

Some of the most talked about

# ISSUES of the Volunteer Community

## Volunteers and Strikes: Good Motives Should Not Be Exploited

By Peter Laarman

**V**OLUNTEERISM IS A GREAT AMERICAN TRADITION which needs to be reinforced rather than undermined. But the heritage of volunteer effort is undermined when well-motivated people are induced to perform roles which prolong or complicate a strike by paid staff. The

*Peter Laarman is the American Federation of Teachers' director of field services for communications. AFT represents over 500,000 teachers, school nurses and secretaries. Since November 1978, its membership also has included hospital nurses and other health care professionals.*

desire to help is exploited by employers intent on "winning" the strike at all costs.

The use of volunteers to perform "struck" work simply is not a problem in most manufacturing and other private-sector employment. No one enters a steel mill or a coal mine to "help" maintain the nation's steel or coal production. People do cross picket lines in these situations, but their motive in doing so is money, not altruism. People who take the jobs of striking employees in these situations are known as scabs.

The sectors of the economy where volunteers are likely to appear and where their contributions may cause real problems include health care, education and other social services. In many instances, the institutions or agencies utilizing volunteer services will be *public* institutions, which by definition are not operating to make a profit. As a result of their nonprofit status, these institutions may give the impression that they are not really *employers* subject to labor-management problems. Yet the National Labor Relations Board and the Congress, recognizing the economic impact and scope of the health care industry, granted the employees of private nonprofit hospitals the rights and protections of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in 1974. And a majority of states permit *public* employees in educational, health care and similar institutions to organize and bargain collectively. These states recognize that the employer-employee relationship in a public employment context does not differ significantly from such a relationship in private industry. So the legitimacy of strikes in the public

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sector, based on the realities of working for a living, should not be in question.

Unfortunately, the right to strike as an extension of the right to bargain is very much in question where public employees are concerned. Most public sector bargaining statutes are weak compared to the NLRA, and nearly all of them prohibit strikes. What this means in relation to volunteerism is that volunteers are likely to encounter a wave of suspicion and hostility when they "fill in" for public employees, since public employees generally take a huge risk when they decide to strike. Mass firings, heavy fines and even jailings are not unusual in public sector strikes, whereas such penalties are unknown when teamsters or machinists or carpenters walk out. Therefore, an individual considering a volunteer role during an actual or threatened public employee strike should be aware that the regular staff members are under extreme pressure, fighting for their rights as workers as well as for improved compensation and working conditions.

A more obvious consideration for volunteers in a strike situation, whether private or public sector, is that people strike for a reason. Employees are not militant by nature; they make the sacrifices involved in a strike because they feel they have no alternative. While it's in management's interest to represent a strike as unjustified and irresponsible, strikes as often as not are precipitated by management's own unreasonable posture. A school district facing budget problems, for example, can save money and balance its budget if it can provoke the teachers into a strike. While one's decision to volunteer cannot be guided exclusively by the question of "who's right," the employer's motives and culpability must be examined carefully. And the volunteer should also bear in mind that health care institutions and school systems traditionally pay their employees as little as possible. Unlike profit-making corporations, they cannot simply "pass through" their labor costs to the consumer.

Public relations constitutes a major factor in any labor dispute, and employers will go to great lengths to score public relations victories. A favorite tactic of hospitals in a strike situation is to accuse striking employees of callous disregard of human suffering or even of human life. What often is not disclosed is that the striking workers have *offered* to perform live-saving roles but have had their offer *refused* by managers determined to discredit the union. Similarly, school boards and administrators frequently will suggest to the media that senior students will be denied college admission on account of teacher strikes, even

though the union involved has attempted to establish tutorial programs to enable students to complete required coursework. And adding insult to injury, the same employer who accuses the employees of indifference to human needs and suppresses their offers of help will call upon volunteers.

As the many sets of guidelines developed by volunteer organizations make clear, the rules for volunteers are relatively simple: Never supplant the roles and functions of regular employees, never volunteer for a program or function which *should* call for paid staff, never accept a volunteer position which might subject you to liability lawsuits, and never volunteer in a context which would protract or exacerbate a strike.

The best service a would-be volunteer can render in a strike is to do whatever he or she can to *end the strike*. Not only does a strike settlement mean restoration of the best possible services for the consumer, but it also means that volunteers can return to their proper *adjunct* role in the institution.

## Strike, Stress and Community Response

By Rochel U. Berman, M.S.W

**T**HREE DAYS PRIOR TO THE JEWISH festival of Passover in 1977, 400 employees of The Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, New York, went on strike due to an impasse in labor-management negotiations. Although a strike plan carefully detailing the role of each department was prepared in advance, the reality and enormity of the responsibility of continuing to care for 700 aged people were overwhelming.

