

A Union is Formed

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With current events such as teacher dismissals, student unrest, and student strikes, one might think that it was the 1960s. However, the year was 1935, and the place was Belleville Township High School in Belleville, Illinois.

On Thursday, May 23, 1935, the board of education at Belleville Township High School held a meeting to take care of regular school district business. At this meeting, six teachers were not re-employed for the following year by a vote four to two. Although the board members thought that they were taking care of business as usual, they did not realize how their decision would affect the community in the following week and decades that followed.

On Friday, May 24, 1935, the word was out about the six teachers not being rehired. Around noon, the students held a general meeting on the steps of the auditorium of Belleville Township High School. After several students stated their concerns at the rally, it was decided to attend classes that day. However, they decided not to attend classes the following Monday. Homer Weidman, president of the class of 1935 stated, "We (the students) just felt the action taken by the board (the dismissal of the six teachers) was very unfair."

For three days, a majority of the students did not report to classes. For all intents and purposes, the school was shut down. Jane Hansleben, who in 1935 was a student at the nearby Union Grade School and who years later would be a teacher at the high school, remembers clearly when the high school students went on strike at Belleville Township High School. "I was

so amazed. We (the students) all wanted to look out the classroom windows at the students who were so upset, but our teacher would not let us."

A special board meeting was held the following Wednesday night. It was attended by about 600 individuals, including mostly former graduates, parents of students and "students who had gone out on strike because of the dismissal of the teachers." The meeting started in Superintendent-Principal Henry G. Schmidt's office, but was moved to the auditorium "so the people who had congregated in the corridors could hear. Arthur Buesch (a board member) and Arthur Spoeneman (chairman of the teachers committee) opposed the move, but when the audience pressed its demands vociferously, the meeting place was transferred."

During the two-and-one-half hour session, the board of education "adopted a resolution declaring illegal, null and void the action taken by the board" at its previous meeting on May 23, which had dismissed six teachers for no valid reasons. Teachers were being favored who had been active in the board's election campaign. In one instance, Schmidt had promised a job to his daughter, who was going to replace one of the released teachers. Also, "the resolution declared that proper notice of the purpose of the meeting twenty-four hours in advance, as provided in the rules of the board had not been given."

"The strike ended when strike leaders, informed of Wednesday night's meeting of the board, urged all the students to return to their classes after Schmidt had assured the strikers that they would not be penalized." The students attended a normal day of school on Friday after an "extra holiday" on Thursday.

About seven months after the student walk out in May, the faculty of fifty-two teachers at Belleville Township High School met Saturday afternoon in December 1935. The purpose of the meeting was to elect new officers and to organize the chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. They would affiliate themselves with the American Federation of Labor. It was

decided that dues would be one dollar per month for the time being but would later be collected on a "sliding scale, subject to the amount of individual incomes."

The *Belleville Daily Advocate* reported that "affiliation of the high school teachers with a union labor marked the first move by educators in this vicinity. A number of unsuccessful attempts had been made in the past by labor leaders to organize teachers as well as the St. Clair County Teachers' Institute."

Another article in the *Belleville Daily Advocate* stated "the decision of the high school teachers to join the American Federation of Labor was the result of deliberations which began last spring when the student body walked out on a strike in protest to the discharge of a number of teachers by the high school board of education. At that time, the teachers discussed the possibility of labor affiliation in relation to protection against future similar action by the board."

On January 22, 1936, the board of education of Belleville Township High School received the regulations governing the American Federation of Teachers for Local 434 at their regular meeting. It stated the purpose, aims and objectives of the American Federation of Teachers were as follows:

The American Federation of Teachers, Local 434, has been organized for the teachers of the Belleville Township High School under a charter November 18, 1935.

The American Federation of Teachers is a national organization affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. It is founded on the motto: 'Democracy in Education. Education for Democracy.'

The objects of the American Federation of Teachers in 1935 were as follows:

1. To bring associations of teachers into relations of mutual assistance and cooperation.
2. To obtain for them all the rights to which they are entitled.

3. To raise the standard of the teaching profession by securing the conditions essential to the best professional service.
4. To promote such a democratization of the schools as will enable them better to equip their pupils to take their places in the industrial, social and political life of the community.
5. To protect public education.

One former Belleville Township High School teacher and very active current member of the union, Nina Bono, believes, "the reason for the founding of the union was to create some sort of policy that could be written down. The board and the teachers wanted to make an agreement on how to avoid similar situations. Although these were main reasons, the strike did help (to cause the union to form)."

Teachers in other school districts learned from the Belleville Township High School District situation. They too began to form unions in their districts. Eventually the Illinois Federation of Teachers was formed, which began to handle matters statewide. The unfair treatment of the teachers had showed them that they had more strength in numbers when organized—a lesson learned by workers everywhere.

[From *Belleville News Democrat*, May 31, 1935, Dec. 23, 1936, Jan. 23, 1936; student historian's interview with Nina Bono, Nov. 3, 2002; student historian's interview with Jane Hansleben, Oct. 28, 2002; student historian's interview with Homer Weidman, Nov. 2, 2002.]