

A History of the Federation of Catholic Teachers In the Archdiocese of New York 1960 to 2009

Compiled by Erika Miklus, Executive Council Member (Jan. 2009)

This history of the Federation of Catholic Teachers combines the works of Barry F. Ryan, a former president (1969-1971) and one of the leaders of the efforts that formed this union, and Harold Isenberg, President of the FCT from 1976 to 1986. Their histories are the basis for the years 1960 to 1986. The remainder is from my recollection, as member of the Executive Council since the early 1990's.

I encourage you to read the accounts of Barry Ryan and Harold Isenberg that are available on the FCT website. They offer a real view into the struggles of our leaders, the politics of the time, and the opposition of the Archdiocese.

This is a story that traces our origins before 1960 from a "social organization" with no real power, to the much more powerful and effective union it is today.

1960 Teachers were members of the Teachers Group of the Walter Farrell Guild. Religious communities of brothers and sisters still dominated the teaching staffs in the vast majority of schools in the dioceses. Laymen and women teaching in these schools were the exception and not the rule. The number of lay teachers in some dioceses reached close to the half way mark by the late sixties.

The Guild had a speaking relationship with the Superintendent of Schools and was able to lobby for a pension plan that took effect in July of 1962 (Isenberg , Brief History, 1, Although this was a very big step forward, pension benefits were calculated on the basis of "lifetime averaging" based on all years of experience, not the latest. A teacher with 25 years of work experience would have his/her pension calculated on the average of all yearly salaries—including the very low salaries of \$3,000 to \$5,000 of the 1960's. This would not be changed for almost 30 years, when in 1999 5-year averaging was implemented).

1963 Birth of CLTG – Members of the Guild realized the need for a more forceful organization to meet teachers' needs. "While the Archdiocese did meet and confer with the CLTG leadership, it did not grant CLTG exclusive bargaining rights." Any agreements reached were merely "recommended" to the local schools, which were under no obligation to implement them. "Nevertheless, the fledgling union was able to achieve improvements in salary, medical coverage, insurance, and begin work on a personnel practices manual. (Isenberg, Brief History, 1)

1965 – 1966 CLTG was able to get a raise for elementary teachers, but the Archdiocese said it needed more time to make further improvements. Salaries go from \$3,600 to \$5,000. The Archdiocese thought this would buy out teachers from the union. Instead it proved to teachers "how effective organized activity can be—a 40% raise and we hadn't even met yet!" (Ryan, 3) This raise for elementary school teachers would put them at parity with high school teachers. Barry Ryan was the only high school teacher in this group, but was instrumental in organizing membership increases in both elementary and high schools.

1967 Parity issue was born in 1967. It referred not to the equality of pay with public schools, but rather to the "equality of pay between elementary and secondary school teachers in the same

Catholic system." (Ryan, 3) Although the plan was to pay both elementary and high school the same starting salary, increments were much less for elementary school teachers. Also, the top salary was much lower for elementary teachers than high school after high school teachers negotiated themselves a raise that created a new differential between elementary school salaries and high school salaries.

1967 – 1968 High schools negotiated a salary schedule that was same as high school schedule in Diocese of Brooklyn which includes Brooklyn and Queens. The Brooklyn Lay Faculty Association negotiated this schedule. The 12 Archdiocesan schools separate from CLTG and form their own Lay Faculty Association.

1967 New York State Labor Relations Act excluded "employees in charitable institutions such as Catholic hospitals and schools. The Brooklyn Diocese freely chose to recognize the LFA even though it had no legal obligation to do so. (Ryan, 4)

1968 – 1969 "New York State Labor Relations Act was amended so that its provisions were extended to employees in charitable and religious organizations (Ryan 4).

The CLTG saw this as a way to gain collective bargaining rights. It wanted to represent all Catholic elementary and secondary schools (except the 12 Archdiocesan schools).

The CLTG wanted to bargain with the Archdiocese for all the schools (Ryan 4). The Archdiocese argument against this was "that all the schools, except the Archdiocesan high schools themselves were not organized by the superintendent's office, but rather by the individual parishes and religious orders that actually owned and operated the various elementary and secondary schools" (Ryan 4). THIS ANSWER WILL REPEAT ITSELF IN EVERY NEGOTIATION.

