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"We are Not Hired Help": The 1968 Statewide Florida Teacher Strike and the Formation of Modern Florida

by Jody Baxter Noll

During the spring of 2010, a debate over merit pay and tenure for teachers swept across Florida. While this was not a new debate, the introduction of Senate Bill 6 by the Republican led-legislature fanned the flames of discord between teachers and the state. Calling for a merit-based system of pay and teacher retention through standardized testing, as well as diminishing local school board autonomy, the bill directly conflicted with educators' demands for professional respect in a continuously besieged occupation. In passing the bill, the Legislature created an atmosphere of resistance among Florida's teachers who flooded the Governor's office with nearly sixty-five thousand emails, letters, and phone calls.¹ Protests took place in Tallahassee and across the state, as teachers, their union, the Florida Education Association (FEA), and parents demanded that Governor Charlie Crist veto the bill and voice his full support for Florida's teachers.² Even with the outpouring of dissent, the veto at first was viewed as a longshot, especially considering Crist's run as the Republican candidate in the upcoming United States senatorial election. The bill saw widespread backing among Florida's conservatives, and any veto would be viewed as a betrayal of Florida's conservative values in regards to education.³

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1 "Governor Crist Vetoes Teacher Bill," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 16, 2010.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Crist initially supported the bill after its introduction; however, after weeks of back and forth dialogue with teachers and their supporters, the governor announced his veto, declaring, "I veto SB6 because this bill is contrary to my firmly held principle to act in the best interests of the people of Florida," and that the bill would, "place teachers in jeopardy of losing their jobs and their teaching certifications."⁴ Broward Schools Superintendent James Notter voiced his support of the veto, exclaiming that, "it was a courageous move and the right move for our children, our teachers, our administrators, and our parents."⁵ While a myriad of other factors led to Crist's subsequent change of party affiliations, the veto of SB6 was seen as the death knell of his time as a Republican.⁶ Less than a month later Crist made it official, announcing that he was leaving the Republican Party and declared his run for the Senate as an Independent. The veto proved a watershed moment in Charlie Crist's political career, as well as the immediate future of Florida's politics, but the battle over SB6 also illustrates the role that teacher activism can play in shaping education and state policy.⁷ More importantly, the political engagement of teachers against SB6 was not an isolated incident. Instead, it spoke to the long legacy of teacher activism within the state, a legacy that began with the 1968 statewide Florida teacher strike and continues to reverberate today.

The 1968 strike, however, did more than leave a heritage of activism in its wake, it also assisted in the formation of a modern Florida. In many ways the battle over SB6 illustrates the duality of political visions that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. The story of modern Florida often centers on the rise of Republican-led conservatism, but the ascendancy of new conservatism never realized full hegemonic control over the state. The successes of the civil rights, environmental, and public sector labor movements, often in response to this new brand of conservatism, played as influential a role as conservative ideology itself. The 1968 Florida teacher strike provides a window into understanding how

4 "Crist Vetoes Merit Pay Bill, Sparking Feud with Republicans," *Sun Sentinel*, April 16, 2010.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 It is important to note that the hope many of Florida's teachers found in Crist's veto was short lived as Governor Rick Scott signed into law a similar bill in 2012. Nevertheless, the vetoing of SB6 should be considered a landmark decision in Florida's political and labor history.

these two contradictory narratives coalesced in the building of modern Florida.

The transformation of Florida to a modern state has been an oft-explored subject for historians of Florida. David Colburn argues that this shift has its roots in the politics of the state. As the population exploded in the post-World War II era, Florida's political culture witnessed an evolution that moved the state away from a southern Democratic stronghold to a more conservative Republican character. This political transformation played a crucial role in the shift away from Florida's Deep South roots, pushing the state to a more modern political and economic model.⁸ Gary Mormino, on the other hand, views the tale of modern of Florida through a social lens. For Mormino, the move towards a more modern state centered on the people of Florida. As transplants from across the country flocked to Florida's warm weather and tax-friendly climates, they brought with them a business spirit that drastically changed almost all facets of the state. Land speculation and an almost continuous real estate boom became the major theme in this transition, as speculators sold developers on a dream of massive profits through tourism and residential housing. In doing so, they changed the identity of Florida from a natural utopia to the paved tourist paradise of places such as Walt Disney World.⁹ The insights of both historians portray the complexities of the formulation of a modern state. Taken in tandem, they illustrate that the building of modern Florida cannot be viewed from a solely top down or bottom up lens. Instead, it was the dynamic interplay between people and politics that created the state as it exists today. However, while both analyses provide salient and important arguments, they leave out a crucial part of the equation. Both fail to mention the role of the 1968 Florida teachers' strike in formulating collective bargaining rights and shaping the trajectory of how modern Florida dealt with public sector unionism.

On the morning of February 19, 1968, more than twenty-seven thousand teachers across the state failed to report to work, creating the country's first statewide teacher strike.¹⁰ Hailing from both

8 David Colburn, *From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans: Florida and its Politics Since 1940* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

9 Gary Mormino, *Land of Sunshine State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

10 It is important to note that teachers and union officials never referred to their actions as a strike, but rather a walkout. The use of walkout instead of strike stemmed from questions over the legality of public sector workers going on

rural and urban areas, teachers across the state walked out of their classrooms that morning in the hopes of both enhancing their standing as professionals and improving the state's underfunded and poorly managed educational system. Defying the *de facto* segregation of Florida's public school system, black and white teachers crossed racial boundaries in an effort to ameliorate the problems with education in the Sunshine State. In this first statewide teachers' strike in United States history, Florida educators stood resolute against a pro-business anti-union governor who called for educational changes by moving to a business style of management, but did little to fix the systemic nature of underfunding. Through the strike, teachers forced many of their concerns to the forefront of Florida's politics, while simultaneously providing the impetus for the inclusion of provisions of collective bargaining rights in the 1968 state constitution. In his 1997 article, James Sullivan argues that the teacher strike played an influential role in the development of Republican-led conservatism within Florida, and foreshadowed the rise of conservatism throughout the country. Sullivan asserts that the teachers' decision to walk out proved a pivotal turning point in the political culture of Florida, as the public, angry over the militant actions of the teachers, embraced the law and order rhetoric that marked the conservative movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s.¹¹ However, by examining the strike solely through the lens of Florida's political transformation, Sullivan never fully addresses the rationales and repercussions of the strike. Responding to the conservative policies of Republican governor Claude Kirk, the first GOP chief executive in Florida in nearly a century, the teachers demanded educational reform that counteracted Kirk's agenda to exert influence and control over Florida's education system. Their fight was not just about school funding

strike. By sending in letters of resignation teachers sought to skirt the anti-strike laws for public sector employees. However, many in the public used the term strike to describe the actions of the teachers. For the purpose of this article, the terms strike and walkout are used interchangeably to reflect how the public, the media, and government officials perceived the actions of the teachers. Moreover, the number of teachers who participated in the strike fluctuates between sources. The National Education Association places the number at a much higher 35,000 while Governor Claude Kirk, in numerous discussions of the strike, puts the number around 20,000. The number used in this article comes from James Sullivan's essay, "The Florida Teacher Walkout of 1968," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 206.

