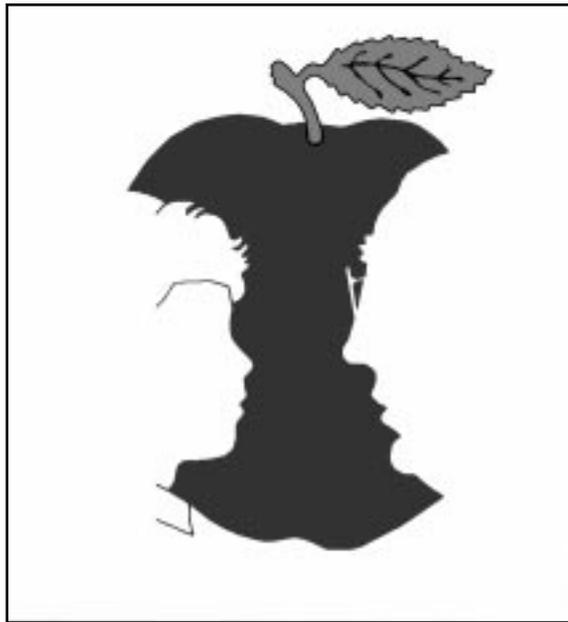


IT'S THE OLD GUARD VERSUS THE NEW SCHOOL AT WEAC

THOMAS W. STILL

MADISON — As the Legislature's April 7 special election drew near, rumors of détente floated through the Capitol: The teachers' union would dampen its fire in the state Senate election to replace veteran Democrat Lynn Adelman in return for a fair hearing from the new Republican majority when lawmakers reconvened a few weeks later.



turnout broke his way. Besides, even if Lazich won, the split in the Senate would be barely Republican (17 to 16) and most of those Republicans would prefer meeting WEAC halfway on some issues than continuing Wisconsin's version of the Thirty Years War.

WEAC's quietly offered truce was, in some ways, predictable: A pragmatic move by a

Cautious Capitol observers warned that the Wisconsin Education Association Council was offering a fool's bargain. The union knew that Republican Mary Lazich was the favorite to win in a suburban Milwaukee district that statistically leaned Republican, so cutting a deal without spending thousands of dollars on a lost Democratic cause was better for WEAC than buying a skid of "Brian Manthey for Senate" yard signs and having no place to stick them. And wouldn't union money not spent against Republican candidates today be spent against them tomorrow?

The adventurous said take WEAC's word. After all, state Rep. Lazich wasn't a model candidate, and former broadcaster Manthey was articulate enough to win if the

pragmatic union that hates to spend money on lost causes. "I'll say one thing for them," said a Republican insider who has helped run legislative campaigns. "WEAC doesn't like to waste money."

In other ways, the notion of WEAC passing on a chance — albeit a slight one — to keep a Democratic majority in the Senate was a dramatic departure from the union's script. It was as if the teachers had concluded that life under Senate Majority Leader Chuck Chvala, the pugnacious Democrat from Madison, would never improve, and they were better off taking their chances with Republican Minority

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Leader Mike Ellis of Neenah — at least until the fall elections, when the union could reassess which side of its bread was more heavily buttered. At its core, however, WEAC's decision to lie relatively low in the April 7 special election had less to do with money and tactics than with the continuing tug-of-war inside a union split, more or less evenly, into two philosophical camps.

The Old Guard faction within WEAC that wakes up each morning, kneels in the direction of Hortonville (site of a bitter teachers' strike in the early 1970s) and prays that lightning will strike anyone who stands in their way — from Gov. Tommy Thompson to the people who dreamed up local cost controls and “qualified economic offers.” It's a give-'em-hell group that believes the job of a union is to bargain better contracts and defend its members, public opinion and tax burdens be damned.

Then there is WEAC's New School, which holds that unions can fulfill their traditional functions while improving professional standards and forming coalitions with groups that have come to view them with fear and suspicion. This school believes that unless teachers nurture the whole of public education — not just their personal stake in pay and benefits — public support for them and the schools will erode. Without a public, they warn, there can be no public schools.

“It's clear there is a titanic battle going on within the teachers' union over its future,” said Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen, R-Waukesha, who has watched the evolution of WEAC as a business lobbyist, Thompson's chief of staff and as a legislator. “Should it become more of a professional organization that worries about standards and quality — or remain a trade union that is little different in its outlook and goals than the steelworkers? There is a tremendous struggle going on for the soul of the union.”

That struggle has come rather late to Wisconsin, one of the states where the national

teachers' union movement cut its teeth in the 1960s and '70s, and where today there are 84,500 members and 1,200 “fair share” dues payers, a total that includes about 60,000 classroom teachers. The state that was among the first to see teachers unionize on a grand scale is now one of the last to feel the winds of reform, which are blowing through the National Education Association as well as the rival American Federation of Teachers.