The dispute went to the State Labor Board which ruled that the Archdiocese must form as large an association of employers as possible. The Archdiocese complied. Virtually all parish elementary and high schools became part of the employer's association. Barry Ryan is our President during these very difficult years. He fought hard for this vote.

1969 The "controversy over the "unit" was settled by two votes. The State Labor Board had ordered a consent election scheduled for the Spring of 1969 (Ryan 5). The LFA's vote came 3 days before the CLTG's. The LFA won bargaining rights for teachers in the 12 Archdiocesan high schools, and the CLTG overwhelmingly won bargaining rights for over 300 parish elementary and secondary schools by a 65% vote of members. This victory is significant in that the vote followed an intensive campaign by the Archdiocese to convince teachers not to vote for the CLTG. (Isenberg 2)

1969 First negotiation since collective bargaining rights were achieved were held in Fall, 1969. Teachers march from Belmont Plaza Hotel to Chancery. Press coverage was overwhelming. (Ryan, 6)

Package proposed for ratification in mid January (after a long arduous negotiation) almost failed because parity was not achieved—disparity was increased" (Ryan 6). However, the gains achieved in this first contract were overshadowed by the anger over the parity issue.

The CLTG did not accomplish these gains without assistance:

- a. The behind the scenes cooperation of Cardinal Cooke was a major contributor to the success. (He “persuaded the pastors and principals to join the employers association.”) (Ryan, 6)
- b. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) through the association “of The Catholic High School Teachers in Philadelphia, a local of the AFT helped establish a connection to the UFT, which quietly provided helpful support to the CLTG during its negotiation with the Association of Catholic Schools. (Ryan, 6)
- c. Master negotiator Harold Ashe, of the UFT, assisted Barry Ryan, then President of CLTG, during the final weekend of negotiations in January that led to an agreement.
- d. The overwhelming amount of press coverage, partly achieved because of the involvement of Albert Shanker, of the UFT, had a large impact on the negotiations. Without it, the Archdiocese might not have been as embarrassed, or pressured to listen and to negotiate. (Ryan, 6)

RECOGNITION OF THE NEED TO AFFILIATE

1970 “Aid to nonpublic schools, a hot political topic. Albert Shanker and the UFT were in the forefront of the battle to fight attempts at funding for non public schools”. Because of this, CLTG could not affiliate with UFT, so we were looking at the AFT. (Ryan 7)

1971 Affiliation with the AFT. We needed to affiliate to be more effective proponents of aid to non-public schools. We could be more successful as insiders in the AFT than as outsiders. With the Affiliation came a new name for the Union—**The Federation of Catholic Teachers, Local 2092, AFT, AFL-CIO** (Ryan 8)

The Archdiocese fought this affiliation. The State Labor Board ordered another consent vote. The Archdiocese bombarded 3000 lay teachers with literature from management. (Ryan 8) The Archdiocese tried to kill the union using the affiliation issue as a way to do this.

AFT and UFT helped the FCT fight this battle providing advice, office space, equipment, and phones. The “Save our Schools” campaign was aided by significant advertising efforts, like the distribution of pictures of petitions for state aid to nonpublic schools being presented to Governor Rockefeller by Barry Ryan, and a TV debate. Teachers voted overwhelmingly in favor of affiliation with the AFT. (Ryan 8-9)

1971 Strike of November. Negotiation demands for larger raises, parity, fringe benefits, and quality of life issues were hampered by the wage freeze imposed by Pres. Nixon in November of 1971.

Members voted to strike (1000 of 1400 attended this vote) “...strike lasted 21 long difficult school days. We had 1100 teachers out when it started. On Dec. 22 when it ended we were down to 600” (Ryan 11). This was a legal strike, but a difficult one to wage. Teachers could not afford to stay out because they were already living on very low salaries, and it was very cold that November. Teachers were on strike five weeks and in the end achieved minimal results. Parity was not resolved and this made teachers angry. Barry Ryan resigned after this strike.

The end of strike was again accomplished by assistance from outside of the union. Aid came from:

- a. Labor leaders who put pressure on the Cardinal
- b. AFT/UFT

c. Al Shanker's influence in brokering meetings with labor leaders.

"The strike left the union demoralized and broke—to this day (1982) the union has not achieved a level of militancy anything like it had in 1969 or 1971. It's as if it's in a permanent state of shell shock." (Ryan 14)

Union activities and negotiations were more low-key with efforts geared at getting back to work and paying old bills.

