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# LABOR RELATIONS:

## An Examination of Conflicts between a Teachers Union and a School District

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### Abstract

In this research paper, I have applied the Marxian theory of conflict to the ongoing situation between a teachers union and its corresponding school district. My research uses a mix-method approach, which includes interviews, ethnographic observations, and content analysis. In this dispute, wages and class sizes are the main contentious issues. The teachers believe that smaller classes would greatly improve their working conditions and have concerns about inadequate responses and perceived incompetence, particularly with the superintendent. Despite this, both sides agree on the importance of constructive conversation to resolve this ongoing conflict. According to the orthodox Marxian theory, labor conflicts arise from divergent interests due to economic structural disposition. The teachers seek better treatment while the school district aims to maintain budgets and a professional image under the superintendent's guidance. Considering these circumstances, I advocate for constructive collective bargaining to achieve a positive outcome instead of engaging in a destructive cycle of mutual harm.

## Introduction

The U.S. Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, commonly known as the Wagner Act, several decades ago during the New Deal Era. This act initially granted collective bargaining rights only to employees in the private sector, explicitly excluding state and local government workers. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a growing recognition of the need to address the rights of public sector employees to unionize.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, California took a significant step by enacting Cal. Gov. Code § 3544, which allowed public school teachers to be represented by unions and engage in collective bargaining. Despite these advancements, concerns about wages and working conditions persist, leading to multiple strikes by public-school teachers across various school districts in California.<sup>2</sup>

Strikes have sometimes been perceived as detrimental to public welfare in the age of globalization in the era of capitalism and globalization due to temporary production halts that can disrupt the entire supply chain. Strikes by public employees, including educators, also incur certain social costs. A notable example is the strike of Teaching Assistants at the UC system, where many undergraduate students experienced a decline in the quality of their education. As labor scholars, we must address this complex situation by examining the causes and origins of such conflicts.

In my research, I plan to conduct a case study focusing on the conflicts between unions and managements. By employing Marxian conflict theory, I aim to analyze the historical trajectory of labor conflicts in modern times and shed light on the nature of tensions within labor practices. Understanding the extent and underlying causes of these conflicts is essential for policymakers to enact effective regulations that promote reconciliation. To resolve a conflict in a modern context, we should seek to understand the extent and the underlying causes of such disagreements. With a thorough understanding, it would be easier for policy makers to enact regulations that result in proper reconciliations. As labor scholars, we should strive to expose the causes of conflicts that arise in labor relations and recommend possible solutions.

For the empirical aspect of my study, I have used various primary sources during my internship with a teachers union in Northern California actively engaged in collective bargaining with the school district. My research incorporates qualitative data from three ethnographic observations during collective bargaining sessions, in-depth interviews with union members and school board representatives, and content analysis of formal written exchanges and contract proposals between the conflicting parties.

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. McCartin, "'A Wagner Act for Public Employees': Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970-1976," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (June 1, 2008): 123–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25095467>.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Hanna, Cheri Mossburg, and Romine, "Teachers in Oakland, California, Begin Strike over Pay and Social Issues," *CNN*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/04/us/california-oakland-teachers-strike/index.html>.

I identified wages and class sizes as the primary contentious issues in the ongoing dispute between the teachers union and the school district. The teachers assert that smaller class sizes would greatly improve their working conditions. Moreover, they have raised concerns about the district's inadequate responses and the perceived incompetence of certain members, particularly the superintendent. Nevertheless, both sides agree on the vital role of constructive conversation in reaching a final resolution. Drawing upon Marxian theory, it becomes evident that labor conflicts arise due to divergent interests held by the conflicting parties. I argue that this discord stems from the economic structural disposition, which assigns incompatible roles and promotes different objectives. The teachers' union seeks better treatment as employees, while people on the school district side aim to preserve budgets under the superintendent's guidance and maintain a professional and compassionate image. In light of these circumstances, I advocate for a constructive conversation as the desired outcome through collective bargaining, rather than descending into a destructive cycle of mutual harm.

In the upcoming sections, I will briefly review the historical background of collective bargaining for public sector employees and the theoretical considerations for this paper.