Along with the Michigan union, Wisconsin's teachers' union became a model for using political activism to accomplish economic, educational and social goals. Under former executive director Morris Andrews, teachers in virtually every school district in Wisconsin became organized under the NEA banner, and the practice of using a portion of members' dues to leverage the political system — from school board races to legislative elections to campaigns for governor — was refined into an art form. The union built an impressive headquarters atop Nob Hill in Madison and even started an insurance company (WEA Insurance Trust) that has become an industry success story.

But mainly WEAC became good at politics, a game it played with the latest polling, the biggest phone banks and the latest campaign technology. It also became feared. Candidates in both parties learned that to oppose WEAC on too many issues was courting trouble in the next election, usually in the form of a well-financed opponent.

It was an approach that worked for many years — and it accomplished what even WEAC opponents would grudgingly acknowledge was some good. Wisconsin teachers went from being poorly-paid and under-protected in retirement to being fairly well paid and secure, all within the course of about 20 years. Even as late as 1984-85, according to figures from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, the average teacher salary in Wisconsin was less than \$25,000 per year. Today that average is nearly \$40,000.

Of course, all that extra money had to come from somewhere, and state property taxpayers began to suspect that it was coming from their pockets.

Public support for the teachers' union ran high throughout the '70s and '80s but began to waver in the 1990s as people realized that teacher pay was no longer lagging behind — and yet teachers were still commanding 9 percent raises, year after year. At the same time, taxpayers and parents began to demand more for their money. They grew tired of seeing kids graduate from high school (if they graduated at all) lacking the skills to compete in a changing world. And they began to question why the teachers' union had become so entrenched, not just on its own economic issues, but on matters affecting the quality of education and innovations in how children learn.

That shifting public mood made it possible for Gov. Tommy Thompson, who campaigned for years on the need for local spending controls and teacher salary caps, to accomplish both in the 1993 and 1995 sessions of the Legislature. They were attached to a property tax relief plan that forced the state to assume two-thirds of the cost of local education, in return for a greater say on how that money was spent. Changing public attitudes also helped private school "choice" gain a foothold in Milwaukee in 1990, against the wishes of the teachers' union but to the relief of parents who had become fed up with the unresponsiveness of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Today, WEAC finds itself struggling to stay ahead of the public perception curve. In 1994, only 12 percent of the respondents to a Wisconsin Policy Research Institute poll rated

"improving public education" as the issue most in need of attention from state government. By the fall of 1997, that number had grown to 26 percent, a sure sign of urgency, if not dissatisfaction.

The Old Guard within WEAC argues the public is worried because Thompson and the Legislature have turned public education into a "fad of the month" club, with school choice, charter schools and other experiments, while slowly bleeding school districts to death through spending caps. They warn that the state's system of controlling teacher salaries — by which any district that makes a "qualified economic offer" of at least 3.8 percent is exempt from binding arbitration — is poisoning the well of labor-management relations.

In Madison, the WEAC-affiliated Madison Teachers Inc. staged a one-day walkout last fall to show its displeasure with the state QEO system, which only applies to teachers and not other unionized public employees. In Racine, a more prolonged walkout in February was over the

same issue. In both cities, community support was divided between the teachers and the school board.

MTI's fiery executive director, John Matthews, summed up the Old Guard position in a February speech to the Wisconsin Newspaper Association in Green Bay. "By acting contrary to Republican philosophy and legislating state control over local government," Matthews said, "the governor and the Legislature have not only put at risk the wonderful, high-quality public education that Wisconsin children have enjoyed and which they have excelled — and from which Wisconsin businesses have profited — but also

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they have destroyed the labor peace which Wisconsin residents enjoyed 15 years prior.”

By “destroying labor peace,” Matthews meant the state had thrown out the binding arbitration system put in place in 1978 to avoid further teacher strikes such as those that tore apart Hortonville and other communities. Binding arbitration worked well for the teachers, but school boards often found themselves outgunned by WEAC as it ratcheted up one district’s contract settlement based on what another district had already negotiated. Binding arbitration became a self-fulfilling prophecy in the eyes of its opponents, which is why the QEO system was created as part of the cost-containment and two-thirds state aid bargain.

“The QEO is destroying our schools,” Matthews insists. “Anyone involved in employment relations or human resources knows that a positive work environment, a happy employee, foster productivity. Why, then, does the Legislature stick with a system which creates unhappy teachers, a system which causes severe morale problems?”

Answer: Because it has worked to hold down costs. Teacher salaries grew 143.1 percent from 1984 to 1997 — averaged 9.3 percent per year before the QEO took effect and 4.7 percent after, according to the non-partisan Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Total teacher compensation, which includes fringe benefits, grew by 159.9 percent over the same period — 10 percent a year before the QEO law and 5.1 percent per year after.