Subsequent contracts achieved small gains, and no improvement to the parity issue. In 1983, a top salary for an elementary school teacher with a Masters +30 degree at the 15th step was \$14,100. A secondary school teacher with the same education and credentials would receive \$18,300 at the top step. (Ryan 14)

1971 – 1975 Jack O'Neill serves as President of FCT. He manages to pay all of the debts incurred by the Strike of 1971.

1976 – 1986 Harold Isenberg is President of FCT. His "The FCT History of the Organization of the FCT" and "The Federation of Catholic Teachers, A Brief History" provide some insight into the politics of the time.

1979 "US Supreme Court ruled that schools operated by a church were not under the jurisdiction of the NLRB" (Isenberg 4) However, teachers in states like New York, with equivalent labor laws, were still protected.

1981 FCT voted to end 11 years of affiliation with the AFT and its state organization. "...there is an inherent conflict of interest between public and private school teachers over the issue of governmental assistance to our schools... AFT had promised to downplay its opposition to legislation like tuition tax credits, it did not or could not honor that commitment." (Isenberg, 4)

"FCT has been active in the fight for federal and state assistance to our schools and parents since the establishment of the CLTG. In 1970, our Save Our Schools (SOS) campaign helped win passage of a state bill granting funds to parochial schools. Since 1976, we have been at the forefront of the fight for a constitutional form of federal assistance to our schools and the parents of children attending these institutions." (Isenberg, 4)

"The last three collective bargaining agreements have covered the periods of 1977-80, 1980-83, and now 1983-86. All were hard fought for victories. All involved months of difficult negotiations, mass picketing, and a one day strike in October of 1980. And all proved the absolute need for teacher solidarity." (Isenberg 5)

1987 – 1994 Marge Menard is President of FCT. The term of her tenure is concurrent with an economic recession and negotiations are extremely difficult. There is no larger union to help with negotiations or even to advise us. As a member of the Executive Council, I found it strange that we were not allowed to speak or even ask questions at the negotiations table. In reading Barry Ryan's account of his experiences with Edward Burke, the labor lawyer for the Archdiocese (who was also the lawyer negotiating our contracts), I realize that this was his policy. There was one time when we were told to voice our opinions. Mr. Burke got up and left in the middle of my statement. I remember talking about how insufficient our salaries were. The major issue in the next negotiation was the health insurance plan. The Archdiocese wanted us to contribute to the payment of premiums for the

health insurance. In exchange for our agreement, they offered a 7% salary increase package over three years. The negotiations were already going several months beyond the expiration of the contract. Their strategy of wearing us down was working. It was difficult to get the public support that we needed, because the press was less supportive during these negotiations. In 1990, when 500-700 teachers marched from 1011 First Avenue to the Cardinal's residence at the Cathedral, there was no press coverage. The feeling was that it had been squashed by the Cardinal. Efforts to get FCT news printed were met with no interest. This is quite different from the days of Barry Ryan, when he was on the front page of The Daily News.

January 1995–2002 Michele Cody takes over as president of FCT and sets the union on a new course. Communications with members are improved, including publication of a monthly newsletter, delegates meetings, regular mailings re contract news updates, and institution of a phone chain that allows communication with every FCT member in a very short time. Ms Cody works tirelessly to improve benefits for retired teachers, especially in the area of the pension. While Michele (Cody) MacDonald was president, membership in the FCT doubled from approximately 1,200 to 2,400. This was accomplished through an intense membership drive, including a door-to-door campaign.

A Final Average Pay Plan (the Supplemental Pension) was negotiated for teachers only, in addition to the existing Archdiocesan Pension Plan. A Voluntary Retirement Plan was also negotiated, allowing a specific group of teachers an opportunity to retire early with added incentives and lowered penalties.

Negotiations are still difficult, but conducted in a much different manner. Discussion including all members at the table is encouraged and supported. Actual experiences of teachers in the field are explained for the first time to people who have no practical experience as teachers. Wording of contract issues are addressed, with some resolution of a few issues. (This is an on-going battle--trying to get the wording of the contract into English rather than legal terminology. There is always confusion about how to interpret some of the terms. This will be a gradual process over many negotiations.) Final resolution of negotiations did require support of work-to-rule actions, rolling sick days, and informational picketing. Teachers work without a contract for several months, but results in 1997 are a 10% raise over 3 years, a cap on health insurance payments, improvements in contract wording and terms, and improvement of grievance procedures. In 2000, the FCT achieved a 10% raise over 3 years for its bargaining unit.