11 Sullivan, "The Florida Teacher Walkout in the Political Transition of 1968." <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol95/iss3/5>

and teacher pay, it was also a battle over educational management and public sector unionism in a rapidly changing state.

Before examining the strike itself, it is important to understand Florida's political culture in the years preceding the walkout. During the 1950s and early 1960s Florida's legislature was controlled by a group of rural north Florida politicians known as the "Pork Chop Gang."¹² The Pork Chop Gang gained power through malapportionment and espoused a rural-centric conservative ideology that championed small government and school segregation, paying little attention to districts outside their rural electorate. By ignoring the needs of the state as a whole, the Pork Chop Gang created a system that neglected and marginalized entire regions of the state. Controlling Florida's government in the years after World War II, the Pork Chop Gang began to see their influence dwindle due to an influx of a younger educated working population during the early 1960s, who demanded political and educational reform.

These new arrivals also brought with them a conservative ideology; one however, that was not focused on the rural concerns espoused by the Pork Chop Gang. This new conservative ethos was instead influenced by the ideology of business leaders. Many of Florida's new arrivals, migrating to central and south Florida, believed that governmental involvement was essential to the formulation of business friendly policies that would boost economic development throughout the state.¹³ As a result, the political demographics of the state began to shift. As Robert Sherill noted, "there is the reactionary-scientific Florida around Orlando and Cape Kennedy; this is Goldwater country, not for reasons of race but because it is inhabited by so many young conservative executives who work for Martin in Orlando or around the space business at the Cape."¹⁴ Florida's new conservatives, such as future governor Claude Kirk, sought to capitalize on the changing atmosphere of the state's new inhabitants, and began to market themselves and their political platforms as business-efficient governance. For Kirk and others, the governmental programs that were the most eco-

12 The term Pork Chop Gang was coined in an editorial by James Clendenin, a *Tampa Tribune* editor, to describe twenty rural legislators who controlled both the Senate and the House within Florida. *The St. Petersburg Times*, July 26, 1962.

13 Elizabeth Fones-Wolf also discusses the influence big business had in the shaping of this business-centric conservatism. *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

14 Robert Sherill, "Florida's Legislature: The Pork Chop State of Mind," *Harper's Magazine* 231 (November 1965): 84.

nomically beneficial to the state would receive the most attention and funding.

Central to these new ideas was the role of education. As industries associated with NASA, aerospace, and later Disney grew, they recruited highly educated workers who demanded improvements to Florida's failing education system to enhance the schools their children attended. Schools not only needed improved educational standards, but they desperately needed physical improvements. The rapid increase of new pupils meant that many schools in industry-rich zones faced the problem of over-enrollment leading to demands for education reform and increased school spending.¹⁵ The average enrollment per school in 1949-1950 was 327.7, but by 1965-1966 this number more than doubled with the average reaching 721.9 pupils per school.¹⁶ The importance of education was not lost on a *St. Petersburg Times* reporter, who declared in 1966 that, "the number one issue in [upcoming] elections will be education."¹⁷ Parents and politicians across the state quickly understood that under Pork Chop rule educational quality and growth had deteriorated substantially. Building on Florida's newfound concern for its education system, teachers asked the National Education Association (NEA) to conduct an investigative report on education in 1965. The use of the NEA demonstrated a growing national trend by teachers to use their national union to advocate for educational and professional improvements.¹⁸ The NEA report affirmed what teachers and the public already knew, that the problems of education stemmed from the Pork Chop Gang's lack

15 Wayne Malone, "Development, Operation, and Evaluation of the Statewide Teacher's Walkout in Florida," (PhD diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1969), 42. James Cobb also discusses the demands for educational improvements permeating the South. Cobb argues that this concern stemmed from the need for educational improvements as a means to garner industrial recruitment. While Cobb does not discuss Florida specifically, an examination of Florida's political culture during the early 1960s places the state within the same context of other southern states that sought to address the problems with education. James Cobb, *The South and America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

16 "Toward Excellence: Governor's Commission for Quality Education, Supportive Material," December 22, 1967.

17 "Editor Says Burns can be beaten," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 12, 1966.

18 This trend can be seen in numerous *New York Times* articles written between 1965-1968 that all discuss the use of the NEA to address inadequacy within education. "Education Group will Aid in Strike," *New York Times*, July 8, 1967, "Nation's Teachers Using Rights Protest Methods," *New York Times*, September 11, 1967, "Education Power of U.S. is Backed," *New York Times*, August 26, 1965, "Teachers Viewed as More Militant," *New York Times*, February 16, 1966.

of interest in education. With the Pork Chop Gang losing power through battles over reapportionment, politics in Florida shifted even more towards the new business-oriented conservative ideal. This became even more evident with election of Claude Kirk.

Claude Kirk's election in Florida's 1966 gubernatorial race ushered in a new era of Florida politics in which the ideology associated with the new brand of business conservatism would be meted out. In a campaign speech, Kirk related the importance of education in recruiting men to positions in industry, stating, "Florida can't just live on sunshine. To convince these men with payrolls to come to Florida, I will tell them education is moving from 37th in nation to first in the nation."¹⁹ By making it a campaign priority, however, Kirk provided the teachers a space to voice their concerns over education and the profession of teaching.