The crisis, which would be difficult to manage at any time

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*Rochel Berman is the director of volunteer services at The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, a Jewish orthodox long-term care facility serving 780 residents.*

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of the year, was complicated further by the fact that it was Passover. The monumental task of koshering a kitchen that prepares food for more than 1,000 people (700 residents plus staff) was in process. This particular time of year carried with it still another negative component. The holiday also meant our existing volunteer corps and the primarily Jewish community in which the home is situated were busy with their own preparations for celebration and family gatherings.

### **"Love Thy Neighbor"**

So, we turned to our Catholic neighbor, The College of Mount St. Vincent, which had helped us during another crisis—the New York transit strike of 1966. At that time, most of the home's essential staff could not get to work. Jacob Reingold, executive vice president of the home, called upon students of the college to assist the aged and infirm.

The common thread of humanity which had grown stronger and firmer in the intervening decade helped sustain us for the next few days. Both faculty and students came early in the morning, between classes, and in the evening to make beds, feed and assist in the care of our elderly population. This source of help was short-lived, however. A few days after the strike began, Easter vacation commenced and the girls headed home.

### **Mobilization of the Jewish Community**

With the first 48 hours of the strike behind us and no settlement yet in sight, another attempt was made to reach the Jewish community. In order to highlight and underscore our need for help, we called each rabbi prior to the Sabbath at his home. We requested that announcements concerning emergency be made from the pulpit on the Sabbath.

These announcements were by far the most effective means of recruitment during our entire crisis period. They kindled a massive response. Starting with the first Sabbath of Passover until the end of the strike, we had a minimum of 30 volunteers a day. On some days as many as 70 people came to offer their help. The spirit of mercy and benevolence radiated and encompassed the Orthodox community in Riverdale. Dozens of Jews for whom the home was merely a beautiful edifice on the banks of the Hudson crossed our threshold for the first time. After their initial experience, they were drawn back almost magnetically.

The needs of the residents were great and were matched by expressions of enormous gratitude for the kindnesses shown them. On the Sabbath and on holidays during which riding is religiously prohibited, there were virtual "march-ins" from every corner of the community. In addition to providing essential care, e.g., feeding the blind and infirm, volunteers brought with them a festive spirit which permeated an otherwise quiet and sedate institution. We noted with pleasure that volunteering at the home had become a family affair. It spanned several generations. In one family, adult children and teenage grandchildren were joined by their grandfather in performing the age-old commandment of visiting the elderly and infirm.

In some congregations, the rabbi himself served to coordinate the volunteer effort, while in others a member of the sisterhood was appointed to the task. In all our recruitment notices we emphasized that volunteering was "not for women only." This helped expand the number of recruits to include several very enthusiastic and energetic males.

The contacts made through synagogues during Passover week led naturally to the further recruitment of volunteers through the three Hebrew day schools in Riverdale. Each school undertook the coverage of one meal a day. Groups of as many as 15 students came each weekday—before school to assist with breakfast, at lunchtime, or after school for the evening meal. The students alternated their service so that there was no significant disruption in curriculum for any individual student.

Here, too, the recruitment had an intergenerational component. The class mothers of one yeshiva instituted a telephone chain that reached all the parents of a school whose student body numbered over 300. Because of their deep commitment to Judaism, these parents were particularly sensitive to the religious needs of our residents. With a sense of dignity and piety they spread white tablecloths for the Sabbath and helped residents bathe and dress for the holy day.

### **How Volunteers Were Utilized**

Volunteers were utilized primarily to assist with the care of skilled nursing facility residents. They worked under the direction of the nurses assigned to each unit. When volunteers arrived, they signed in at a centrally designated point. Meal passes redeemable in the staff dining room were distributed to volunteers who served a minimum of three hours. Volunteers were required to sign out when they left.

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After the first few days, when we had accustomed ourselves to the new system and routine, we identified the most appropriate tasks for volunteers as well as the most crucial times of day during which help was needed:

- 7:00 a.m.—11:00 a.m. Wake patients, assist with washing and dressing, distribute breakfast trays, clear tables, make beds (a formidable task, since each of eight units has about 50 beds!).
- 11:00 a.m.—1:30 p.m. Distribute lunch trays, assist with feeding, clear tables.
- 1:30 p.m.—4:00 p.m. Sort and distribute laundry, sort and distribute mail, escort patients out-of-doors, bring wheelchair patients to physical therapy for treatment.
- 4:30 p.m.—7:00 p.m. Distribute supper trays, assist with feeding, clear tables, assist in preparing for bedtime.