A critical issue during negotiations is the health insurance plan. The Archdiocese wants to increase the amount teachers pay, and FCT wants to prevent or limit any increases. In 2000 discussions on parity are fruitful, leading to an agreement to achieve parity over a number of years.

1997 The years between the FCT's break from the AFT in 1981 to the late 1990's were difficult years in which the weakened union faced difficult negotiations, achieving marginal gains for its teachers. Realizing the need to strengthen its bargaining position at the negotiations table, the FCT voted to affiliate with the OPEIU, Local 153 of the AFL-CIO.

March, 1997, by a vote of 852 to 131, (total membership at the time was about 2,200) the FCT decides to affiliate with AFL-CIO, Local 153 of the OPEIU because of the realization that we cannot do it alone any longer. We need the help of a larger organization with its contacts, resources, advice, and assistance at the negotiations table. The first negotiation with the OPEIU at the table was extremely difficult, with the Archdiocese claiming that it just could not afford to pay the teachers any more (a familiar plea since we hear it at every negotiation). The OPEIU negotiator,

Michael Goodwin, helped the Archdiocese realize that it could well afford to pay the teachers more. Experts were brought in to discuss the pension, health insurance plans, and salary projections.

With the help of the OPEIU's chief negotiator at the table, subsequent bargaining achieved more substantial gains for FCT members. Most significant achievements included:

- a. An overall salary increase of 73% in the 15 year period between 1995 to 2008.
- b. Through the leverage we gained as affiliates with the OPEIU, Local 153, we were able to negotiate an improved pension plan for our teachers. Effective July 1, 1999, teachers had the additional benefit of the Supplemental Pension Plan. This plan, negotiated for bargaining unit members only – the teachers in our schools – calculated benefits based on the average of a teacher's highest five consecutive years out of his/her last ten years of teaching. This pension plan, officially known as the Association of Catholic Schools Retirement Income Plan, has had benefits increased during each negotiation. The multiplier used, the salary cap, and the early retirement penalties have all been improved over the years.
- c. Significant limits of health plan contributions by members, although we have had to pay more and more. However, this is an industry-wide issue.
- d. Achievement of parity agreement. The first agreement negotiated in the 2000 contract was to achieve parity in 9 years. A correction to the schedule of parity installments necessitated revision of the scheduled realization of parity to 12 years in 2012. During the 2008 negotiation, this date was guaranteed by the Archdiocese.
- e. Other non financial improvement to contract terms.

During the negotiations for the CBA, effective September 1, 1998 through August 31, 2001, our first negotiation with the presence of the OPEIU, the FCT bargained the right to collect an Agency Fee from teachers who were not members of the union. The union had to prove that 70% of the bargaining unit employees were dues-paying members. This was very difficult to do since the base number given by the ACS kept changing. Finally, the FCT was able to sign up enough members throughout the Archdiocese to reach the 70% threshold. This was verified, and so, effective September 1, 1999, the FCT was able to collect an Agency Fee from those employees hired after that date who did not choose to join the union. This was a major victory for this union.

The OPEIU has been supportive in any venture with which we have needed assistance. They provide us with information, physical resources such as meeting places, signs, a publicist, contacts to publications, contacts to financial and pension resources and many others. Their advice regarding labor practices and negotiations has been priceless. We are very thankful for all their help.

2002 – 2008 Mary-Ann Perry becomes President of FCT. She continues to improve the operation of the FCT, making major improvements in the way grievances are handled and expands the amount of communication with union members.

Because of her strength of purpose and with the assistance of OPEIU negotiations help, we are able to achieve a 10% and 11% increase in salary, increase of salary step, a cap on the amount of out-of-pocket payments FCT members must make under the new health plan and an employer match to the TDA investment for teachers who participate. Mary-Ann was a fastidious guardian of the rights of our teachers and tenaciously strove to improve their conditions at every opportunity.

During Mary-Ann Perry's presidency, the FCT continued to reach out to teachers who had not joined the union, particularly in the upper counties. Membership eventually increased to 3,000 teachers.

At the same time, the Archdiocese was closing a few schools each year and other schools were downsizing – all due to lowering enrollments. Each year, FCT officers visited faculties in every closing school and worked with all teachers on the priority hiring lists, helping them to find placement for the following school year.