Illustrating their concern with Kirk's election, FEA leaders sent out a memo to its teachers discussing the possibility of sanctions against Florida and the Governor-elect. These proposed sanctions included notifying businesses of the problems in Florida's education system, and recommended censuring state officials for their lack of leadership on educational issues.²⁰ The FEA's threats served two purposes. First, they addressed the issues and conditions of Florida schools such as overcrowding caused by a lack of state funding, and illustrated to teachers that the union sought to champion their cause in an effort to improve the schools and their profession.²¹ Second, and perhaps more importantly, they placed the newly elected governor on notice of the union's increasing power both nationally and within the state.²² The rise in teacher militancy reached beyond Florida in the late 1960s. This dynamic was explored in a 1967 *New York Times* article that stated, "school and college teachers across the country, fed up with lagging salaries and a lack of voice in policy making decision are looking more and more to strikes, sanctions, and mass resignation and similar tactics to change matters."²³ The FEA's use, or threatened use of sanctions, became a common trend in early forms of teacher activism

19 "Kirk's Philosophy: Go Get It," *Ocala Star Banner*, February 19, 1967.

20 FEA Action Alert: Status of Sanctions Alert, February 9, 1967, Series M86-11: FEA Papers, Carton 106, File Folder 1, State Archives of Florida, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 "Militancy Sweeps Schools in U.S. as Teachers Turn to Strikes, Sanctions, and Mass Resignations," *New York Times*, June 11, 1967.

during this time period. In the early stages of this militancy the NEA adopted an anti-strike stance, viewing sanctions as the most effective way to gain education improvements, as well as a more respectable form of protest. By publishing the report, FEA leaders sought to inform the newly-elected Kirk that they would back teachers in the fight for improvements to Florida's education system. The FEA document also hinted at the union's statewide power and potential influence. "If statewide sanctions are imposed," the FEA declared, "they will be a result of lack of adequate legislative action; therefore, they will apply to all 67 counties regardless of local financial effort."²⁴ Importantly, the FEA's commitment to its members extended to African-American teachers as well. Black educators merged their existing education union, the Florida State Teachers Association (FSTA), with the previously white-only FEA in 1966, thus tying the call for educational improvement to the larger issue of breaking down the barriers of segregation.

The merger of the FEA with the FSTA evidences the fact that while Florida's schools and the state at large remained mired in segregation, the union served as a progressive forbearer demanding equality for its constituents.²⁵ The integration of the FEA reflected a national trend for teacher union integration. In 1964, at the NEA convention, delegates approved a plan that forced black and white teachers' unions to merge by 1968 or face the loss of their NEA affiliations.²⁶ While the NEA certainly held a progressive stance in regards to racial equality for teachers, the push for integrated unions was also a shrewd political tactic. The NEA recognized that union power in anti-union southern states could not be attained unless the NEA saw support from a majority of teachers, regardless of race. While Florida integrated its teacher ranks in 1966, other Deep South states were more resistant, again illustrating how liberal organizations such as labor unions assisted in Florida's move away from its Deep South roots.²⁷

The need for a more powerful union, which could only develop through an integrated unified organization, became increasingly

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Barbara Shircliffe, *Desegregating Teachers: Contesting the Meaning of Educational Opportunity in the South Post-Brown* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).

²⁶ "NEA Chief Hails Integration Plans for Six States," *NEA in the News*, July 3, 1967, Atlanta Education Association Papers, Box 110, Folder 9, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.

²⁷ Resistance to union integration is evident in numerous memos and documents in the Atlanta Education Association Papers, at the Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.

important as teachers moved stridently to oppose the educational policies of Claude Kirk. Kirk sought to shift Florida away from its regional identity as a Deep South state, and make it a national economic power. In discussing Kirk's proposed plans, the *Ocala Star Banner* concluded that, "he wants Florida to be number one in everything. For Kirk, Florida is just another corporation which needs a top salesman."²⁸ Kirk's plans to make Florida "first," centered around ideas of industrial recruitment that would provide the state with a "decisive vote on the national political scene."²⁹ In doing so, he placed his vision of educational reform at the forefront of his governorship.³⁰

Kirk's calls for education improvements, coupled with his ideas of entrepreneurial governance, however, also provided a space for teachers to voice their own concerns over education. The teachers found some common ground with Kirk's ideas, agreeing that mismanagement of education by the Pork Chop Gang necessitated reform, but the two clashed on definitions of "educational progress," leading to a confrontation over management within the educational system. Mirroring new conservative ideas on governance, Kirk believed that by running education as a business (such as cutting costs, downsizing where possible, and eliminating what he viewed as needless waste), he would decrease the need for increased taxes and funding for Florida's schools. Kirk did not plan to raise any additional funds, believing that simply "trimming the fat" would provide all the funds necessary to improve Florida schools. Kirk's "education as business" policy was exemplified in a February 1967 speech where he told listeners, "I am concerned with the child in the classroom. I will look at education from the vertical and the horizontal. I want to be sure education is working in Florida. After all, Florida is 37th in the nation."³¹ Kirk's use of terms such as "horizontal" and "vertical" integration showed his business thinking, thus underscoring his background as an

28 "Kirk's Philosophy: Go Get It," *Ocala Star Banner*, February 19, 1967.

29 Ibid.

30 Before the 1960s, much of the South remained well behind the national average in education in almost every regard. Between 1960 and 1968 though, many Southern states saw educational improvement as paramount to the industrial recruitment. While states such as Mississippi and Alabama remained steadfast in their anti-big government ideology, educational funding saw a surge during this period. This extra funding though did not come from the state, but rather from federal funding, illustrating the contradictory nature of southern politics. Cobb, *The South and America since World War II*.

31 "Kirk's Philosophy: Go Get It," *Ocala Star Banner*, February 19, 1967.

entrepreneur. In another speech to teachers that same year, Kirk told his audience that, "you have nothing to fear and everything to gain from a business administration of our government. And you have a friend in the Governor's office at Tallahassee."³² The ideas of business-centric reforms rather than tax-based initiatives to improve Florida's schools became a central theme during the 1968 teacher walkout, and clashed with teacher demands for more autonomy within their profession.

