

BERKELEY TEACHERS STRIKE

Last April teachers in Berkeley reached agreement on a new contract with the Berkeley Board of Education. Facing an anticipated \$2 million deficit in the Board's budget, the teachers agreed to a contract with no increase in wages and benefits, but with a promise from the Board for no layoffs and a commitment to maintain and upgrade special programs like ethnic studies and alternative schools. Then in June the School Board "discovered" the deficit would reach \$4 million and it called on the teachers to renegotiate the contract. When the teachers refused, the Board, using emergency powers, unilaterally cut teachers' wages 2½%, eliminated certain medical benefits, and dramatically reduced school programs and services such as nurse and library services. No negotiations were held over the summer, and on September 2, the day before school opened, the teachers voted 707 to 123 to strike to restore the April agreement.

Berkeley's schools were integrated without violence 5 years ago, and are considered a model integrated school system. But racism still pervades the schools. Within integrated schools, tracking begins at an early age. In many early grades there are separate reading groups for Black and white kids. In the high schools the advanced math and English classes are almost 100% white. Sometimes teachers pass Third World students on to the next grade without having taught them the material, thereby institutionalizing a system of non-education. For these reasons there is a lot of mistrust between Black and other Third World parents and the teachers; parents were not inclined to support the teachers' demands. In addition, many Third World parents were afraid that if the teachers won, the money to pay their wages would come from the special school programs they had struggled for. They also feared that if the board had to lay off teachers after the strike, it would be the more recently hired Third World teachers.

The teachers' leadership was initially divided over the importance of organizing support in the community, and as a result they did very little. The School Board, on the other hand, sent letters to parents and held numerous parent and community meetings over the summer where they described the finan-

cial crisis as irresolvable and attacked the teachers for irresponsibility and not caring about the children. The first day of school was chaos as many parents, convinced that the strike was against their interests, brought their kids to schools which were surrounded by picket lines and staffed by non-union "teachers" hired by the Board at \$50 to \$55 per day.

WHO IS ALBERT SHANKER?

Albert Shanker is an enemy of the people, a class collaborator posing as a leader of working people. He is vice president of the AFL-CIO, close ally and likely successor to George Meany. Shanker wields his powerful position as head of the United Federation of Teachers to:

-- Support the war in Vietnam. Teachers were purged from his "unity caucus" in the American Federation of Teachers for publicly demanding that the AFT take a position against the Vietnam War.

-- Steer the United Federation of Teachers toward virulent anti-communism to mobilize labor support for US foreign policy and red-baiting.

-- Support unlimited arms to Israel, even if it means a war in the Middle East, and whip up terror and hatred of Arab peoples among New York's Jews.

-- Attack community control of schools by New York's Black and Puerto Rican communities. Shanker became a national figure as the leader of a racist teachers' strike in 1968 which Black parents called a strike against their children. Under cover of teachers' rights and job security he organized whites in New York against the Black community.

-- Sell out the teachers. In September's New York teachers' strike Shanker gladly accepted the layoffs of 70% of the Black and Puerto Rican teachers, reaching a sweetheart settlement with the Board of Education which gave nothing at all to the schoolchildren or any but the highest-paid teachers.



Berkeley Teacher

ON STRIKE!

During the next few days some parents and teachers met and began to organize community support for the strike. An independent Community Desk was set up in the strike headquarters. Over the next days and weeks meetings were held throughout Berkeley, in homes and churches, where parents and radical teachers urged support for the demands -- no cuts in wages or educational programs -- and talked about building a movement of parents and teachers to fight against racism and for decent education.

One important victory was the establishment of alternative site education classes for the children of working parents who otherwise would have had to break the strike and take their kids to school. These classes, held in the parks, were initially opposed by many in the strike leadership as a drain on the energy of strikers who should be on the picket lines, but the organizers were able to convince teachers to participate. This clear demonstration by some teachers of support for the parents helped build community support for the strike. After two weeks less than 2000 of Berkeley's 14,000 public school students were still crossing the picket lines into school.

Classified workers (the mainly Third World bus drivers, cafeteria and custodial workers) split 50-50 over the strike, voting by a small margin not to strike themselves. Although the Board had also cut their wages over the summer, they feared their jobs would be threatened if the Board had to meet the teachers' demands. "They'll never fire the teachers," said one janitor, "but I can be replaced easily." This feeling reflected their experience of the year before, when their strike against the Board was ignored and their picket line crossed by the teachers. This year, because the classified workers stayed on the job, the school board was able to keep the schools open. This was a defeat for the teachers and resulted directly from their lack of solidarity the year before.

The struggle against racism was never openly engaged during the strike, but it played a key role as the strike progressed. Early on, some teachers proposed that the Board raise the funds to make up the 2½% wage cut by eliminating the ethnic studies program. After protest from parents and many teachers this proposal was withdrawn. And late in September, when Albert Shanker was visiting the Bay Area, the Berkeley Federation of Teachers decided not to invite him to speak because many opposed him and knew his reputation as a notorious racist would cost them support in the community.

After a month, although there was still much mistrust of the strike, support for the teachers had grown among classified workers and in the Berkeley community. In early October, after 33 days on the picket lines, the teachers finally went back to work, while a mediation board evaluates the Board's finances and prepares recommendations. The teachers are guaranteed there will be no wage cut, and they say they will strike again if any important programs are eliminated.

A Third World teachers' caucus was formed during the strike and may continue to meet. Radical forces among the teachers gained strength as everyone saw the need for unity with other workers, parents and the community. And through forums and other ongoing groups parents are continuing to deepen their role in the educational system in Berkeley.

For teachers the struggle against racism remains critical. The real progress made in building unity among parents and teachers during the strike will be lost if the struggle for education is not continued. Unless racism in the schools and the community is consciously fought and teachers actively make the struggle and demands of other workers in the school system their own, unity in the struggle will not be possible.