## Background

Collective bargaining is a negotiation process between employees, represented by a union, and their employers. The primary objective of this process is to achieve mutual agreement on various important aspects, including wages, working conditions, benefits, compensations, and other related issues. Additionally, agreements regarding grievance procedures, such as the selection of arbitrators or the option of resorting to controlled actions like strikes or lockouts, may also be established during collective bargaining.<sup>3</sup> Scholars generally concur that collective bargaining and unionization have positive effects, particularly in terms of reducing wage inequality and enhancing working conditions for employees. These mechanisms provide a platform for workers to collectively voice their concerns and negotiate with employers, leading to fairer remuneration and improved workplace conditions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John T. Dunlop, "Past and Future Tendencies in American Labor Organizations," *Daedalus* 107, no. 1 (1978): 84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024522>.

<sup>4</sup> See William J. Collins and Gregory T. Niemesh, "Unions and the Great Compression of Wage Inequality in the US at Mid-century: Evidence from Local Labour Markets," *The Economic History Review* 72, no. 2 (May 2019): 691–715, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12744>; Henry S Farber et al., "Unions and Inequality over the Twentieth Century: New Evidence from Survey Data," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136, no. 3 (June 30, 2021): 1325–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab012>; John S. Ahlquist, "Labor Unions, Political Representation, and Economic Inequality," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (May 11, 2017): 409–32, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-023225>

Since the enactment of the Wagner Act,<sup>5</sup> the public sector has been striving to establish organized labor representation, which is not explicitly granted by federal law. Consequently, disputes regarding the rights of public sector employees to unionize have been brought before the courts, and in most cases, the courts have ruled against public sector unions.<sup>6</sup> State attorney generals and court decisions often cited “the threat to state sovereignty” as the basis for declaring public sector unionization illegal.<sup>7</sup> This sentiment is also echoed by contemporary politicians who argue that unionization in the public sector is “practically impossible” within the existing framework of democratic government structure.<sup>8</sup>

In response to these legal barriers, public sector unions have resorted to venue shopping and lobbying politicians more sympathetic to public sector employees’ rights.<sup>9</sup> However, without a federal statute explicitly addressing this issue, the authority to determine whether public sector employees have the right to unionize lies primarily with individual states and counties. In 1958, Robert Wagner Jr., the mayor of New York City, granted public sector employees the right to unionize, an action commonly referred to as “the little Wagner Act.”<sup>10</sup> Wisconsin became the first state to grant public employees the right to unionize in 1959. Currently, nearly three-fourths of all states allow public sector employees to unionize and engage in collective bargaining.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935, also commonly known as the Wagner Act, gave workers the right to unionize.

<sup>6</sup> Alexis N. Walker, “After Wagner (1936–1960): Life Without Collective Bargaining Rights,” in *Divided Unions, The Wagner Act, Federalism, and Organized Labor* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 31–52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv16t6chj.5>.

<sup>7</sup> Walker, “After Wagner (1936–1960).”

<sup>8</sup> McCartin, “A Wagner Act for Public Employees,” 126.

<sup>9</sup> Walker, “After Wagner (1936–1960).”

<sup>10</sup> Anthony C. Russo, “Management’s View of the New York City Experience,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 30, no. 2 (1970): 81–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1173366>.

<sup>11</sup> National Council on Teacher Equality, “NCTQ Collective Bargaining Map,” National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), accessed June 3, 2023, <https://www.nctq.org/contract-database/collectiveBargaining>.

## Review of Literature

### Conflict Theory

Conflict may be defined as “the actual or threatened use of force in any continuing social relationships,” which has also been “a characteristic social process in all realms of life.”<sup>12</sup> The classical conflict theory provides us with a critical perspective at examining power and social control, which emphasizes class struggle and coercion. It stipulates that structural division of limited resources may give rise to conflicts. Karl Marx is regarded as a central figure in the development of the modern conflict theory,<sup>13</sup> who believes that the economic structure of society has deterministic force in shaping laws, institutions, and ideologies and social actions are determined by an individual's position inside the social structure.<sup>14</sup> In *Das Capital*, Marx believes that the “materials productive forces of society” would conflict with the “property relations within which they have been at work.”<sup>15</sup> He also espouses a radical revolution where workers - also known as the proletariat - would eventually overpower the bourgeoisie - the people who control the means of production and profits from worker's labor. He believes that the industrial relations the bourgeoisie strive to maintain will become “its own grave-diggers,” and “the victory of the proletariat” is “inevitable.”<sup>16</sup> Scholars that come after Marx have also expanded the conception of conflict theory. George Simmel believes that conflict is necessary to bring constructive social change and structure, while enhancing social integration among different sectors.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Lewis Coser agrees on the positive effect of conflict to “remove dissociating element in a relationship and to re-establish unity.”<sup>18</sup> Dahrendorf also suggests the importance of “assuming certain structurally generated orientations of the actions of incumbents of defined positions.”<sup>19</sup> Bartos and Wehr argue that “role differentiation” can

