mine workers. I saw a teenage boy, about my age, roughed up when he tried to cross the line at the building's front door. He wasn't a strike-breaker; they didn't use the front door. Maybe he was a paper boy, there to collect payment. He never made it into the building. (I filmed the entire episode. When the film returned from the lab the segment depicting the picketers roughing up the kid was blacked out.) The union lost the strike and the president left town. My Dad crossed the line, which was a major personal sacrifice since both he and my Grandfather were union organizers. That prompted a death threat; I took the call. The trail can be treacherous.

The labor movement gave us the American middle class and many things we take for granted, such as a 40-hour work week, overtime pay, an eight-hour work day, and sick leave. Today's action is not just about economics. Teachers are not walking out in singular pursuit of a higher income; they also want a safe and effective learning environment that includes decent pay for support staff, and buildings with roofs that don't leak, plumbing that works, air conditioning that doesn't break down in August and textbooks that are current.

The teachers know a mass walkout is not for the faint of heart, but neither is teaching. The profession is challenging enough without low pay, large class sizes, outdated textbooks and crumbling facilities. Arizona is one of several [states governed by a cult](#) that opposes public education, derides public schools as "government schools," demonizes teachers' unions, and sells fanciful visions of a magic economy that will boost funding without increasing taxes. It's "something for nothing" politics and school children pay the consequences when it fails – as it always does.

Kris and I have retired, but a new generation has taken our place and they'll be walking the line with thousands of their colleagues throughout the state. That's why I'm reminiscing; their decision triggered memories. Still, I'm optimistic about their chances for these reasons:

1. They have numbers. In 1978, only TUSD teachers walked out, not the entire state. The vote to strike was not overwhelming – 57.6% voted in favor. By contrast, 78% of the 57,000 Arizona teachers who participated voted to walk out. They will shut down the State's entire public-school system.
2. Arizona voters support public education and have voted to raise taxes to pay for it. In Arizona the general population is more progressive than the Legislature – witness votes to increase taxes to pay for education, to legalize medical marijuana, and to establish a system of public funding for candidates for political office.
3. Arizona is part of a national uprising against state failures to adequately fund public education. Being part of a national movement is empowering.
4. Governor Doug Ducey is panicking. After digging in his heels, he reversed himself and called for a 20% raise for teachers – that he can't pay for. He's up for reelection and education is his vulnerability. Politicians act in their own self-interest and will support increased funding if they believe it will help them.
5. Arizona schools don't have the option to fire teachers who walk out. The state has 2,000 vacancies it can't fill because of the lousy pay and working conditions. Any school district that fires striking teachers may find itself unable to function when it can't replace them.

My heart is in my throat as I watch family members join the walkout. They'd rather be in the classroom but realize they belong elsewhere: outside, in the sunshine, walking the line.