Not surprisingly, Kirk's espousal of "education as a business" conflicted with educators' pushes for increased involvement in school policy decisions and a general rise in funding for education. These demands by Florida teachers paralleled a national trend among educators and public sector union officials who wanted more involvement in policy decisions regarding education. Discussing the rationales for increased militancy by teachers, *The New York Times* stated that, "They [teachers] complain of too many directives written by administrators without the advice and consent of the field troops."³³ Florida teachers, already angry over a lack of administrative input before Kirk's election, feared that his plans for reform would strip them even further of what little control they maintained over educational policy. However, by showing a concern over education Kirk's rhetoric and plans marked a departure from previous administrations. By viewing education as an investment for Florida's future, Kirk's willingness to address the problems of education further illustrates the new conservatives' belief that an involved government could improve business climates. Nevertheless, Kirk's ideas of education as an investment, linked with his no new tax platform, required him to push for efficiency-based reform initiatives rather than through an increase in funding.

On May 10, 1967, reacting against Kirk's "no new tax" platform and efficiency styled reforms, teachers across the state voted almost unanimously to impose sanctions against the state.³⁴ The sanctions included a ban on NEA-affiliated teachers from outside Florida trying to gain employment within the state, and also included a censure of Kirk and the legislature. Importantly, the sanctions

32 Claude Kirk Speech, May 1, 1967, Claude Kirk Papers, Series M86-11, Carton 21, File Folder 3, State Archives of Florida.

33 "New Teacher Militancy: Image of Mr. Chips Gone in Struggle for Higher Wages and Control of Policy," *New York Times*, September 9, 1967.

34 "How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis," Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, State Archives of Florida, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL.

attacked the heart of Kirk's new business-minded initiatives, and included a section about notifying businesses within the state and those seeking to move to the state of the eroding educational climate within Florida.³⁵ However, despite the tough nature of the sanctions on paper, they had little real effect on Kirk.

With the summer ending, the FEA called for a statewide meeting of all teachers on August 24, 1967, at the Tangerine Bowl in Orlando. Teachers from across the state flocked to this meeting with estimates of attendance ranging from 19,000 (*Ocala Star Banner*) to 30,000 (*St. Petersburg Times*).³⁶ Those in attendance demanded a special session of the legislature to address the continuing education crisis. Addressing the raucous crowd, FEA Secretary Phil Constans gave a rousing speech that spoke to teachers' frustrations. His message was muted, though, as he also called for more patience among teachers. He exclaimed,

lord knows I know how fed up, frustrated, and mad you are; how tired you are of seeing kids you teach cheated because you have to give them individual attention; how tired you are of crowded classrooms, limited materials, and old textbooks...I know all these things

and yet I am asking you to turn the other cheek... I ask of you that we fulfill our commitment to the children in full until such time as we are driven to overt action and then to break clean"³⁷

By the time of the meeting, teachers recognized that the sanctions did little to move the Governor, and increasingly began to demand a strike. However, Constans's cautious approach won the day as teachers at the meeting signed letters of resignation but withheld sending them, hoping that the threat of mass resignation would move Kirk to action. What they got instead was an even more hard-line stance from Kirk.³⁸

In response to the Tangerine Bowl protest, Kirk looked for a way out of the pending disaster that could result from a potential

35 Ibid.

36 "Teachers Meet in Orlando," *Ocala Star Banner*, August 24, 1967; "Teachers: Try Again, Win...Or Resign," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 25, 1967. This disparity between how many teachers actually attended the meeting exemplifies the divide between liberal and conservative news outlets.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

statewide teacher walkout. Soon after the meeting, Kirk took to the airwaves in a thirty minute televised program that aired in the Miami-Dade area called "Education in Florida: Perspective for Tomorrow."³⁹ In this program Kirk laid out a plan for a study to glean information on how to make Florida first in education. He also appointed a thirty-member citizen committee to look at the needs of education and make suggestions on reform for the legislature to follow. This committee consisted of mostly businessmen from across the state, further illustrating Kirk's agenda to limit educators' influence on policy.⁴⁰ Kirk's suggestion of a committee that would file a report did nothing to placate the demands of teachers who wanted immediate results. Teachers felt they could no longer allow education to take a back seat to other political policies. On August 26, State School Superintendent Floyd T. Christian, along with Phil Constans, replied to Kirk's plan. They defended the teachers, reiterating that their primary concerns stemmed from school problems (i.e. outdated textbooks, overcrowding, decrepit schools, and a lack of air conditioning in the majority of Florida's schools) and not the low salaries of teachers, as Kirk often argued to the public.⁴¹ The war of words between Kirk and FEA leaders continued throughout the 1967-1968 school year, with both sides hoping to avoid a walkout.

Kirk originally planned to hold a special legislative session after the completion of the task force's study. However, pressured by a litany of public opinion campaigns by the FEA, and the threat of a strike, Kirk's hardline stance began to change, and in recognition of the damage a statewide teacher strike would do to his political career he began to take a softer approach towards the union and its demands. In November he announced the creation of a special legislative session to address educational issues to be held in January 1968. Kirk's capitulation was hailed as a major win by the FEA, which had been demanding such a legislative session to address education issues since Kirk was inaugurated in January 1967. With the promise of a special legislative session, teachers backed off their militancy and entered the new year with hope that their voices had finally been heard.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis," Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, State Archives of Florida.

The legislative session that initially brought hope to the teachers proved the breaking point that led to their strike. Kirk opened the special legislative session with a speech on January 29, 1968, outlining his plans for educational reforms. Kirk acknowledged that the session was a landmark in Florida history stating, "never before in the long history of Florida has any legislature convened for the sole purpose of examining the state of public education and considering the ways and means by which it might be significantly improved." Kirk continued to expand on his ideas of education as an investment to enhance Florida's business climate stating that, "the shape of Florida's future is in electronics, in Oceanography, in space age engineering, and in the technically oriented industries of tomorrow. To attract these steadily growing payrolls calls not only for educated people but for an educational establishment that has within itself the vitality to anticipate the learning needs of the business community."⁴² In a move that surprised many, Kirk, recognizing the need for adequate funding and influenced by the Governor's Commission for Quality Education Report that called for increased funding, proposed a tax increase to fund education.

It appeared that Kirk came to understand the value of using education as a rationale for increasing taxes since less than half of Kirk's promised amount was actually allocated to K-12 programs for the 1968-1969 school year. Since much of Kirk's "education" tax increase went to other programs such as law enforcement, teachers viewed the governor's proposal as a blatant political ploy, rather than a sincere attempt to address educational programs. Kirk's plans also further stripped teachers' of their autonomy within education as he sought improvements through the placement of businessmen into positions of administrative power.⁴³ An FEA memo sent to the teachers on July 18, 1967, outlined the demands for educational improvements and stated that teachers have "no voice in policy decisions," and that this, dovetailing with other factors such as funding issues and overcrowded classrooms, "kept the teachers from giving the students a better education."⁴⁴ While rank and file teachers and FEA leadership demanded educational improve-

42 Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature, Series 960, Carton 1, File Folder 10, State Archives of Florida, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL.