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Dubin, “A Theory of Conflict and Power in Union-Management Relations,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 13, no. 4 (July 1960): 501, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2520201>.

<sup>13</sup> See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Seattle, WA: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010); Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (CH Kerr, 1904); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto. 1848,” Trans. Samuel Moore. London: Penguin 15, no. 10.1215 (February 1848): 9780822392583-049.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Scholars after Marx interpret this as the theory of “the base and superstructure,” where the base is the economic mode of production in a society and the superstructure is the cultural and institutions built on the “base.”

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Das Kapital*.

<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto. 1848.”

<sup>17</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Conflict. I,” *American Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 4 (January 1904): 490-525, <https://doi.org/10.1086/211234>.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, Reprint, first issued in paperback 2011, *Class, Race and Social Structure* 9 (London: Routledge, 2011), 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, printing 1990 (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 175.

produce incompatible goals directly by “asking those who play different roles to act in incompatible ways” and indirectly by “promoting different values.”<sup>20</sup> After this brief overview of conflict theory in general, we will delve into the details of the conflicts between Labor unions and employers in the next section.

## Conflicts Between Management and Organized Labor

Modern labor scholars have also exhibited the Marxian mindset. Rachleff advocates for a complete revitalization of the labor movement, emphasizing the need for militant leadership and cohesive organizing that encompasses all rank-and-file members across various levels of industrial society.<sup>21</sup> Fantasia explores the concept of “social stratification,” which often solidifies a sense of solidarity among workers formed and shaped by industrial conflicts.<sup>22</sup>

However, some scholars found and suggested an alternative approach to address labor issues in lieu of direct confrontations. In her research of administering surveys among 285 local union officials and stewards, Chang has found that steward’s roles have exhibited a more activist-oriented mindset than a conflict oriented one.<sup>23</sup> She also found that rationalization ideology, in which the stewards tried to maximize the available means to a desired outcome, is the most prevalent.<sup>24</sup> Rai believes that “unions will have to be less confrontational, more flexible and realistic, and more accommodating if they wish to maintain their relevance in the bargaining processes” in his analysis of a case study where Air India pilots went on strikes.<sup>25</sup> In another study by Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan, they found that “cooperative and improving relations” would appear where they saw new initiatives following the bargaining sessions at both workplace and management level.<sup>26</sup> They propose a transformation process with less confrontation and more alignment of goals between unions and management.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Otomar J. Bartos and Paul Ernest Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Rachleff, “Why Participation? Lessons from the Past for the Future: A Response to Charles Hecksher’s Article, ‘Participatory Unionism,’” *Labor Studies Journal* 25, no. 4 (January 2001): 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X0102500402>.

<sup>22</sup> Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of solidarity: consciousness, action and contemporary American workers*, 1. paperback print (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 228.

<sup>23</sup> Tracy F. H. Chang, “Local Union Leaders’ Conception and Ideology of Stewards’ Roles,” *Labor Studies Journal* 30, no. 3 (September 2005): 49–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X0503000303>.

<sup>24</sup> Chang.

<sup>25</sup> Himanshu Rai, “Managing Trade Unions at the Firm Level & the Dynamics of Collective Bargaining,” *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 44, no. 1 (2008): 127.

<sup>26</sup> Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Thomas Kochan, “Taking Stock: Collective Bargaining at the Turn of the Century,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 58, no. 1 (2004): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4126634>.

<sup>27</sup> Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan.

