

BRANDON, 1922

On Monday, February 27th, 1922, the 87 teachers employed by the Brandon school board were summoned to a meeting after school. The school board chairperson informed them that because of a shortfall in taxes and a city budget deficit, the board could not afford to maintain the level of teacher salaries. As a result, the school board asked the teachers to agree to a 25% reduction in their salaries. However, failure to agree would lead to the termination of all teacher contracts as of April 30th. At the time, most teachers were being paid no more than \$1800 a year. About 30% were being paid \$1100 a year (a school caretaker's salary was about \$1320).

The teachers (who were also the Brandon Teachers' Association of the day) met by themselves to consider the position. They concluded that the state of the city finances was not "a sound and proper principle on which to base a reduction in the salaries of teachers." The service rendered by teachers should be the main consideration in determining salary schedules. They also reviewed teacher salaries being paid by other school boards and determined that their salaries were not out of line. Every teacher signed a letter rejecting the board's demand for a salary cut.

The school board responded on March 4th by sending each teacher a letter terminating her or his contract by April 30th. Advertisements were published seeking applicants to fill the teaching positions for May and June, requesting that the applicants state the salary they required. For the next two months the issue was hotly contested in the city. The teachers received enthusiastic support from their students, trade unions, and many citizens. However, the Brandon Sun was adamantly opposed to them and ran editorials, news stories and letters accusing the teachers of trade unionism and bolshevism. The Brandon Teachers' Association bought advertising space to respond. The recently founded Manitoba Teachers' Federation published advertisements in provincial and national newspapers requesting that teachers not apply for positions in Brandon.

The Teachers' Association proposed to have the matter resolved by arbitration. The school board responded that it did not recognize collectives of teachers. Its staff were hired on an individual basis. The board did not wish to have a third party (i.e., an arbitration board) tell it what to pay its employees.

Seventy-five years ago, on the afternoon of April 30th, 87 teachers left their schools for the last time.

"Teachers across the Dominion are looking at Brandon - their eyes are on us as teacher-colleagues. If we submit to this unjust ultimatum, they will say, sadly: 'Brandon, you let us down!' We must stand fast for the sake of our profession at large."

-Duncan McDougall, principal of Brandon Collegiate Institute to April 30, 1922.

A more complete history of these events can be found in:
Mann, Margaret. The Strike That Wasn't. Brandon: Chalk Talk Publishing, 1972.

The book is available in many Brandon libraries.