43 "Toward Excellence: Governor's Commission for Quality Education, Supportive Material," December 22, 1967.

44 FEA Action Alert, Series M86-11, Carton 106, File Folder, State Archives of Florida.

ments through better funding, they also sought an increased voice within their profession, a concept that Kirk refused to accept. Hal Lewis, a professor at the University of Florida and member of the American Association of University Professors that supported teachers during the walkout, believed that the strike stemmed from teachers' demands for increased autonomy within their profession. Lewis stated that the teachers were "saying the determination of their fate is no longer in the hands of politicians. They are saying that 'we are not hired help; we are not to be used... we demand you take us into partnership in making decisions affecting us.'"⁴⁵

An aspect of Kirk's business-minded reforms centered on his calls for teacher accountability in the form of merit pay and the loss of continuing contracts for teachers. Even though Kirk never directly attacked teacher performance, his demands for merit pay called into question the professional success of Florida's teachers, further marginalizing an already disrespected profession. Presaging current political debates on merit pay, Kirk demanded quantitative measures to assess teacher performance, exclaiming that, "there should be some acceptable method devised to pay teachers on the basis of demonstrated ability, professional performance, and their functional roles in the system."⁴⁶ Kirk's demands for merit pay, the teachers argued, ignored the difficulties teachers faced when they were forced to work with inadequate funding that stymied educational growth and success, all of which affected teacher and student performance. Moreover, his plan for merit pay conflicted with the FEA's demands. In a confidential memo sent to FEA members on January 3, 1968, the FEA discussed the issues of merit pay and the loss of continuing contracts stating that, "this association is unalterably opposed to depriving any level of the profession of continuing contract, and to merit pay in any form or disguise."⁴⁷ By maintaining his stance on merit pay and continuing contracts, Kirk showed the fundamental divide between his new conservative ideology and the demands of the teachers.

At the close of the special session on February 19, 1968, FEA members, feeling that their concerns had not been adequately addressed, sent in the letters of resignations signed by the teachers at the Tangerine Bowl meeting to signal the start of a statewide

⁴⁵ "AAUP Weighs in on Teacher Strike," *Gainesville Sun*, Feb 27, 1968.

⁴⁶ Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature.

⁴⁷ FEA Action Alert, January 3, 1968, FEA Action Alert, Series M86-11, Carton 106, File Folder 1, State Archives of Florida.

teachers' strike. The strike involved over 27,000 teachers and some administrators from all grade levels. The most active levels of participation occurred in urban areas such as Dade, Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Duval counties, but all counties in the state, except for Taylor County, witnessed strike participation from their teachers and administrators.⁴⁸

Florida's teachers faced steep opposition from much of the public with their decision to walk out of the classroom. However, the character of this opposition also unified the teachers and brought them in line with other social movements of the time. Indeed, the social upheaval of the 1960s influenced both the teachers' militancy, and the public's negative reactions towards their actions. In a speech to teachers, NEA president and Florida educator Braulio Alonso (then serving as principal of King High School in Tampa) reflected the language of the time exclaiming that, "American teachers have only begun to fight; this is the beginning of the real revolution."⁴⁹ Florida teachers, however, took a more cautious approach when discussing their demands with the public, a citizenry that was growing weary and angry over campus rebellions. This stemmed from their fear over backlash from an increasingly conservative public. Viewing the teachers' actions in the same context as the social upheaval of the 1960s, many Floridians looked to Governor Kirk to maintain the status quo and public order.

Teachers, however, found support and inspiration in the social movements permeating the state. The direct and indirect support and influence of civil rights activists, coupled with the public backlash that was created by both the gendered perceptions of teaching and anti-unionism, illustrate the importance the social upheaval of the 1960s played during the strike. Kirk's law and order stance mirrored that of other conservative stalwarts such as Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. These factors offer evidence that the strike served as a central moment in the rise of Florida's new conservatism as right-leaning politicians increasingly used racialized, anti-union, law and order, and defense of traditional values rhetoric to appeal to the "silent majority."⁵⁰ The influence

48 How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, State Archives of Florida.

49 "NEA Asks \$6 Billion to Curb Teacher Revolt and Stem Summer Revolts," *NEA NEWS*, January 9, 1968.

50 This increase of law and order rhetoric is exemplified in Thomas Sugrue's, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-War Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Darren Dochuk's, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt:*

of other social movements on the teachers further indicates the combining of competing ideologies in the formation of modern Florida. Moreover, it also illustrates a different racial dynamic in the Florida strike than in northern teacher strikes, especially the iconic 1968 Ocean Hill Brownsville teacher strike in Brooklyn.⁵¹

The congruence of the teachers strike with other social movements began quickly after the teachers left their classrooms. The strike brought together both white and African-American teachers, often for the first time. Interracial strike meetings gave many teachers, regardless of race, a heightened social awareness they had not expected.⁵² Exemplifying this, Alachua County teacher Emma Evers, an African-American strike participant stated that, "even if racial inequality was not a part of it at first it became a part of it...We started comparing notes. And then we came up with a conglomeration of things. [Kirk and the legislature] were not meeting the needs of blacks, teachers, children, and schools."⁵³ Moreover, as members of an integrated union, many teachers found common ground in their demands for educational improvements and professional respect. Many black teachers who joined the strike offered experiential advice gained through their fights for civil rights or found inspiration in the actions of others who had.⁵⁴ The FEA readily saw the connection between the civil rights

Plain Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the rise of Evangelical Conservatism (W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), and Dan Carter's, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

51 The Ocean Hill Brownsville strike pitted white teachers against community led civil rights leaders who wanted more community control over education. See Joanna Perillo's *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions and Race in the Battle for School Equity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), and Jerald Podair's *The Strike that Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

52 Robert Korstad in examining tobacco workers unions in Winston-Salem, NC, discusses how interracial unionism fostered awareness of civil rights for African-Americans. Moreover, Michael Honey in his book explores the Memphis sanitation workers strike, and indicates the important role unions could play in garnering civil rights for African-American workers. Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), and Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and their Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

53 Oral History Interview of Emma Evers, conducted by Erika Gubrium, "African-American Teachers Look Back: Interpreting Participation in the 1968 Florida School Walkout," (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2007), 156.