However, scholars have also cautioned against an excessively reconciling approach to labor issues. Cooper highlights the underlying fear among unionized teachers, despite their improved organization and higher salaries.<sup>28</sup> Cicerchia argues that although economic structures automatically determine the role of management to be at direct conflicts against workers, scholars should still not ignore agents' "intentions" to "produce structures" and "dominating effects."<sup>29</sup> This paper is situated within the context of these previous works. It aims to offer an additional perspective on examining labor conflicts by theorizing their potential causes and proposing feasible solutions, as outlined in the introduction section.

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce S. Cooper and John Sureau, "Teacher Unions and the Politics of Fear in Labor Relations," *Educational Policy* 22, no. 1 (January 2008): 86–105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904807311298>.

<sup>29</sup> Lillian Cicerchia, "Structural Domination in the Labor Market," *European Journal of Political Theory* 21, no. 1 (January 2022): 4–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119851094>.



## Methodology

This research employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating three key methods: ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and content analysis.

The ethnographic observations involved three collective bargaining sessions between the teachers union and the school district. These observations were conducted via Zoom, with the researcher maintaining a non-participatory role. Each bargaining session lasted approximately two hours, focusing on the discussing of contract proposals, particularly those related to class size and compensation. The researcher took detailed notes on the interactions and dynamics among the parties involved in the bargaining process.

In addition to the ethnographic observations, the researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews. The first interview, conducted over the phone, was with the executive director of the teachers' union and lasted around forty-five minutes. The second interview took place via Zoom and involved the teacher union's president and vice president, lasting approximately one hour. The third interview, also conducted via Zoom, lasted around thirty minutes with the Chief Human Resources Service Director on the district side. These interviews provided valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of key individuals involved in the conflict.

The final component of the research involved a content analysis of formal written exchanges and contract proposals between the teachers' union and the school district. This analysis includes the contracts exchanged during bargaining sessions, and other written formal exchanges, such as letters and various proposals. By examining these documents, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the specific issues and positions put forth by each party.

By employing a mixed-method approach combining ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and content analysis, this research aimed to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of the conflicts between the teachers union and the school district.

## Findings

### Wages

Wages remain a highly contentious issue at the center of discussions between the teachers union and the school board. This includes not only the actual amount of payment but also the timely manner in which it is disbursed to teachers.

The union members have expressed deep dissatisfaction with the district's reluctance to increase teacher compensation. A notable dispute arose during bargaining sessions over a specific clause: "When both the principal and designated teacher are absent and another member of the unit is assigned responsibility for carrying out the duties of the principal, ~~he/she shall be compensated at the rate of ten percent (10%) of their regular salary, \$50 per day.~~"<sup>30</sup> In response, the district's counterproposal struck out the provision for a \$50 daily raise and instead suggested a monthly stipend of \$200 for staff members assuming temporary roles in the absence of principals and designated teachers. The director of the teachers union promptly noticed the reduction in compensation during the bargaining session:

If you're doing it ongoing, it's \$200 per month, right? Correct? And there is about anywhere from twelve to 20 days. In fact, in some months, you could have 25 days of instruction in a month, right? I would think 25 is on the certainly. Let's say, 22 yes 21 is that's eleven hundred dollars a month and yet for somebody who's doing it all year round you're only proposing \$200 per month if you if you do \$50 per day, that's eleven hundred dollars.<sup>31</sup>

Normally, there are 20-25 days of instruction in public schools during a month (on average about 22 days monthly). The union's director argues that if paid \$50 daily, the salary for staff members, who assume the temporary role of principals and designated teachers would average about \$1100 a month ( $\$50 \times 22$  days), which is substantially higher than the district's proposed wage (\$200 a month). This persistent unwillingness to provide a satisfactory increase in wages is evident across various clauses and provisions as well:

The salary schedule for language speech and hearing specialists, special education-credentialed teachers working in a special education position, assistive technology specialist (needs job description), school nurses, social workers and psychologists the classifications listed below shall be increased by an additional 15 5% over the current salary

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<sup>30</sup> The language stricken out here in the district's counter proposal indicates disagreements in the clauses from the initial proposal by the union, with the stricken-out language being the original language adopted by the union. Such citing patterns also appear in the following paragraphs and sections.

<sup>31</sup> Quotes from the interview were unedited to preserve originality and the thought-process of each speaker, which is the citation patterns adopted in following paragraphs and sections as well.

schedule applicable for each of these classifications provided the employee is working in the classification.

