

Remembering the 'Brandon 88'

» 100 YEARS SINCE MAJOR LABOUR DISPUTE

BY KYLE DARBYSON

Today serves as a sombre anniversary for local teachers, historians and union activists, since it marks 100 years since 88 Brandon educators lost their jobs after refusing to accept a massive pay cut.

While not nearly as well-known as other chapters in Manitoba history, like the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, Brandon University archivist Tom Mitchell told the Sun the 1922 event still represents a pivotal moment in the province's broader labour movement.

"This was a real test of the teachers' ability to stand their ground and insist on being dealt with as a collective group," Mitchell said on Tuesday.

"Teachers never saw themselves as workers [by this point], but they embraced collective bargaining as a way to improve their situation and also to advance education."

The origins of this labour conflict can be traced back to the end of the First World War, when the City of Brandon was contending with a variety of financial hardships that resulted in a tax shortfall and budget deficit.

To try and close this gap, the local school board summoned its 87 teachers to a meeting on Feb. 27, 1922, and asked them all to accept a 25 per cent reduction in pay. Failure to agree to these terms would result in termination of employment by the end of April.

What followed was a two-month standoff between the administration and the teachers, with the latter party signing a statement, dated March 3, rejecting the board's demands.

The list of signees included district superintendent Alfred White, who would ultimately resign from his job as a show of solidarity despite not facing a pay cut himself.

"So that's why we're calling them the 'Brandon 88,' because there's 88 individuals who stood up for their collective bargaining rights for all labourers and teachers specifically," Brandon Teachers' Association president Cale Dunbar said.

But White was far from the only person to publicly champion the teachers' actions.

Once word spread about the school board's ultimatum, these Brandon teachers received enthusiastic support from students, citizens and even some educators from outside the province, giving the crisis a national scale.

"Teachers in Toronto and Edmonton ... they were sending money to the Brandon teachers," Mitchell said. "So the Brandon teachers, they understood that they were fighting a battle not just for themselves but for teachers across the country."

However, the teachers still had plenty of critics, with local lawyer J.F. Kilgour using the pages of the Brandon Sun to repeatedly voice his opposition.

"One of the fiercest opponents of the teachers was the Brandon Sun," Mitchell said "The Brandon Sun was jumping all over the teachers and wouldn't give them the time of day."

But Mitchell insists these educators still came out on top in the long run. Not only did they quickly find work elsewhere, but the division's reputation took a major nosedive in the wake of the crisis.

"The schools were in total disarray for the rest of the year," the historian said.

"And in the fall, the only people that they had teaching were people who shouldn't have been there, because the Brandon school district was blacklisted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation."

By standing their grounds, Mitchell also believes the teachers successfully established a "baseline for behaviour" that discouraged other school division's from pursuing similarly punitive measures against its staff in the future.

While the Brandon Teachers' Association and the local school board currently have a "great working relationship," according to Dunbar, he said the resolve these teachers displayed during the mass firing in 1922 can still serve as an instructive moment for their activism moving forward.

After all, the union president remains wary of the province's current approach to education funding, which he believes isn't keeping up with the rate of inflation.

"I'm hopeful that we learn from the past, that cutting education is not a viable way to balance the tax book," Dunbar said.

In order to broadcast the importance of the Brandon 88, the Brandon Teachers' Association is hosting a variety of educational resources online throughout the month of May.

This month-long celebration will be capped off with a May 31 cocktail reception, where the union will unveil a monument to honour these educators.

The Brandon Teachers' Association is also hoping to award all 88 educators a symbolic lifetime membership during the union's upcoming annual general meeting. » kdarbyson@brandonsun.com » Twitter:@KyleDarbyson



Even though the Brandon 88 drummed up a lot of public support, the school board refused to change course and all those teachers ultimately lost their jobs on April 30, 1922.

The staff of the Brandon Collegiate Institute pose for a group photo on April 30, 1922, the same day nearly 90 local teachers lost their jobs for refusing to accept a 25 per cent reduction to their salary.
(Submitted)

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