

## New Westminster teachers deliver a special Valentine almost a century ago

#### by Janet Nicol

Teachers in New Westminster delivered a special valentine to their school board when they announced an "illegal" strike February 14, 1921. Since the founding of the BC Teachers' Federation in 1917, only one other local, Victoria, had defied their employer. The New Westminster walk out almost a century ago marked an important step toward full bargaining rights for BC teachers.

Conflict had been brewing for some time when 86 teachers returned to their classrooms after winter holidays. At the time, more than 3,000 students were enrolled in the district's seven primary and two secondary schools.

There was no legal framework for teachers to negotiate salary improvements. Boards unilaterally set individual salary rates for teachers without reference to education or experience. George Ford, President of the New Westminster Teachers' Association (NWTA), which included principals and vice-principals, told the school board its members' salaries were falling behind other districts. A secondary teacher at Duke of Connaught High School, Ford stated teachers wanted a substantial pay hike, to be negotiated on an incremental salary grid, not individually.

Trustees stalled in responding to the salary demand. Finally on February 8, the board countered with a wage offer far below the NWTA proposal and refused to negotiate further. The association responded by requesting salary issues be resolved through arbitration. The trustees remained inflexible, stating they "regarded the matter on salaries as fixed and settled and not subject to further consideration or negotiation whatever."

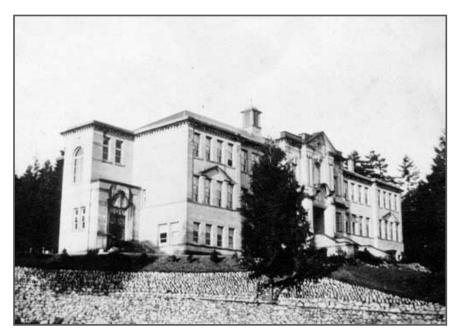
Teachers lost their patience and on February 12 the association sent a written ultimatum, with a copy to *The British Columbian* newspaper. "Unless the Board meets the executive of the Association and makes arrangements mutually satisfactory to both parties with regard to salaries for this year," the message read, "the teachers will not be in School on Monday."

## Teachers Will Strike On Monday Unless Suitable Salary Schedule Arranged

The British Columbian, February 12, 1921

When students made their way to school on the morning of February 14, they were doubly surprised by a fresh blanket of snow and classrooms without teachers. Only two of 86 teachers had showed up for work. T.J. Trapp Technical School was the exception because staff had a separate agreement with the board. Principals came to work too but only to shepherd the students to the exits and lock the doors. Students from one high school formed a parade and headed downtown, announcing they were on a sympathy strike. They also went to the technical school, protesting its "strikebreakers," until the unique circumstances of the staff were explained. Despite the warning of a walk out in the previous weekend newspaper, parents and other members of the public were taken by surprise.

"We have gone out of our way to be liberal," board chair, Thomas Trapp explained to the *The British Columbian* newspaper. The teachers disagreed, telling the newspaper the board failed to consider their salary proposal and refused to submit the issue to arbitration. Furthermore, the board did not recognize the NWTA, referring to the



Duke of Connaught High School, c. 1920, New Westminster Archives.

association as an 'institute,' a form of teacher organization that had existed in BC prior to the formation of the BCTF in 1917.

At an emergency meeting later that Monday, trustees voted in favour of delivering an ultimatum. The secretary was instructed to mail each teacher a letter. "Failure on your part to report for work (by Thursday) as indicated," the letter stated, "will be taken to mean that you have resigned your position and the trustees will take steps to fill the vacancy."

Ford predicted teachers would be angry when they received the letter. "They will tear it up," the NWTA President told a newspaper reporter. "The board cannot carry out its threat." Teachers across Canada were organized, Ford also asserted, and would not apply for positions during a labour dispute. The NWTA had enough support and resources for teachers to stay off the job for six months, he also said. Parents were urged to telephone or write board members and insist they negotiate. Trade unions sent messages of encouragement to the teachers. The Mayor offered his services in negotiations, though the board declined. A petition requesting the board and NWTA meet was signed by 50 citizens and delivered to the board on Wednesday. The signatories, primarily businessmen, stated they "...

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— George Ford

view with great concern the serious situation now existing between your Board and the Teachers, respectfully request that a joint conference be held at once..." The Parent Teachers Association met Thursday to discuss the strike. School had been out the entire week when a meeting was



George Ford, President of New Westminster Teachers' Association later became BCTF President. *BCTF Archives*.

held at Duke of Connaught High School on Friday. Several members of the public spoke out against the trustees' stubborn attitude.

Public pressure had an impact and on Saturday, the board agreed to meet with Ford and fellow teachers William Steele and Robert Little. Also in attendance were three ratepayers. Both parties decided arbitration would be the next step if salaries were disputed. They also reached agreement on a proposal that would grant a fired teacher the right

to a hearing before the board. While no punitive action would be taken against the striking teachers, the board requested 15 minutes be added to each school day to make up for lost time. The gathering broke up with friendly words all round, according to a newspaper report, and the singing of the national anthem.

# Classes in City Schools Resume Work; Strike of Teachers is Called off

The British Columbian, February 21, 1921

The story of the New Westminster teachers does not conclude with a song however. Arbitration was required as salary issues dragged on throughout 1921. Teachers were awarded increases that required additional funds and so trustees did not comply with payment. The NWTA retaliated by passing a resolution at the end of November: individual resignations of 96 teachers would take effect on December 31, 1921, if the arbitration award was not implemented by the board.

However, school board election in January of the following year ushered in a majority of trustees sympathetic to teachers. The full award was honoured and in a tone clearly different from the previous board, minutes of January 16 recorded "...the Management Committee would be pleased to meet representatives from the Association to discuss salaries and other matters...."

The five day teacher walk out in 1921, heartened by strike donations from locals across BC and Canada, led to improvements to salaries over the ensuing years. As well the Board agreed to the recognition of the association as the legitimate bargaining agent for teachers in the district. Eighty-four remarkable teachers had taken an important stand. Among them were Ernest Lock, a teacher at Duke of

Connaught High School who went on to become President of the BCTF in 1925 and George Ford who became BCTF President in 1929-30. Both subsequently received the G.A. Fergusson memorial award, the highest honour the BCTF can award a teacher. Most of the money generously donated to the New Westminster teachers' struggle was given to the BCTF, forming the nucleus of a strike fund for future generations of teachers.



Ernest Lock was one of 84 teachers who took a stand against the New Westminster school board in 1921. In 1925 he became President of the BCTF. BCTF Archives.

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