Here the district only proposed a 5% increase to the current wage instead of 15% that the teachers union initially suggested. We can observe that the wage awarded to the teachers has been a central conflict.

Another crucial issue revolves around the timely payment of wages and the potential consequences if they are not delivered promptly. In the district's counterproposal to the union, they have completely removed the clause that stipulated the additional interest payment in the case of late payment. This action has sparked numerous inquiries from the union's side. The union director confronted the district, accusing them of violating fundamental contractual principles, stating, "When somebody agrees to something in a contract and you don't perform, but you've agreed to in a contract, there's repercussions to that, based on my experience." The vice president also expressed strong dissatisfaction with the treatment of teachers during summer schools, stating, "The fact that the district office cannot pay people is not acceptable, and having any staffing or lack of staffing is not an acceptable explanation for not paying people for all the extra work that they did because they did that work, and they made it happen for students no matter what. People did all kinds of work in the summer; and people weren't paid until October, November, December, months and months and months afterwards." However, the district consultant swiftly responded to this emotional appeal by stating, "I've said it before, but I'll be happy to say it again, the district is not agreeing to pay additional interest."

During the interview, the director of the teachers union informed me that the district's primary objection to their request for wage increases is the alleged lack of sufficient funds. This leads us to the next section of findings.

### Available Funds

Accusations have arisen from the union side, claiming that the district fails to allocate funds for the welfare of both teachers and students. In the midst of the bargaining session, the director of the union cast doubt on the district's incapacity to fulfill their payment obligations: What we believe is the district's LCFF funding went up by 13.26 % this year, right? Your proposals are basically status quo and not keeping up with what other areas are doing, and certainly not keeping up with what the resources that the state has provided to the district to improve services for students. and that it doesn't help to stick money into a reserve fund, ordering it into a reserve fund that isn't spent on students.

During my interview with him, he expressed extreme frustrations with the situation, emphasizing, "When it comes to a school district, the intention is not to hoard the money; it's to spend the money on today's students. Here's the LCFF funding so your revenues from the

state have increased by 34% and salaries have only increased by 4%." The "Local Control Funding Formula" (LCFF) has replaced using property taxes to determine a school district's revenue. Under this formula, funds distributed by the state determine the amount a district can receive. The union director found it frustrating to see a significant disparity between the percentage increase in the LCFF fund and teachers' salaries.

In addition, the union's vice president raised concerns about the possibility of the superintendent "embezzling" public funds, stating, "He's trying to siphon money off to his friends, and he's trying to, you know, union bust something was like wrong. He's incapable of leading. And so even with his bad intent, he's not able to even do that. He's just not a good actor and not a good leader." When asked if this included the LCFF fund, she confirmed it. The union president and vice president suggested that the superintendent might have transferred money out and engaged in nepotism through outside contracts with public funds.

In one correspondence sent by the district superintendent's office, it explicitly stated, "We continue to advise the district to use caution in increasing expenditures and to ensure that it can support any increases within ongoing revenues, including increases resulting from negotiated agreements."

This may explain the district's inability to meet the union's request for a wage raise. This direction also seemed to explain the Chief Human Resource Officer's attempt to evade questions about funding during my interview with her. When pressed for a response to the accusations of hoarding money instead of spending it, she replied, "What I'm saying is that because it is such a complicated issue, and on the district's website we talk, in the budget, um, in the negotiations update a lot about the budget component in pieces."

### Class Size

Class is another significant point of contention between the union and school board. Teachers advocate for improved working conditions, including fair wages and smaller class sizes. It is widely believed that reducing class size would significantly alleviate the intensity and stress of teachers' work. For instance, envision the difference between grading homework for forty (40) students versus twenty (20). The director of the teachers union expressed this sentiment during our interview:

So if you improve the condition, the circumstances under which students learning, then you're also improving teachers' working conditions. So one of the things that we've been advocating for are smaller class sizes and more staff who are able to provide services to students with disabilities.

