

# **The Federal Way Student Strike of May 1938**

**By Chris Green**



*Historical  
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of  
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## *Introduction*

In the United States, the decade of the 1930's was notable for huge increases in the number of strikes by workers and membership in labor unions. These increases were, in part, facilitated by laws supported by the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt designed to protect a workers right to organize unions. In the 1930's, labor unions were at the forefront of a general ferment among various groups in society—such as the elderly, the unemployed and military veterans—who organized and protested to demand that business and government adopt new policies. The Roosevelt administration incorporated some of the demands of these groups in its reform program, which was popularly known as the New Deal.

The ferment of the 1930's even made an appearance in a sparsely populated unincorporated community in King County known as Federal Way. For three days at the beginning of May 1938, students at Federal Way School (the community's only educational institution) were in tumult over the Federal Way School Board's decision not to renew the contract of the school's principal, Charles Springer. The issue of labor unions interjected itself into the controversy as Springer and his supporters alleged that the school board fired Springer on the ground of his activism with a teacher's union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). On the third day of the tension, a third of the three hundred students at the school—which encompassed grades 1 through 8—staged a strike. They refused to attend classes and loitered in the school yard with picket signs until sheriff's deputies arrived and convinced them to return to class. In lieu of striking the students were convinced to draw up a petition to present to the school board.

Sources about this event are relatively sparse. For this article I've relied exclusively on accounts of the events from two newspapers, *The Seattle Daily Times* and *The Auburn Globe Republican*.



Figure 1. Federal Way School faculty, 1935-36 school year. Charles Springer is second from right (Courtesy Carol Cox).

### *The Federal Way School District, May 1938*

Today Federal Way is one of the most populous cities in Washington State but in 1938 it was a sparsely populated unincorporated community in King County. The Federal Way School District was founded in 1929. For its first nine years, the district contained only one school, Federal Way School, which taught grades one through eight. Students desiring a high school education were compelled to seek it in neighboring cities. The district would soon offer junior high and high school education in a building adjoining Federal Way School. However in May 1938, at the time of the student strike, Federal Way School was the community's only educational institution.<sup>1</sup>

### *Springer's Contract is Not Renewed*

The unrest was put into motion on Saturday, April 30, 1938 when a meeting of the three Federal Way School Board members—C.V. Lemmon, J.R. Garber and R.M. Kirchner—voted, apparently unanimously, not to renew the contract of Federal Way School's principal Charles Springer. Springer had been the school's principal since 1934 but the board decided that he had recently shown an intolerable level of incompetence in the performance of his duties. This board meeting was notable for the presence of future US Congressman Hugh DeLacy, who came to speak on Springer's behalf. DeLacy was then a Seattle City Councilman and an official with the nation's largest teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which

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<sup>1</sup> See Dick Caster. "Federal Way Area School History," Historical Society of Federal Way (HSFW), May 28, 2008, 51, 54, 58, accessed December 10, 2013, <http://www.federalwayhistory.org/powercms/files/FederalWayAreaSchoolHistoryMay282008.pdf>.

counted Springer as a member. Though restrictions on public school teacher strikes and collective bargaining would not be lifted in Washington State and most areas of the United States until the 1960's, Springer and at least two other Federal Way staff members belonged to the AFT. At the board meeting, DeLacy quickly ran into conflict after he denounced the board for refusing to renew Springer's contract. The meeting chairman declared DeLacy out of order. However DeLacy continued talking until, the *Auburn Globe Republican* reported, he "was finally drowned out [by the chairman] with the simple expedient of slapping a yardstick on the table until the yardstick made more noise" than DeLacy. <sup>2</sup>

### *Springer is Fired*

On Monday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, students briefly went on strike to protest Springer's ouster before teachers destroyed their protest signs and forced them to return to class. Also on that day, Springer, who was still contracted to be principal until the following September, left his post at the school, supposedly to seek treatment for a medical problem. On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, the school board--stating that Springer's leaving of his post to address his medical problem indicated that he was unable to deal with the tension at the school--declared him terminated immediately and announced that H.J. Winter would be the school's interim principal. Winter, superintendent of schools and teacher at Trout Lake School in Klickitat County, Washington, was scheduled to replace Springer in September 1938. However he happened to be in the community inspecting

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<sup>2</sup> "Federal Way Trouble Ebbs." *Auburn Globe Republican*, May 6, 1938, 1. "Strike to Aid Principal Ends," *Seattle Daily Times*, May 3, 1938, 3. Steve Kink. "Teacher Strikes in Washington." History Link Essay 9763. March 22, 2011. Steve Kink & John Cahill. *Class Wars: The Story of the Washington Education Association, 1965-2001*. (Federal Way WA: Washington Education Association, 2004), 1-29. For an account of the evolution of the practices of American teachers' unions over most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Marjorie Murphy. *Blackboard Unions: The AFT & the NEA, 1900-1980*. (Cornell University Press: Ithaca & London, 1990). DeLacy represented Washington's first congressional district in the US House from 1945 to 1947.

construction of the new junior high and high school facilities when the disturbances started and thus was conveniently available to be recruited to be temporary principal.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2. H.J. Winter  
(Courtesy *Seattle Times*).