This downsizing and closing of schools resulted in a drop in the number of teachers in the bargaining unit and a drop in FCT membership to approximately 2,900 members.

In 2006 she was instrumental in protecting rights of teachers who lost their jobs because of school closings or consolidations. Negotiations during Ms. Perry's tenure were difficult as usual, requiring teachers to work without a contract for several months, but work actions like rolling sick days and work-to-rule helped let the Archdiocese know that teachers supported the efforts of the FCT's administration.

In her last contract negotiation, which again ran well past the expiration of the contract, she was able to negotiate a 15% increase on the salary charts over a 4-year period (the first time we had ever had a 4-year contract), an increase to the pension multiplier, and improvement to the contract terms. The parity issue was committed to be resolved by the year 2012, as formally pledged by the Association's lawyer and included in the contract. A contract was able to be agreed upon because teachers in several schools participated in one-day Unfair Labor Strikes. The guidance and support of the OPEIU was critical to the success of both the strikes and of the negotiations. These strikes and teacher support brought the Association of Catholic Schools back to the bargaining table.

2008 – Present Patricia Gabriel assumed control as FCT President. Ms. Gabriel worked closely with both Michele (Cody) MacDonald and Mary-Ann Perry, so the transition was seamless. She had been an Executive Council member and Treasurer under President Michele (Cody) MacDonald and Vice-President for Mary-Ann Perry.

Ms. Gabriel has been a key participant in negotiations during the last two administrations, and her strong character and loyalty to the teachers of the FCT will guide her during future negotiations.

The FCT leadership presently consists of three full-time officers. Joining Ms. Gabriel are Eileen Sweeney, Vice President and John McEvilly, Secretary/Treasurer. The FCT has a full-time organizer, Julia Pignataro. The FCT also has three administrative assistants on staff. All of these employees of the FCT are able to serve our members and help them with their concerns and questions.

The present Executive Council of the Federation of Catholic Teachers consists of Theresa Amarosa from St. Eugene, Yonkers, Mary Ann Driscoll from St. Anthony, Nanuet, Jennifer Fleckenstein from St. Philip Neri, Bronx, Patricia Fortuna from Holy Rosary, Staten Island, Erika Miklus from Blessed Sacrament/St. Gabriel High School, New Rochelle, Gloria Reyes from St. Simon Stock, Bronx, and Jo-Ann Umstot-Verdiglione from St. Peters Boys High School, Staten Island. The officers, organizer, Executive Council and legal council meet on a monthly basis throughout the school year and on an emergency basis, if necessary.

In addition to our delegates' phone chain, the FCT now contacts its delegates by e-mail – a very quick and accurate way to get information to its members. The FCT also has a website where members can access needed information and forms.

January 2009 The Archdiocese of New York announces that the 10 Archdiocesan High Schools (represented by the LFA) will become independent schools. The impact upon teachers in these schools has yet to be determined.

TODAY The condition of the Catholic school teachers is still much different from public school teachers. Salaries of Catholic school teachers are still about ½ of public school teachers, and benefit packages are still less than public school packages. However, with the help of larger unions like the OPEIU and the influence they can apply to power brokers who can help us, we will continue to improve our strength.

The FCT today represents approximately 3000 teachers in 188 elementary schools, and 18 high schools in Staten Island, Manhattan, the Bronx, Westchester, Rockland, Orange, Dutchess, Putnam, Ulster and Sullivan. Mother Cabrini High School in Manhattan and St. Ursula Learning Center in Mt. Vernon (for special education students) are the most recent schools whose teachers organized, ratified contracts and became FCT members.

The FCT is currently negotiating a contract for teachers at St. John Villa Academy High School on Staten Island.

In addition to collective bargaining for its member schools, the FCT actively lobbies local and state officials on issues affecting families, students, and schools. In keeping with the mission and history of the FCT, this union has continued to actively lobby on behalf of Catholic schools, students and parents. The OPEIU has provided the FCT with a lobbyist in Albany who has been helpful in our lobbying efforts for tuition tax credits and reimbursement for mandated services.

The OPEIU has also been instrumental in the FCT's fight to provide school nurses in our schools in New York City. The OPEIU has provided us with publicists who help us with publicity when needed and also provide us with their expertise in producing TV ads, radio ads and newspaper ads. The FCT continues to promote our schools whenever and wherever possible.

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