On the district side, there is a preference for higher student-to-teacher ratios to lower spending on teachers' salaries and adhere to the superintendent's directives to maintain the existing

standards. This preference becomes evident in the contract negotiations between the union and the school district. In the clause addressing student/teacher ratios, the district clearly indicates a desire for larger class sizes, while the union argues for the opposite. For example, in the counterproposal presented by the district to the union, their objective is to keep the current arrangement unchanged:

#### 7th and 8th Grades

One (1) teacher per ~~twenty-four (24)~~ thirty-one (31) students enrolled; which shall be computed on third-month projected enrollment. [District is restoring to existing language, except as noted]

#### 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th Grades

One (1) teacher per thirty-two (32) ~~twenty-four (24)~~ students enrolled; which shall be computed on third-month projected enrollment. [District is restoring to existing language, except as noted]

In the context of class sizes for middle and high school students, the district has unequivocally expressed its reluctance to reduce class sizes, as it would necessitate hiring more teachers and increase overall expenses. Conversely, teachers naturally advocate for smaller class sizes, as it enhances their working environment. This presents yet another point of contention between the union and the school board. Similar attempts to revert to the previous state, as proposed by the district, can also be observed in the clause pertaining to school counselors, general education classes, school nurses, and classified school specialists. Invariably, the district leans towards higher student-to-staff ratios, aiming to reduce wage expenditures.

#### Bad Leadership and Irresponsibility

Furthermore, the union has voiced grievances about the district's inadequate response during collective bargaining. The director openly expressed his disappointment during the bargaining session:

You guys delayed the bargaining for four months when you were supposed to. You had agreed in writing to be at the bargaining table by no later than December. So you weren't focused on it then. You weren't focused on it in January. You weren't focused on it in February. You weren't focused on it in March. So that's not a very convincing explanation. And, and, you know, you can focus on it.

The delay in reaching a resolution has caused significant impatience among union members. In fact, during bargaining sessions, the union even proposed involving the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) to escalate the dispute. PERB serves as a judicial committee overseeing collective bargaining in California's public schools and issues decisions when disputes cannot be resolved at a lower level. This highlights the growing anxiety and eagerness for a solution on the union side.

Another noteworthy finding is the union's attribution of the current conflicts to the superintendent's misconduct. In my interview with the union director, he described the superintendent as a "dictator" who is unwilling to listen to teachers due to his authority. Consequently, he believes that the lack of support for the superintendent throughout the district is substantial. The vice-president of the union echoed similar sentiments, expressing concerns about a culture of incompetence that permeates from the superintendent to all district levels. Additionally, the president and the vice-president of the union claimed that the superintendent not only lacks competence but also holds ideological opposition to public education. They further pointed to a toxic work culture in which the superintendent easily dismisses employees who have made progress with the union.

Moreover, when evidence of fund embezzlement was presented, the previous school board did not initiate any subsequent investigation. The union's vice-president suggests that the superintendent's authority may have hindered his subordinates from launching an investigation, emphasizing the need for a superintendent worthy of trust. Interestingly, during my interview with the district's Chief Human Resources Officer, she mentioned the superintendent's role as a leader, working with various stakeholders to achieve their vision: "I think what I will share in that is like that's the structure the superintendent you know is the leader is the one with um vision and working with leadership and you know various stakeholders to try to get to that vision."

#### Hopes for the Future

Despite the frustrations experienced by both sides, they agree that engaging in constructive conversation is the ultimate solution to this complex issue. However, the union strongly desires better leadership on the district side, someone who will actively participate in constructive bargaining. The district side displayed hesitation when questioned about the leadership and the future of the negotiation.

During my interview with the union director, he expressed his wish for more constructive discussions, stating, "But it's not like some of the problems that our district faces would go away if there's a new superintendent. It's just that the approach to resolving those problems would be so different, and instead of it being adversarial, it could be very constructive already." The sentiment is similarly echoed by the union president and vice-president, who mentioned the positive direction the new school board is moving in and the potential for improved collaboration with different leadership to recruit and retain educators who value the district's diversity and enhance educational conditions for students. In our conversations, they also highlighted the union's efforts to elect school board members who are competent and sympathetic to their situation. Despite the challenges posed by a strong contract negotiated by the current superintendent, union members recognize the importance of having a leader who will listen and engage collaboratively with the union, rather than perpetuating the current tumultuous situation.