When teacher salaries are controlled, so are overall operating costs for the state’s K-12 public school system. And when overall school costs are controlled, it’s possible — but not easy — for the state to meet its two-thirds funding pledge and to provide property tax relief.

The plan is a three-legged stool. If any one leg is removed — spending limits, the

two-thirds pledge or the QEO — the stool will fall.

The teachers’ unions, which long thought that more money from the state was a blessing, now see it as something of a curse. Meanwhile, Thompson and the Legislature do not need the extra headaches that have come from the two-thirds funding promise. Virtually every other state program has tithed to help meet that pledge, including the University of Wisconsin System. Sure, lawmakers get the credit for cutting property taxes — but they also get some of the blame for tight school budgets and crimped teacher salaries.

School boards and administrators don’t like all the strings that come with the state aid, and they don’t get any of the political credit for the lower property taxes. They also feel their ability to manage has been diminished.

In short, a lot of people — including WEAC — now wish they had not received what they asked for. But it’s still a standoff in which all of the main players who originally embraced the two-thirds pledge have come to see it as Wisconsin’s version of Vietnam, devouring more resources by the day and never getting them any closer to victory.

Who will be the first to blink? That brings us back to the cease-fire in the April 7 special election and WEAC’s appraisal that Ellis might be an acceptable alternative to the Chvala gridlock.

Ellis has long believed that a “foundation” school support plan makes the most sense. Under such a plan, the state would guarantee a base amount of aid per student — a foundation — and local districts would have the ability to decide how much more spending is shouldered locally. It would get the state off the two-thirds treadmill because the costs would be calculated on a per-student basis, and adjusted periodically. But it would still be equitable to all Wisconsin students and it would restore some measure of local control.

Best yet, from WEAC's point of view, it would allow the Legislature to do away with salary caps — or at least make them more flexible.

Dumping or diluting the salary caps is a political goal shared by the Old Guard and the New School. But they disagree on how to get it done.

“The Hezbollah strategy certainly isn't working,” observed Jensen, who thinks many WEAC leaders now recognize that job actions such as the Madison and Racine walkouts — both of which skirted the limits of the law — cost the union public sympathy.

Trouble is, there are still significant camps within the union who think the old-time religion works just fine. They're suspicious of anything that smells like cooperating with management, which is why some of Wisconsin's 430 delegates walked out of the NEA's 1997 convention over the issue of “peer review.”

Reformers such as NEA President Bob Chase think peer review allows teachers to police their own ranks by helping mediocre teachers get better and easing out bad teachers who hurt the profession's standing. While that makes sense to most people who work in the real world, WEAC teachers from cities such as Madison, Racine, Milwaukee and Green Bay didn't see it that way. They thought peer review was a sellout and their militancy helped to push Chuck Lentz, WEAC's executive director for five years, over the edge.

The mild-mannered Lentz had replaced Morris Andrews and was slowly but surely changing WEAC's image from kneecap-

breakers to conversation-makers. Before he left to become executive director of the NEA affiliate in Arizona, he talked about his accomplishments — and his unmet challenges. “I feel that I helped build greater member involvement in the organization that is much more reflective of member interests, and I feel that I contributed to a recognition that the union has a responsibility to address public education as a whole rather than just the personal and professional needs of the members,” Lentz said.

Lentz repositioned WEAC as a less in-your-face and more collaborative union that was willing to work with the larger community. The cerebral Lentz looked for ways to link educators and WEAC to their communities by organizing the Vanguard project, which tries to build support for public education in some of the state's rural school districts. He also met privately with business leaders in Milwaukee and elsewhere to pound home his message that strong public schools are necessary for a strong economy and a vibrant democracy.

Lentz also democratized the union itself by making members more directly involved in lobbying, community outreach, meeting professional standards and framing union programs. Finally, he created a communications division within WEAC to spread the message that public schools are vital to a healthy state and society.

Typically, a meeting with Lentz would end with him leaving behind a copy of Kettering Foundation President David Matthews' book, “Is There a Public for the Public Schools?” In it, former Ford Cabinet secretary Matthews argues that America's historic commitment to public education will disap-

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pear unless those schools are viewed as strengthening the communities they serve.

Lentz described himself as “an advocate for the entirety of public education,” which meant he sometimes ran afoul of his own members by defending the need for higher academic standards or more stringent professional reviews. One of his goals was creation of a statewide Teacher Professional Standards Council, something that continues to edge closer to reality. “All segments — including the media — would be well-served if they kept in mind that public education is a system. It is responsible for regenerating all of society, and therefore worthy of stewardship by all of us,” he said.

Lentz was replaced by Don Krahn, who built the WEA Insurance Trust into a major business and whose counsel is valued by the Old Guard as much as the New School. He’ll only hold the job for a few years before retiring, at which time a new executive director will be named. Keep an eye on WEAC in the meantime. The battle for its heart and soul has only just begun.