54 Gubrium uses seven oral history interviews of African-American teachers in Alachua County as a means to illustrate how the Civil Rights movement shaped African-American participation during the strike. While this is a localized

movement and Florida teachers' struggle, and used civil rights rhetoric as a means to generate African-American participation.⁵⁵ Evers discussed the importance of the strike as a means to develop interracial professional relationships when she stated that, "we talked and we found that we all had the same goals in mind. And we wanted better for education, the teachers, for each other, for our children."⁵⁶

The strike gave white and black educators a new opportunity to work together and provided African-American leaders and newspapers with an outlet to express their discontent. Many leaders within Florida's civil rights movement viewed the teachers' strike as a means to address the disparities between white and African-American schools. Federal actions such as Lyndon Johnson's creation of Head Start programs, the increase of federal financial support for education, and the view of education as vital to improve social standing, led African-American leaders to place education at the forefront of many civil rights battles.⁵⁷ On March 2, several weeks after the initial walkout, Marvin Davies, Field Secretary for the NAACP for Florida, announced his support for the teachers. He urged members of Florida's sixty-four chapters to keep their children out of the schools during the strike in order to support the teachers.⁵⁸ Moreover, while white newspapers often derided the teachers for leaving their classrooms empty, African-American newspapers largely supported their demands for quality education and professionalization. In a February 1968 editorial from the *Miami Times*, one of Florida's largest African-American newspapers, the author discussed the importance of negotiations between the teachers and Kirk to end the strike, while simultaneously complementing the teachers for their actions, writing that "we highly commend the teachers for their dedicated campaign for

study of one county in Florida, these interviews, together with editorials and articles in Florida's two major African-American newspapers, *The Florida Star* and the *Miami Times*, point to a statewide trend in regards to African-American participation and support.

55 Gubrium, 135.

56 Oral History Interview of Emma Evers, conducted by Erika Gubrium, "African-American Teachers Look Back," 145.

57 In her book, Sylvia Ellis points to the importance that federal policies, like the Head Start programs, played in the development and continuation of the Civil Rights movement. Moreover, Ellis illustrates how many within the Movement viewed education as essential to gain full equality within the United States. Sylvia Ellis, *Freedoms Pragmatist: Lyndon Johnson and Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

58 "Teacher Strike," *Florida Star*, March 3, 1968.

quality education for our children...but let's make a sincere effort to get our schools open."⁵⁹

While teachers found support from civil rights leaders, they failed to garner the support needed from the larger white community, including mainstream newspapers, to sustain the strike and provide change for Florida's schools. This lack of support often stemmed from the public's demands for law and order and the anti-union sentiments that permeated Florida and the country. Both of these ideas, a push for law and order and anti-union sentiment became mainstays in conservative ideology, exemplified by government officials like Claude Kirk, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan. In many ways, the battle over Florida's public schools became a battle over the hearts and minds of Florida's public, as both Kirk and the teachers struggled to gain public sympathy for their cause.

Kirk used his position as governor to fan the flames of discord, positioning himself as the proverbial "sheriff" sent to restore law and order to a state held hostage by what many viewed as a radical leftist group. By using the law and order rhetoric, Kirk was able to influence public perceptions and responses towards the teachers' actions. While Kirk moved away from the direct racialized rhetoric of the Pork Chop Gang, his law and order stance perpetuated segregation and other racialized policies. Kirk's tough talk played well with an angry white public, who viewed the teachers' actions as a disruption of the ordered society Kirk sought to maintain. Letters from parents to Claude Kirk and Superintendent of Public Instruction Floyd Christian evidenced the public's anger towards the teachers they viewed as contributing to the deterioration of the moral fabric of Florida. In a letter to Christian, one parent argued, "the teachers are teaching more about the working of a lawless mob as they stay away from their classrooms than they ever taught from a book."⁶⁰ This parent's rebuke of the teachers exemplified the sentiments of many Floridians who viewed the strike as an attempt by lawless teachers to corrupt their children and cause chaos throughout the state. In an effort to increase public support and rebut the increasingly strident rhetoric categorizing them as radicals bent on destroying the state, teachers sought to frame their actions as a means to improve the educational opportunities

⁵⁹ "The Education Dilemma," *Miami Times*, February 23, 1968.

⁶⁰ Letter to Floyd Christian, February 26, 1968, Series 303, Carton 11, File Folder 6, State Archives of Florida.

for the children of Florida. Despite their best attempts, Florida teachers failed to convince a skeptical public that they had their children's best interests at heart, foreshadowing not only the rise of a "silent majority" that dominated the late 1960s political scene, but also the public's reactions towards later public sector strikes. Kirk, though, had better luck by playing up the role of the union in the strike. By emphasizing the union's role in the teachers' decision to walk out, Kirk effectively shifted the debate from concerns over problems within the educational system to one over union control within the state. In a letter to Floyd Christian, one angry citizen pondered whether, "national power by the teachers' association which they are trying to get, could be used as a club to paralyze our entire nation—the same goal that Jimmy Hoffa had. These teachers' unions—or rather organizations—must not be allowed to dictate nor allowed to make the decisions of our government."⁶¹

In addition to his "law and order" rhetoric, Kirk ramped up gendered critiques of the strike to cast public aspersion on the strike.⁶² In his first public response to the walkout, Kirk implored teachers to "not desert your children."⁶³ Kirk's letter emphasized the roles of gender identity within the teaching profession. Instead of imploring the teachers to complete their duties as educators, he demanded instead that they tend to their children, alluding to a gendered belief in a teacher's maternal role as a caregiver of children outside of the home. By portraying teachers as abandoning their "children," Kirk attempted to depict female teachers as not only bad teachers, but also as bad mothers and women. James Sullivan explores such ideas of femininity in the teaching profession by examining teachers' responses to Kirk's letter. He argues that these teachers attempted to gain support from the public by emphasizing their feminine roles as teachers, writing that, "when striking teachers framed their demands in terms of their sacrifices, they claimed their entitlement as teachers because they had fulfilled their duties

61 Letter to Floyd Christian, Floyd Christian Papers, Series 303, Carton 10, File Folder 24, State Archives of Florida.

62 Robert Taggart discusses the role that gendered perceptions of teaching has played in teacher struggles to gain professional respect. "The Conflict Between Education Reformers and the Needs of Teachers," *Journal of the Midwest History of Education* 24 (1997): 112-125. James Sullivan also argues that Kirk attempted to make the conflict with the teachers a battle over traditional family values, in his article "The 1968 Florida Teacher Walkout," 209.