On the other hand, during my interview with the Chief Human Resources Officer on the district side, she provided a defense for the superintendent when I inquired about his bargaining tactics. Her response was, "Not sure that's a fair question. I mean, I think that he is doing the best that he can, with a really challenging environment and a really challenging situation. I think that there have been good things that he has done." She further emphasized the significant role of open communication, stating that it holds the key to finding a fundamental solution to the current dilemma:

I think through negotiations with continued talks and continued negotiations and continued I'm listening um and you know continue if you're not talking you're not gonna solve anything right if you're just not talking so I do think by continuing to engage is um is a path forward I think so. that we will continue to talk it's hard it's hard it's not easy, I'm really hopeful we will continue to agree to talk.

When I pressed her for more information on the district's direction for future bargaining sessions, she evaded my question and consistently emphasized the crucial role of open dialogue. While both sides agree that engaging in conversation is the best approach to resolve the current conflict, significant differences arise in their level of confidence regarding the current leadership. We will delve deeper into this matter in the next section.

## Discussion

According to Marx and other theorists, such as Bartos and Wehr, conflicts arise because of role differentiation, in which different agents assume incompatible roles that promote divergent interests. Marx also claims the economic division of labor could be the underlying cause of such conflicts – people who own the means of production (bourgeoisies) and those who do not who have to work for wages (proletariats). The findings of this study illustrate a similar dynamic within the realm of public education, where the means of production may not be tangible in the traditional Marxian sense; However, they are still controlled by the state, which includes the classrooms, equipment used by teachers, and the land on which schools are built. In this scenario, teachers who are union members do not own these means of production but instead rely on wages provided by the state, which stands to benefit from the future "human capital" generated by the education system. The state anticipates significant cultural and economic gains by developing a well-educated younger generation.

In this case study, labor conflicts emerge as teachers seek to improve their working conditions – higher wages and smaller class size - within the education system. The struggle for better conditions and fair compensation can be seen as a perfect illustration of the class struggle outlined by Marx, with the teachers as the proletariats demanding their rightful share of the benefits of their labor.

In contrast, those who represent the state, such as the superintendent, assume the role of the bourgeoisie, owning the means of production and profiting from the teachers' labor. Through

the complaints voiced by members of the teachers union, it becomes evident that the superintendent aims to exploit teachers' labor by withholding adequate wages while misappropriating public funds for personal gain and the benefit of his associates. The superintendent's subsidiaries, including the district's bargaining team and the Chief Human Resources Officer, are compelled to comply with his directives and maintain the façade of concern for teachers' well-being without offering any concrete solutions without risking getting fired.

In conclusion, I advocate for a constructive bargaining approach, provided both sides are genuinely committed to engaging in productive dialogue to reach a solution. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant ideological differences between the union members and individuals within the school district, making this task challenging. Nevertheless, pursuing a constructive approach remains the most appropriate solution to avoid escalating conflicts and promoting mutual growth rather than mutual destruction.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have used a case study of the conflicts between a union and its corresponding school district and analyzed it with the classical Marxian conflict theory. Based on my analysis, the ongoing dispute between the teachers union and the school district centers around two main issues: wages and class sizes. The teachers firmly believe that reducing class sizes would significantly enhance their working conditions. They have also expressed dissatisfaction with the district's inadequate responses to their concerns and have questioned the competence of certain individuals, notably the superintendent. Despite these differences, both sides agree on the importance of engaging in constructive conversations to reach a final resolution.

While it is important to acknowledge the limitations of my case study's generalizability, it has shed light on a common pattern observed in the historical trajectory of collective bargaining – the recurring themes of conflicts arising between management and unions, particularly pertaining to issues surrounding wages and working conditions. Although the specific details and dynamics of each labor dispute may vary, the fundamental nature of these conflicts remains consistent throughout history.

By considering the Marxian theory of conflicts, it becomes clear that labor conflicts arise due to conflicting interests held by the parties involved. This conflict can be attributed to the economic structure, which assigns incompatible roles and fosters divergent objectives. The teachers union advocates for improved treatment as employees, while on the other hand, the school district aims to maintain budgetary constraints under the guidance of the superintendent and uphold a professional and compassionate image.

Given these circumstances, I propose that a constructive conversation should be the desired outcome through collective bargaining, rather than descending into a destructive cycle of mutual harm. By engaging in productive dialogue and negotiation, both parties can address



their concerns and find mutually beneficial solutions. This approach aligns with the principles of collective bargaining and offers the potential for resolving the dispute in a manner that respects the interests of all involved.

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