Legislative limelights . . .

IEA statewide strike threats intemperate

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Idaho teachers lost considerable support two weeks ago when, at a delegate assembly at Boise, they voted to call a general strike and shut down the state's 210,000-student public school system if the next Idaho Legislature didn't come up with more funding to offset effects of the 1 percent initiative.

Such intemperate action has undoubtedly alienated an Idaho Legislature which gave public schools preferred treatment, by appropriating them a 6 percent increase. However, this increase is more than swallowed up by the estimated 9-10 percent inflation increase and other costs, which places most school districts worse off than before.

Over 30 years observation on the Idaho political front has proved that the one thing the legislators will not accept is threats, whether it be by special interests such as the IEA, the governor, or any other faction.

Perhaps the IEA threat is merely saber-rattling, but nevertheless, it's extremely ill-advised. Idaho legislators are conservative, even anti-labor. They are jealous of their power and no one gets their cooperation when handed ultimatums.

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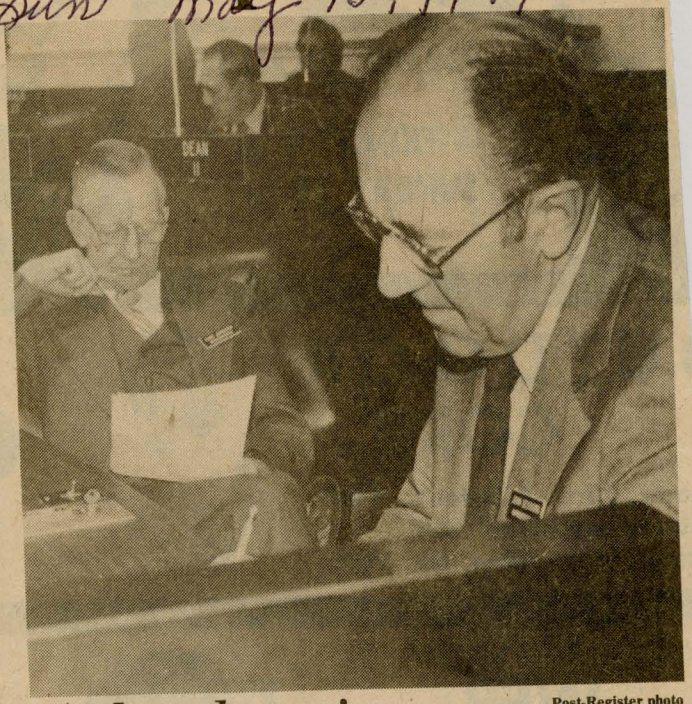
The teacher delegates' action is all the more surprising because Don Rollie, the IEA executive director, earlier expressed satisfaction at what the Idaho Legislature accomplished for public schools in the last session.

Right now, teachers in most of the 115 school districts are negotiating for contracts. The IEA stance, whether the teachers know it or not, is not helping them.

Their strike threat came just before the 7.92 mill levy vote in Idaho Falls May 1, and it certainly did not help its passage, but likely influenced some negative votes to express anger against the teachers.



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Aid education

BOISE — Reps. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, left, chairman; and Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, right, ranking majority member of the House Education Committee, were among the leaders to help get preferred treatment for public education in the 1979 Idaho Legislature.

One has only to look back to 1975, when Idaho Falls patrons for the first time rejected a $500,000 levy, not because of the high cost but mostly to express their ire against the striking teachers. It was ironic that the teachers also failed to support that levy. As a result, the teachers lost that strike, and the vote crippled school finances for years because 30 staff positions needed to be dropped.

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A local strike over specific issues, such as salaries or working conditions, is one thing. A proposed IEA statewide strike is another — one that is intended to force an education policy that is acceptable to the union. Neither the public nor the Legislature will tolerate such a movement, make no mistake about this.

Certainly, Idaho Falls teachers should have learned from their 1975 experience. Idaho Falls patrons have always been generous in support of their schools, as witnessed by their strong 68.4 percent approval of the 7.92 mill levy.

The IEA delegate action was split, which indicates the strike ultimatum does not have full support.

It sounds almost incredible for Rollie to say, as quoted in an Associated Press dispatch: "I would classify the mood of Idaho teachers at this point as one of controlled anger . . . But the delegates voted with the clear understanding that this would involve up to, and including, a complete withdrawal of statewide services."

Rollie said the IEA executive committee will be prepared to direct the more than 8,000 teachers to close the Idaho schools until such time as the Legislature takes appropriate action.

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In Idaho Falls, Rob Nicholson, regional director of the IEA, has not helped the teachers' welfare.

He sneeringly said the legislators "are patting themselves on the back by doing a good job, but they didn't. They took away 11 mills of levying authority within the school districts, and they didn't replace it with any funding program."

Such a statement is, of course, a gross error.

Jerry Evans, the school superintendent, pointed out that yes, the property tax was reduced 11 mills, but the Idaho Legislature made a generous general appropriation of $29,970,000 from its general fund, and in doing so, increased the state funding for public schools from 66 to 75 percent.

Nicholson's statements, coming just before the May 1 levy election also didn't help, by their negative approach.

It was Nicholson who also sent a threatening letter to Sen. Richard A. Egbert, D-Tetonia, whose commendable record in behalf of education is well known from his 28 years of service.

Nicholson took exception to Egbert's affirmative vote on Senate Bill 1128 which gave school trustees authority to reduce work forces in case of an emergency. It passed the Senate 19-16 but died in the House Education Committee.