63 Open Letter to the Teachers of Florida, February 17, 1968, Series 960, Claude Kirk Documents, Carton 1, File Folder 12, State Archives of Florida.

as women.”⁶⁴ By doing so, Sullivan believes that, “...playing a feminine role also restricted the striking teachers, because to play the role credibly they had to maintain the deferential comportment expected of women.”⁶⁵ The evidence, however, counters this claim. The teachers rarely discussed their role as educators in the context of their femininity. Teachers recognized their importance to society, not as caregivers of children, but as highly qualified professionals, and through their actions in formulating the strike developed a professional class consciousness that reflected their positions in society. One teacher stated that “the teachers that are being criticized today are the truly dedicated of the profession. We are all concerned about the money involved in a good educational bill. But I ask you how much is it worth to educate a potential doctor, lawyer, legislator, scientist, or a president?”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the public often viewed teaching as an unskilled job, rather than a skilled profession. Verifying those perceptions of teachers, one top Kirk official, in an interview with David Halberstam, stated that, “they are all second raters. It’s become a second rate profession. No man goes into it if he can do anything else.”⁶⁷ This opinion of the profession influenced the lack of professional respect teachers received, which often translated into their low salaries. The *New York Times* highlighted the neglect felt by Florida’s teachers stating that while “pay for urban teachers has tripled since 1939... their salaries cannot stand comparison the top brackets of other professions, such as law, medicine, and engineering.”⁶⁸

By using professional terms such as educator, rather than something more maternal, Florida’s teachers indirectly fought against the gendered concept of the teacher as a motherly figure.⁶⁹ In fact, the very act of going on strike attacked gendered stereo-

64 James Sullivan, 215.

65 *Ibid.*, 211.

66 Claude Kirk Papers, Series 960, Carton 1, File Folder 10, State Archives of Florida.

67 David Halberstam, “Claude Kirk and the Politics of Promotion,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 1968, 40.

68 “New Teacher Militancy,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1967.

69 While the sources I used do not point to a direct correlation, many teachers used similar language as second wave feminists while championing their cause. While this does not point to a direct influence, it does suggest that the teachers were, at the very least, indirectly motivated by the feminist movements seen during the 1960s. This indirect causality is also illustrated in Kathleen Barry’s book *Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

types of women as being passive figures. This dynamic perhaps played a role in some of the public's anger towards the teachers and their union officials. In a letter to Floyd Christian, one angry parent, launched a gendered attack on Janet Dean, a union official in Dade County, stating that, "in all this mess it is becoming increasing clear that you have short changed the taxpayers. If a bitch like Janet Dean can turn the whole system into a mess, and people like you who we pay to represent us just go along with her and her gang."⁷⁰ While this letter exemplifies the gendered attacks against teachers seen during the strike, it also speaks to society's views on masculinity. By allowing the female teachers to disrupt education and the state, Kirk failed in his role as a man to sustain female passivity within the workplace. Nevertheless, Kirk fought to maintain the masculine image of a strike breaker seeking to uphold traditional values.

The refusal, from Kirk and the public at large, to acknowledge teaching as a skilled, non-gendered profession influenced the governor's decision to keep the schools open during the strike. FEA leaders hoped that forcing school closures would pressure Kirk to a compromise, but Florida's teachers found little support from Kirk, Christian, or the public, hindering any chances at success. Public perception of teaching as a non-skilled profession provided Kirk with an opportunity to hire unqualified substitute teachers with little public outcry. By keeping the schools open, Kirk minimized the social disruption that the teachers needed, thus upholding ideas of law and order and even his own masculinity. The public overwhelmingly backed Kirk's decision to keep the schools open, often writing letters to both the governor and Christian imploring them not to close the schools. As a group of concerned parents stated, "we endorse the efforts made to keep the schools open...the qualified volunteers and substitutes are doing a magnificent job."⁷¹ The volunteers and substitutes, hired by county school boards, in actuality, lacked any meaningful qualifications, serving more as babysitters than educators.⁷² While demands to keep the schools open flooded Kirk's and Christian's mailboxes, teachers found more support from the students themselves. Discussing the lack of qualifications for the replacement teachers, students wrote to Kirk and

70 Letter to Floyd Christian, Floyd Christian Papers, Series 303, Carton 10, File Folder 24, State Archives of Florida.

71 Ibid.

72 The lack of qualification of these substitutes is discussed in articles in both the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Miami Herald*.

Christian in support of the teachers and school closure. In one letter a student stated, "I do not desire to send myself to any schools where the teachers are not certified. The implementation of an unqualified teacher substitute program is not a satisfactory answer to the immediate problem. I want to go on record on supporting the FEA's demands for higher educational standards in the state."⁷³ Students also took to the streets in support of their teachers. Students on Florida's Space Coast walked out of their classrooms to show their support of the teachers, leading to student arrests for loitering.⁷⁴ Even with student support, the FEA's campaign to completely close Florida's schools never gained any meaningful traction, and Kirk appeared to gain the upper hand in the dispute.

By early March as the walkout continued into its third week, the FEA leadership began to see support from the rank and file dwindle as many teachers became disheartened with the general lack of public support. On March 8, 1968, three weeks after the initial resignations, the State Board of Education led by Floyd Christian called a meeting that ultimately provided the FEA with enough concessions to end the strike. During the meeting the board approved a settlement with the FEA asking for \$10.2 million for education for the remainder of the school year, and other minor concessions for the teachers.⁷⁵ The FEA also demanded that all teachers who had resigned be reinstated immediately. While Christian and the Board agreed to this, many county school boards attempted to use the walkout as means to rid themselves of militant teachers. By March 13, only twenty-seven out of Florida's sixty-seven counties agreed to reinstate, in full, all teachers who resigned. In response, Christian implemented an order to allow retroactive leave of absences for teachers. This provided a legal impetus to return teachers to their classrooms, and many of the counties did so immediately. By March 14, with the majority of the teachers back in their classrooms the FEA cancelled all sanctions, effectively ending the school crisis and the strike itself. The compromise brokered by Kirk, which provided some victories for teachers, indicated that while the ideas of the new conservatism had begun to take root by 1968, there remained opportunities for public sector

73 Letter to Floyd Christian, Series 303, Floyd Christian Papers, Carton 10, File Folder 24, State Archives of Florida.

74 "Students Backing Florida Teachers," *New York Times*, February 21, 1968.

