

Struggle for Dignity:  
A brief history of teacher unionism in Catholic schools in California

by  
Christian Clifford

***Introduction***

Teacher relationships altered! People jailed! Strike! Strained labor-management relations! U.S. Supreme Court decision! The first and only! This is the stuff headlines are made of and I knew next to nothing about what Nick Bridger, past president of the San Francisco Archdiocesan Federation of Teachers (SFAFT) Mitty High School Unit, affectionately referred to in a letter to *California Teacher* as “our brave little Catholic school union” came about. I was determined to find answers.

It is a story of people stepping up and challenging an educational system firmly in place, one that historians argue dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century with the founding of the universities of Salerno and Bologna. What was demanded was a call to be recognized as dedicated professionals who would share financial parity with their public school counterparts. For many the desire stemmed from the Catholic Church’s teaching on the dignity and rights of the worker coupled with the drive to make the schools where they worked better places.

Though the struggle came at a cost, it was not in vain. Built on a proud tradition, today the SFAFT is a group of professionals with a shared vision of a brighter future for the Catholic high school communities we serve. We walk in the footsteps of those who helped us arrive at where we are today. This brief history is dedicated to those courageous men and women.

***Demand to be allowed at the table***

Only a short time after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) concluded its last session and a few years after the Civil Rights Act became law in the United States, teachers in the Archdiocese of San Francisco diocesan high schools began to voice opposition as to how they were being treated. During this time of great change the Archdiocese of San Francisco was shepherded by Archbishop McGucken (1962-1977). The Lay Teachers Association was formed in June 1967. Within a year the new movement morphed into the Secondary Teachers Association (STA). The STA Constitution would be signed on June 12, 1968. James Monahan, teacher at Serra High School in San Mateo, became the first President of the STA.

The STA had the ear of the chancery. Negotiating with Church officials since January 1971, frustrations boiled over in early November. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 15, 1971), salary negotiation points at the table included the following;

- STA demanded 0%-6%-6%
- Archdiocese offered 0%-4%-4%

Members would eventually vote to reject the offer 105-25 and would soon support a strike by a 74-54 vote on November 15, 1971. The strike would soon see emotions escalate.

On December 2, 1971, twenty-two teachers held a sit-in at the Chancery on Church and 16th streets. All would be arrested. Twelve chose jail time (four days would be served) while ten others accepted police citations. According to Jackson Rannells, reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, all except for one were lay teachers -- James Gallagher, American Federation of Teachers representative, would also be locked up for what STA president Jerry Killian called “a matter of conscience.” The strike would end on December 9, 1971. The teachers agreed to a 10% raise over three years in increments of 0%-5%-5%. In a December 10, 1971 report, the *San*

*Francisco Chronicle* quoted Killian as saying, “Both sides compromised . . . teachers voted to end the strike because they were hurting financially after 3 1/2 weeks, because they wanted to get back to classes and because they felt they had created a base to get further improvements.”

As tempers waned and formal recognition was given to teacher representatives, the discussion among teachers turned away from strike and towards a new issue: the need to reach a decision as to which group would formally be their voice in the future. The teachers had two groups speaking for them. Sides were chosen – those who favored affiliation with the California Federation of Teachers, a traditional labor union, and those who felt their voices were being heard through the STA, the independent professional association. Having two mouthpieces would not work. An agreement between the STA and the Archdiocese would be made to hold a vote by secret ballot on January 18, 1972, conducted by the California State Mediation and Conciliation Service. Seventy-nine sided with the STA and eighty-one with the California Federation of Teachers. The close vote reflected that not all teachers felt the CFT philosophy was consistent with private Catholic education. Nonetheless, on March 6, 1972, the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the Archdiocese of San Francisco and the SFAFT, AFT, AFL-CIO, Local 2240, would be signed. Member schools would be;

- Marin Catholic, Kentfield
- Sacred Heart, San Francisco
- Cathedral, San Francisco (consolidated with Sacred Heart in 1987)
- Archbishop Riordan, San Francisco
- Junípero Serra, San Mateo
- Archbishop Mitty, San José  
(Diocese of San José was established in 1981 – Mitty is designated a Unit of Local 2240)
- Saint Lawrence School for Girls, San José  
(consolidated with Archbishop Mitty in 1972)

Speaking to the value of Unionism, Nick Bridger, retired teacher from Mitty High School and eighteen year veteran as a leader in the SFAFT, stated; “Primarily because of the strength of the SFAFT and its CBA (collective bargaining agreement) which included strong Tenure and Grievance provisions (notably Binding Arbitration), my career as an educator included respect, professional development and use of a wide range of teaching skills in enriched, healthy and balanced educational settings. Under ordinary circumstances, a union like ours is able to balance the weight of arbitrary, narrow and/or authoritarian administration and bureaucracy, so endemic in church systems. But when membership dwindles and enforcement of contract provisions becomes lax, then favoritism and harassment of staff can become the norm and the union protections a sham. Then we end up back in the 1960s.”