### Problems and Reflections

When the possibility of a strike seemed imminent, all families of residents were notified by mail that their assistance might be necessary to continue vital resident services. Family response was minimal. When family members did come they usually tended only to the needs of their own relatives. In a few cases, they became adjunct staff on the unit and pitched in with patient care for the entire unit. For the most part, however, families continued to observe their usual visiting patterns.

The role and effectiveness of our existing volunteer corps varied. About half of the 20 volunteers increased the number of days and hours they gave to the home and performed all of the tasks described above. There were many, however, who chose not to cross the picket line. Some felt that they would be jeopardizing relationships with social workers and aides so that they could not provide quality service to residents following the strike. These volunteers chose instead to keep in touch with the residents by phone or postcard. From this point of view, it was less trying for people who had not previously volunteered to cross the picket line than it was for those with longstanding relationships. Even among the new recruits there was much sympathy for the cause of the staff on strike. Several young people requested to be assigned only to those patients most in need. Another group which experienced considerable conflict was our resident volunteers. Many of them pioneered better working conditions through activism in trade unions and identified with the staff on the picket line. As a sign of support, they felt they should curtail their usual volunteer activity for the

period of the strike. A very conscious effort was made to create an atmosphere in which opposing points of view could be aired, discussed and respected.

Perhaps among the many unusual developments during this crisis, the most positive and heartwarming to observe were the interpersonal contacts which emerged between teenage students and our aged population. Segregation of the aged in our society has left younger generations relatively unprepared to deal with old people or with their long-term future. Assisting during this emergency provided some insights into the aging process.

A "rap session" held with a group of students following the strike revealed that the youngsters were unusually sensitive and upset by any signs of infantilization of the aged or by any lack of credibility or dignity accorded to an old person. It would appear that their level of awareness of the problems of old age increased. It is our hope that with future contact and exposure will also come a greater level of understanding and acceptance.

## The Role of Volunteers During a Teacher Strike

By Sue Szentlaszloi

*The following article is reprinted with permission from the National School Volunteer Program's Information Bank.*

**O**UR SCHOOL DISTRICT HAS NOT BEEN INVOLVED in a teacher strike, but during negotiations a few years ago, we were close enough that it became necessary to seriously consider the role of volunteers, and particularly our volunteer organization, in the event of a strike.

*Sue Szentlaszloi is the coordinator of the volunteer program for the West Chester, Pa., Area School District.*

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This is the framework of reference from which we made our decision:

- The State of Pennsylvania enacted a Public Collective Bargaining Act in 1970 which includes teachers. Act 195 provides the conditions for establishing bargaining units, bargaining guidelines, and a schedule for the collective bargaining process in addition to conditions for unfair labor practices and remedies for resolving problems. The law specifies the point at which a strike may be called. Therefore, assuming parties have followed established procedures, teacher strikes are legal in Pennsylvania.

The bargaining unit is the West Chester Area Education Association, the local branch of the National Education Association (NEA). We have a small AFT (American Federation of Teachers) membership which is very vocal but has not yet become powerful enough to replace the Education Association.

- The West Chester Area School District is in Chester County, about 30 miles west of Philadelphia, with a student population of just under 12,000, a teaching staff of 650 in 11 elementary schools, three middle schools and two high schools. We are the largest in Chester County and have the largest Education Association, and therefore we are watched carefully by the surrounding districts. In a sense, we are likely to establish precedents or at least influence the direction that nearby districts take.

- We have in our district well organized volunteer programs supported by the district. In 1973, the board and new superintendent began establishing throughout the community and within the system the concept that the schools and community needed to find ways to develop a cooperative, collaborative relationship. One step taken that year to encourage the development and growth of that concept was the creation of the position of coordinator of volunteer programs and the commitment to develop volunteer programs in all the schools. Board policy specified that "the district shall maintain a vigorous program of school volunteer assistance." Guidelines indicated that school volunteers will work under the direction of a staff person to provide supplementary and supportive services to students and staff.

Our programs were organized to allow for maximum flexibility in each school. A parent volunteer of each school is recruited to serve as the chairperson for the school's program. They each receive about 16 hours of training for their jobs and are key people in the administration of the programs. Working with principals and staff, they are responsi-

ble for recruitment, scheduling, orientation and recognition of volunteers within the school.

During the first year we confronted all the usual fears and questions of staff members. Will volunteers be expected to replace paid aides? Will volunteers be used to avoid hiring additional teachers? What about liability? Will parents come in to snoop and interfere and try to tell us what to do? If anyone can "teach," who needs teachers? Are volunteers really dependable?

