

About Billings

Every now and then stuff happens no one wants. Events race out of control. Heads hammer. Compromise proves elusive. Folks do what they have to do.

So it came to pass, a school strike in Billings for the second time in 27 years — a rare event for sure even in our great state where school and public employees have the “right” to strike.

For 20 long, tense days — 14 school days — the Billings Education Association hit the bricks to defend and promote our members’ interests, to obtain what it could not otherwise negotiate. One thousand eighty-three members struck. Seventeen crossed BEA picket lines. Only seventeen! In addition, nearly all classified school employees — members of Billings Classified Employees Association and Montana Public Employees Association — honored BEA picket lines.

Certifieds and classifieds did what they had to do even as some of them suffered serious financial losses.

Perhaps even more remarkable, parents and students honored BEA picket lines — with their feet. In an unprecedented and still largely inexplicable move, the district “opened” elementary schools through grade 6. But the kids stayed away in droves. Elementary school attendance during the strike never exceeded 30 percent of normal enrollment. The district never opened middle and high schools.

Residual impacts; lessons learned

Numerous legal and educational issues — emanating from the 12 days of real school elementary students and teachers lost — remain to be resolved. Other residual impacts are inevitable. We can only guess, for instance, how the 2003 Legislature might address the Billings strike.

Putting all conjecture aside, permit the following BEA strike observations:

- Chronically inadequate state funding has dramatically and negatively impacted the ability of school districts to meet the compensation needs and expectations of even the “best” paid teachers in Montana.
- Despite or perhaps because of bad state fund-

ing, MEA-MFT bargaining units and their employer school districts must think longer, harder about how to design and implement better school employee compensation plans.

- Not one school district employee health care plan in Montana can provide quality health care benefits at a reasonable price. Not one! Those who believe otherwise live in abject denial.

- The BEA strike has underscored the absolute necessity for MEA-MFT to pursue legislation to create a mandatory statewide school employee health care plan.

- Local MEA-MFT leadership means everything.
- BEA President Brian Ehli is as good as it gets. Strong. Calm. Determined. Focused. Superb media presence. Member oriented. Brian pointed the way, and our members followed. He had lots of help. Too many names to list out here.

- BCEA President Janet Baum and her fellow BCEA members and members of MPEA who honored BEA picket lines earned enormous respect and deserve union medals. Should BCEA or MPEA ever hit the bricks, BEA will no doubt repay the debt.

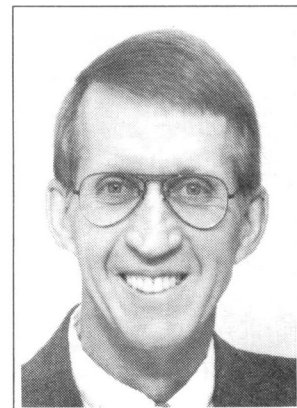
Thanks to our brothers and sisters

- Union solidarity is alive and well in Billings. Brother and sister unions all over the city honored picket lines, kept their children home, and contributed to the BEA Benevolence Fund. We are all union, all the time. We are AFL-CIO.

- MEA-MFT staff did what MEA-MFT staff does: lead negotiations, coordinate strike activities, engage legal counsel, and solicit moral and financial support. MEA-MFT is blessed with outstanding staff.

- NEA and AFT, our two national affiliates, contributed mightily to legal defense, interest-free loans, and the BEA Benevolence Fund. For the record, all BEA, BCEA, and MPEA members who struck or honored picket lines were and continue to be eligible for interest-free strike loans and Benevolence Fund assistance.

- In the last analysis, BEA struck for all of us. Please have a very enjoyable holiday season. ■



BY ERIC FEAVER
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT

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