#### *The Strike of May 4*

The most sustained action by the students appeared to take place on Wednesday, May 4. The *Seattle Daily Times* reported that as school began on Wednesday, 100 students (out of an enrollment of 324) loitered in the school yard with pro-Springer picket signs and were joined by “about a dozen parents, some of whom said they are ‘pals of Springer.’” The demonstration was also joined at one point by 15 Auburn High School students, former students of Federal Way School, who skipped class. Roughly 200 of the students did not join the strike and went to their classrooms, but were apparently too distracted for classes to take place.<sup>4</sup> The school’s eleven teachers

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<sup>3</sup> “Federal Way Trouble Ebbs.”

<sup>4</sup> “Sheriff’s Men Break County School ‘Strike.’” *Seattle Daily Times*, May 4’ 1938, 1.

went out to round up the [striking] pupils chasing them....around the yard, playfield and street like cowboys trying to round up wild cattle. The teachers finally gave up and tried to conduct classes, but there was too much confusion.<sup>5</sup>

Striking students outside the building made faces at their non-striking colleagues peering out the windows and yelled “scairdy-cats! scairdy-cats!” at them. The strikers also chanted “It’s a dirty deal. Down with the School Board, ya-ya-ya.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Seattle Daily Times* reported that messages on student protest signs included “Springer or no school!”, “No Springer, no work!” and “We don’t want Winter but we do want Springer.”<sup>7</sup>

Soon, interim principal Winter summoned law enforcement. King County Chief Criminal Deputy Sherriff O.K. Bodia arrived on the scene with three other deputies. Bodia gathered the student strikers before him and urged them to return to class and let their parents handle the protest over Springer’s removal. Bodia received their agreement to end the strike and return to the classrooms. This agreement was obtained after a discussion which featured indignant cries from the students such as “aw nuts” and “phooey.” The discussion also featured an offer-- favorably received by the students--from the father of eighth grade strike leader Royal Brazier to circulate petitions in the community calling for a recall election against the three school board members.<sup>8</sup>

After the students returned to class, they accepted a suggestion from interim principal Winter that they draw up a petition stating why they liked Springer. The students set to work

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<sup>5</sup> “Sheriff’s Men Break County School ‘Strike.’”

<sup>6</sup> “Sheriff’s Men Break County School ‘Strike.’”

<sup>7</sup> “Sheriff’s Men Break County School ‘Strike.’”

<sup>8</sup> “Sheriff’s Men Break County School ‘Strike.’”



on the document. When completed, the petition attributed some of the following favorable qualities to Springer: “He cooperates with the boys’ and girls’ clubs.....He provides recreational education....He understands the pupils and works with them.” The petition also called for the resignation of school board clerk C.V. Lemmon, whom Springer supporters believed to be the prime mover to oust the principal. The document was signed by eight eighth graders (but apparently no other students). The signatories were Agnes Betts, Dorothy Edgar, Eleanor Carr, Royal Brazier, Dan Johnson, Glen Frye, Kenneth Stone and Margaret Mannheim.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 3. King County Deputy Sherriff O.K. Bodia, far left in trench coat and hat, exhorts striking Federal Way students to return to class, May 4, 1938 (Courtesy, *Seattle Times*).

<sup>9</sup> “Sheriff’s Men Break County School ‘Strike.’” “ ‘Striking’ Pupils Petition Reinstatement of Principal,” *Seattle Daily Times*, May 5, 1938, 14.

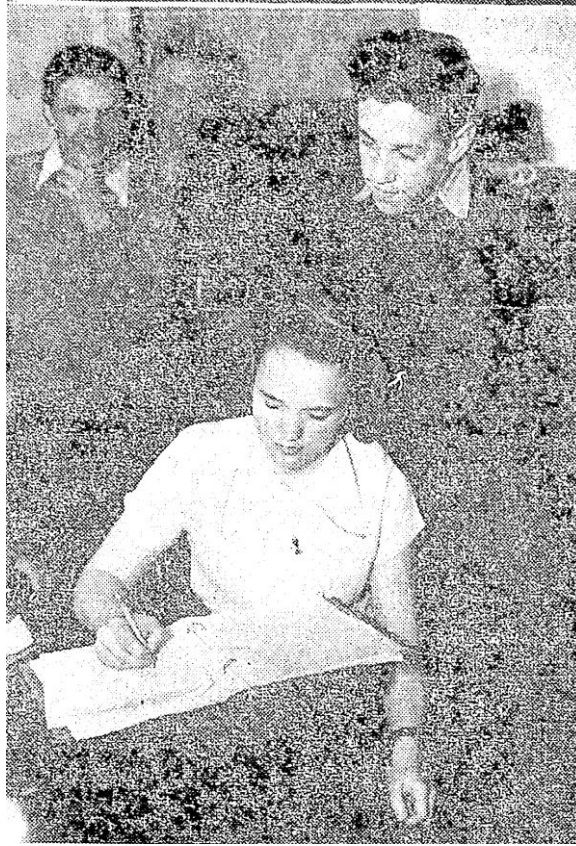


Figure 4. Student Agnes Betts drafts a petition to reinstate Principal Charles Springer while fellow eighth grader Royal Brazier watches over her shoulder (Courtesy *Seattle Times*).