The key to minimizing negative attitudes was to assure all staff members that the decision to request volunteers was up to them. They, too, were in a sense volunteers. Care was taken not to pressure individual teachers to request volunteers. Within every school in the district there were teachers who wanted volunteer help. By the end of the first year, volunteer programs were established in every school.

By the end of the second year, an evaluation by principals indicated that they had begun to consider the volunteer program as a regular part of their educational program. By the third year, expansion and refinement of volunteer programs were being included in the management objectives of principals, and teachers declared they couldn't get along without their volunteers. Individual teachers and schools were beginning to find varieties of creative ways to utilize volunteers and were learning to be realistic about what volunteers were willing and able to do. By this time 550 to 600 parents, college students, high school students and senior citizens were contributing more than 25,000 hours a year. Programs were coordinated by 25 volunteer chairpeople. We had become a solid volunteer organization which had been accepted as a regular part of the school system.

It was out of this background, in the fourth year of our development of volunteer programs, that teacher negotiations became very tense. The possibility of a strike was very real during the first semester of that year. As tensions mounted, both administration and teachers developed detailed "strike game plans." The administration's game plan called for keeping schools open if there was a strike. At this point, we had to carefully consider the role of volunteers.

Because we had a corps of well-trained school chairpeople and more than 500 working and experienced volunteers, it would have been *logistically* possible to use the volunteer organization to help keep schools open during a strike. We could have hooked the volunteer organization into the communications network of the administrative game plan and recruited and deployed volunteers to those schools where they were needed almost on a daily basis. There was sup-

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port for this concept within the system and there would have been considerable community support for such action. Parents do *not* want schools closed! In this way, we could have effectively and efficiently used volunteers as strike breakers.

Thus, we could have solved a short-term problem, but what would the long-term results of such action be?

Teachers request volunteers on a voluntary basis. Good volunteer programs require a climate of acceptance, cooperation and collaboration on the part of volunteers and teachers. Even teachers who do not personally use volunteer help must accept the idea for the creation of a positive climate in a school.

Negotiations, by their very nature, set up an adversary relationship between teachers and the board. The reality of the negotiation process is that it is a political process revolving around the issues of money and power. Feelings run high and positions become polarized. By using volunteers to break strikes, we would be formally establishing the "side" of the adversary relationship that volunteers are on, and it isn't the teachers' side. We would be adding a third "power group," the community, to strengthen one side (the board) against the other (the teachers). It would undoubtedly have an effect.

But when the teachers return to work after a strike and are asked if they want their volunteers to return to work, what would you expect them to say? And what position would the Education Association adopt in relation to volunteers? Are we really serving our students and communities best in the long run by choosing to be actively involved in resolving a short-term conflict? Is it worth risking the destruction of the programs and relationships built up slowly over several years and possibly losing those 25,000 hours of volunteer help? What would be the attitude of the children of the volunteers toward their teachers when normal classes resume?

We considered all those questions and chose to keep the volunteer organization out of the line of fire if a strike was called. Letters were sent to all school volunteer chairpeople indicating that we would maintain a position of neutrality. We felt that this position would permit school volunteers to play an active role in the healing process when schools resumed normal activities and could in that way best serve the students and schools.

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## On Crossing the Rubicon A NOW Editorial

By the National Organization for Women

**Change-directed volunteerism.** *We have no quarrel with this kind of self-expression, which is the cornerstone of a democratic society. Without such volunteer effort, women could not liberate themselves.*

**Service-oriented volunteerism.** *This seeks to complement insufficiently funded social services with nonpaid labor in order to alleviate social ills. In addition, it blunts the pressure for a more equal distribution of the nation's wealth. . . .—from "Volunteerism and the Status of Women," a position paper of the National Organization for Women.*

*Ever since the National Organization for Women developed its position on volunteerism in the early '70s, the debate over woman's role as a volunteer never has abated. In 1974, for example, Association of Junior Leagues President Mary Poole responded, "It's not service volunteering that degrades women—it's the prevailing attitude toward women that is degrading service volunteering. It's impossible to reconcile exploitation of women with something they do voluntarily. If they are or feel exploited, all they need do is quit."*

*At its 1975 convention, the General Federation of Women's Clubs passed a resolution reaffirming its mission, "which is to work solely for the common good as it sees the need to be, for the well-being of the people and without remuneration."*

*In 1977, the National Council of Jewish Women made volunteerism its number one priority, forming national and local task forces. Esther Landa, NCJW president, declared*