California Federation of Teachers retired Secretary Treasurer Michael Nye shared with the author, “Local 2240, the San Francisco Archdiocesan Federation of Teachers, was one of the earliest education collective bargaining units in California only being preceded by other private sector AFT locals of film studio teachers and Westland School in Los Angeles. Therefore, Catholic teachers participated in collective bargaining long before their public school counterparts.” The SFAFT would be founded three years before the Educational Employment Relations Act (SB160) was signed by Governor Jerry Brown.

### ***Bargaining power on the Hilltop***

Just a few miles away from where the action took place between teacher representatives of the seven diocesan high schools and Church officials, faculty at the University of San Francisco in the fall of 1975 made demands at the Jesuit order Catholic university.

A summation of what Michael Lehmann writes in “A Short History of the USFFA” on the union’s web site is as follows; Faculty representatives elected by their peers called for a meeting with the University president who scoffed at their requests because they had no bargaining power. Therefore, feeling their hands were tied, a request was made to the National Labor Relations Board to hold elections at the University of San Francisco. Faculty voted 155-48 in favor of Union representation. University of San Francisco Faculty Association, Local 4269, CFT, AFT, AFL-CIO, was founded. In November 1975, bargaining for a first contract began.

When the author asked Elliot Neaman, current president of the USFFA, “Since most Catholic colleges and universities are not unionized, what do you think they are missing out on most?” he responded, “I think the main thing that Catholic schools, indeed all schools are missing when they are not unionized, is leverage. We have a contract which clearly states out the rights of the administration and the rights of the faculty. When those rights are violated we have powerful tools to address them. The University has an incentive to consult with us even on issues where the CBA is not so clear-cut, because they know we are organized and can unite the faculty on many issues into one voice.”

At roughly the same time the USFFA was exercising their new rights, teachers in Southern California, in one of the largest Catholic school systems in the United States, began to empower themselves.

### ***Success and failure in the Southland***

In April of 1975, organization of 600 teachers at 26 high schools began in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (then consisting of Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Orange counties). United Catholic Secondary Teachers Association (UCSTA), AFT, AFL-CIO, Local 3448, was formed. Marian Hull, teacher at Mater Dei in Santa Ana at the time, would be the founding president.

Between March 9-30, 1977, the UCSTA led a strike for better wages, job security, due process and grievance procedures, and pension benefits.

On June 21, 1977, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that some successful strides had been made during informal meetings between the UCSTA and the Chancery. Later headway was established between the UCSTA and officials of the two high schools located in the Diocese of Orange, which was established in 1976.

### ***The turbulent 70s comes to an end***

On March 21, 1979, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision regarding *NLRB v. Catholic Bishops of Chicago, et al* [440 US 490]. In a 5-4 decision, the Court found that the government may not regulate labor relations in church operated schools due to the First Amendment guarantee. This decision would bring to a swift end the attempts made by the UCSTA. Church officials argued that they had never formally recognized the UCSTA as the official voice of the teachers.

## Conclusion

It's ironic that the SFAFT is in a predominantly public school union, since it was the state of religious instruction in public schools in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that gave rise to the Catholic school movement in the United States. Today, as far as I know, collective bargaining units in Catholic elementary and secondary schools exists in the Archdiocese of New York (Federation of Catholic Teachers, OPEIU, Local 153, AFL-CIO) and in certain dioceses in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (National Association of Catholic School Teachers). On February 5, 2010, while at the CFT Leadership Conference, I sat down for lunch with some union brothers and sisters from Castroville and Oakland. They asked where my colleague and I were from and we said a Catholic high school union. They were very curious and continued to ask many questions about our history and how being different from everyone else impacted how we conduct affairs. All the while I had fresh in my mind an article I had just read from 2005 about Brother Rice High School in Birmingham, Michigan. A movement to unionize occurred there that was fought by Church officials, who argued First Amendment protections and referred to *NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago, et al.* In the Brother Rice case, the Church, who bears such great witness for the cause of labor, was victorious against labor under its own roof. The SFAFT stands alone as the only Catholic secondary system west of the Mississippi whose faculty is affiliated with a national labor union--39 years standing side-by-side our brothers and sisters in public schools.

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*Christian Clifford has been a teacher in the Archdiocese for fourteen years, currently teaching at Junípero Serra High School, San Mateo. He comes from a family with strong union ties (his dad was a representative for the Newspaper Guild, a cousin is a local leader in the IBEW, has two brothers in the Police Officers' Association, and another who has been a leader at a community college CFT local). Christian has been active in union leadership for eight years and is currently the president of the SFAFT, Local 2240. He is married to Iris and they have a son, John Paul. They reside in San Mateo.*

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