### *Springer's Union Activism*

While the school board claimed that Springer was ousted for incompetence, Springer and his supporters were convinced that the real reason was Springer's activism in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Springer told the *Seattle Daily Times* that his AFT activities were the real reason for his dismissal and also because he'd "always gone to bat against the board for higher salaries for teachers."<sup>10</sup>

The three school board members denied the anti-union charges, pointing out that they themselves were all members of railroad unions in Tacoma, where all were employed by the Northern Pacific Railroad. There appeared to be no evidence that the school board members were anti-union. However it was entirely possible that they joined a union when it supported their interests as railroad workers but opposed unionization of school teachers in their capacity as school board directors.<sup>11</sup>

The *Seattle Daily Times* reported that interim principal Winter caused a cheer among the students when he informed them that he was chairman of his AFT local in Klickitat County Washington.<sup>12</sup>

### *Springer's Dismissal is Upheld*

At the end of May 1938, a hearing over Springer's removal was presented to Nina O. Buchanan, King County Superintendent of Education, with Hugh DeLacy representing Springer. The school board presented to Buchanan some of its reasons for firing Springer:

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<sup>10</sup> "Strike to Aid Principal Ends." "Federal Way Trouble Ebbs."

<sup>11</sup> "Strike to Aid Principal Ends." "Federal Way Trouble Ebbs."

<sup>12</sup> "Sheriff's Men Break County School 'Strike.'"

Insubordination in making purchases without the approval of the district clerk, failure to hold fire drills in conformity with regulations, failure to report to the board when he left the school May 2 when pupils were striking, permitting teachers who supported him to leave their classrooms and agitate among other teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Buchanan upheld the school board's decision, in particular pointing to Springer's decision to leave his post as principal on May 2, at the beginning of the unrest among the students. Springer claimed he left his post to seek treatment for inflammation of an eye; Buchanan rejected his excuse and stated that "you must have known" on May 2 "that the pupils were in a tense and excited state of mind." Buchanan implied that Springer had abandoned the school's teachers at a particularly dangerous moment. She quoted one teacher as saying that on May 2 "I felt like a bombshell might explode at any moment."<sup>14</sup>

After Buchanan's decision, Springer's supporters had the opportunity to appeal it to the State Superintendent of Education, Stanley F. Atwood, though it seems they did not.<sup>15</sup>

### *Recall*

Some of the parents of Federal Way School's pupils launched an effort to create a recall election against school board clerk C.V. Lemmon, who was seen as a leader in the anti-Springer movement. Two of Springer's AFT colleagues on the Federal Way school staff—chairwoman of the union's local and PE instructor Roberta Foster and art teacher Dorothy Ambrose—indicated to the *Seattle Daily Times* that their union would await the outcome of the parents' recall effort before taking any substantial action against Springer's removal. However, a superior Court

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<sup>13</sup> "School Ouster Details Aired." *Seattle Daily Times*, May 25, 1938, 7. "Ouster of Federal Way Head Upheld." *Auburn Globe Republican*, May 27, 1938, 1.

<sup>14</sup> "Ouster of Federal Way Head Upheld." "Schools Head Backs Ouster of Principal." *Seattle Daily Times*, May 26, 1938, 2.

<sup>15</sup> "Ouster of Federal Way Head Upheld." "Schools Head Backs Ouster of Principal."

judge appeared to derail the effort against Lemmon by declaring that the charges in the petition for recall were insufficiently articulated. It is not clear if there was any further movement in the recall effort or if the AFT local took action beyond circulating pro-Springer petitions.<sup>16</sup>

### *Epilogue*

In the end, the students (and the adults) were unable to reverse Springer's removal. H.J. Winter, after briefly serving as the principal of Federal Way School, became Superintendent of the Federal Way School District until his resignation in December 1940. Winter suffered from a great many financial problems and, after his resignation, disappeared from the community and was apparently never heard from again. Federal Way High School principal Kenneth Jones succeeded Winter and remained as superintendent until his retirement in 1966.<sup>17</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In 1974, Federal Way teachers, by that time affiliated with the National Education Association, launched the first K-12 teachers strike in King County history, a 20-day affair that featured a huge degree of acrimony between the striking teachers and the school board. The student strike in 1938 shows that issues of labor union activism made an appearance in Federal

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<sup>16</sup> "Judge Rules for Clerk in School Clash." *Seattle Daily Times*, June 1, 1938, 8. "Strike to Aid Principal Ends."

<sup>17</sup> Caster, *Federal Way Area School History*, 61-63.

Way long before the 1970's and during a period when teacher strikes and organization for collective bargaining were virtually non-existent.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Green. "The Federal Way Teachers Strike of 1974," Historical Society of Federal Way (HSFW), November 24, 2013, accessed December 10, 2013, <http://www.federalwayhistory.org/powercms/files/teacherstrikeFederalwayNov24Dec92013.pdf>.

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