

# H-Net Reviews

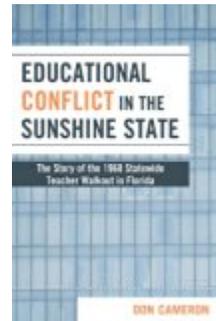
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Don Cameron.** *Educational Conflict in the Sunshine State: The Story of the 1968 Statewide Teacher Walkout in Florida.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2008. xiv + 82 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57886-942-8; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57886-943-5.

Reviewed by Molly Jessup (History Department, Syracuse University)

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## A Gathering Storm: Economics and Education in Florida

Nineteen sixty-eight, a year of revolution and change, was the beginning of a period of teacher strikes. That year, a confrontation between New York City's United Federation of Teachers and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Board led to the closing of schools.[1] Two years later, teachers in Newark, New Jersey, went on strike, with many facing arrest.[2] Teachers in Minneapolis staged strikes in 1970 as well, resulting in the establishment of a collective bargaining law for public employees in 1972. Florida, however, was the location of the only statewide teacher walkout, and Don Cameron's book, *Educational Conflict in the Sunshine State*, commemorates this event.

In contrast to other strikes, often motivated not only by deplorable teaching conditions but also by racial strife, the Florida walkout, Cameron asserts, was primarily motivated by economic concerns. Florida's long tradition as a low-tax state and a constitutional prohibition on income tax combined with low property taxes became increasingly problematic as Florida's population grew rapidly from under two million to near six million after World War Two. Most public services were limited, and it was schools that suffered the most as enrollment grew by more than 50 percent in the decade before the walkout. Industrial and corporate interests favored the low-tax mentality, as did the large number of retirees without children in schools. These problems were compounded by the state government. Despite the populist rhetoric employed by Claude Kirk Jr. during the election for gov-

ernor, once in office he could not deliver on his promise of no tax increases and improved education.

Cameron describes the events leading up to the strike. Teachers were increasingly frustrated with out-of-date materials, overcrowded classrooms, dilapidated buildings, and pay far below the national average. In 1965, the Florida legislature encouraged schools to ask for funding from their counties, with local districts typically refusing to seek funding or failing in their attempts. In April 1967, the state legislature adjourned without an education budget. Without a collective bargaining law, the Florida Education Association (FEA) and the National Education Association (NEA) threatened sanctions against the state, censuring the state government and discouraging teachers from seeking employment in Florida. Concerned about the sanctions, the legislature extended its session and created several proposals to address education issues. Nevertheless, Governor Kirk line vetoed the budget, cutting 150 million dollars in appropriations that were earmarked for education.

Responding to the frustrations teachers felt, FEA executive secretary Phil Constans organized a meeting which was held at the Tangerine Bowl on August 14, 1967, with over thirty-five thousand teachers attending. The following February, teachers across the state resigned from their jobs, resulting in the immediate closure of schools in twenty-two counties. The teachers faced retribution ranging from public disapproval to decertifi-

cation. Public support for teachers was limited: national unions offered only minimal support, and Florida's business and industrial interests openly criticized the teachers. The difficulty in maintaining the strike owed to the fact that multiple state jurisdictions, county school boards, and educators were involved. The FEA called off the strike on March 8; however, the results of the walkout varied greatly. Without collective bargaining, the teachers had essentially resigned from their positions. Among counties, rehiring policies were contradictory and occasionally punitive. After the strike, the FEA lost membership as educators debated whether the organization should continue as a professional association or unionize and lobby for the state passage of a collective bargaining law. As the FEA debated, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) began to establish unions in Florida. In 1974, a merger plan to unite Florida's factions into an all-inclusive group affiliated with both the NEA and the AFT led to the creation of a new organization: FEA United. However, this merger caused the NEA to disaffiliate the Florida branch because of a similar merger experience in New York that ended in the state association moving entirely to the AFT, and the NEA losing thousands of members. Subsequently the NEA created a new organization known by 1977 as the Florida Teaching Profession-National Education Association (FTP-NEA). Not until 2000 did the groups merge and become known once more as the FEA.

Cameron ably describes the events surrounding the strike. The difficulty in assessing the work is stated by Cameron himself. Cameron, the former executive director of the NEA, was present during the strike and acknowledges that he is not writing an objective, academic piece. Readers may find themselves frustrated by a lack of footnotes and the limited scope of Cameron's work, which is largely from the viewpoint of teachers involved in the walkout. Therefore, questions surround those whose perspectives are absent in this work. What influenced some teachers, described by Cameron as "largely nonpolitical," to join the walkout, while others hesitated (p. 32)? Did non-striking teachers come to regret their decision? Were students influenced by or aware of their teachers' actions? Despite these questions, Cameron's work functions effectively as a cautionary tale of the dangers of inadequate resources for public education.

#### Notes

[1]. See Wendell Pritchett, "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Community and the 1968 Teachers' Strike," in *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[2]. See Steve Golin, *The Newark Teacher's Strikes: Hopes on the Line* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

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