75 How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, State Archives of Florida.

unions to continue their resistance against this business minded ideology.

With the teacher's strike resolved, Kirk used the event as political capital to bolster his standing both with Florida voters, and nationally, as a proponent of both law and order and business conservatism. He was even considered as a candidate to join Nixon's ticket as his Vice-President. In a speech given on March 7, the day before the emergency meeting with the FEA, Kirk announced his victory and control over unions within the state, exclaiming that, "Florida has been the national testing ground for the battle over the control of our public schools. I am pleased to announce that this sovereign state has stood its ground and has shown the nation that this is a government of laws, not of men and no organization or association will be allowed to break the law and be successful."⁷⁶ Throughout the speech, Kirk placed the blame for the strike firmly on the union, quipping that "public employees should communicate directly with the local agencies that employ them instead of finding themselves manipulated by the distant state and national associations. In this case the real objective of these organizations was not so much quality education as it was the creation of union closed-shop control of Florida schools."⁷⁷

While Kirk claimed victory over the teachers, it is difficult to come to the same conclusion nearly fifty years later. Even though the teachers failed to force Kirk to completely overhaul educational funding, they were successful in staving off calls for merit pay and anti-tenure policies. Their battle against Kirk began as a call for improvements in Florida's education system, but it also became a battle over exactly how education would operate in a rapidly changing state. Most importantly, the teachers also forced the legislature to address the issue of public sector bargaining rights. The writing of a new Florida Constitution in 1968 provided a provision for public employees to have the right to collectively bargain, but not to strike. Angry over the confrontation and fearing other public sector strikes, legislators demanded this non-strike caveat be placed in the constitution alongside the right to collectively bargain.⁷⁸ While the gain of collective bargaining rights was a clear victory for the teachers, the no strike provision caused

76 Speech Given by Claude Kirk, March 7 1968, Claude Kirk Papers, Series 960, Carton 1, File Folder 10, State Archives of Florida.

77 Ibid.

78 "Florida's Plan for Collective Bargaining for Public Employees," *Spartanburg Herald*, December 15, 1975.

much consternation among FEA officials. However, while the no-strike provision was certainly a means to strip unions of bargaining power, it also legitimized the teachers' professional importance to the state. By stating that teachers could not go on strike, the provision implied that teachers held a specific skill set that could not be easily replaced. The provision illustrates the co-mingling of liberal and conservative ideology in the formation of modern Florida by providing collective bargaining rights to all public employees, stripping them of the right to strike, and creating anti-union right to work laws for both private and public sector workers within the state. The provision reads as follows, "The right of persons to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of membership or non-membership in any labor union or labor organization. The right of employees, by and through a labor organization, to bargain collectively shall not be denied or abridged. Public employees shall not have the right to strike."⁷⁹

This provision became a particularly contentious issue between public employees and state government. While the placement of an anti-strike provision in the state constitution represented a significant victory for Kirk and business conservatives, it should not diminish the importance of also including within that same document the right of public employees to collectively bargain. By fighting for these rights, teachers across the state forced Florida into the more modern role of union recognition for public sector employees, no small feat in a decidedly anti-union state. This rather ambivalent stance towards public sector employees further illustrates the role that both conservative ideology and liberal activism played in the formation of modern Florida. The battle over collective bargaining rights continued well after the ratification of the new state constitution. A 1969 Florida Supreme Court ruling in the *Dade County Classroom Teachers' ASS'N, INC v. Ryan* case affirmed the collective bargaining rights for public employees provided in the state constitution. The ruling overturned a 1968 Circuit Court ruling that viewed public sector collective bargaining rights as unconstitutional stating, "that collective bargaining in the labor relations sense as used as related in the foregoing finding in dealing with employees of public bodies such as said teachers employed in the Dade County school system is an activity which is not supported by the public policy of the State of Florida."⁸⁰ In writing the majority

⁷⁹ Constitution of the State of Florida as revised in 1968, Article I, section 6.

⁸⁰ *Dade County Classroom Teachers' ASS'N, INC v. Ryan*.

opinion that overturned this ruling Chief Justice Richard Ervin exclaimed that, "The circuit judge paints with too broad a brush in eliminating all collective bargaining by public employees through their bargaining organization...We hold that with the exception of the right to strike, public employees have the same rights of collective bargaining as are granted private employees granted in section 6."⁸¹ However, the battle over the implementation of collective bargaining persisted until 1973 and provided the impetus for the Florida Supreme Court to establish the Supreme Court Public Employee Rights Commission (SCPERC), an outside commission which sought to enforce the state constitutionally protected right to collectively bargain for all public sector employees.⁸² The creation of SPERC forced the state to finally recognize collective bargaining rights for public employees leading to the formation of the Public Employee Relations Committee (PERC). The purpose of PERC was to set guidelines for the collective bargaining process and legitimize public sector unions within the state. After years of back and forth fighting over collective bargaining for public sector employees, Florida finally had a plan in place that ensured the protection of this right.⁸³ The plan was widely hailed throughout the country.⁸⁴ William Usery, director of the federal mediation service and President Gerald Ford's labor advisor, referred to the plan as "a milestone in the still emerging area of collective bargaining for public employees" and stated that it "should serve as a model for other states enduring strikes by unhappy citizens."⁸⁵

The 1968 Florida teacher strike provides new insight into the political transformation of Florida. The key to understanding this change lies in the business style policies of Republican politicians

81 Ibid.

82 SCPERC's creation found legal precedent in the federal court system's use of similar outside commissions in regards to reapportionment and school desegregation cases. Berkeley Miller and William Canak, "From Pork Choppers to Lamb Choppers," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 44 (January, 1991), 362.

83 "Public Employees Union Favored," *Lakeland Ledger*, September 23, 1973.

84 Berkeley Miller and William Canak provide a broad overview of the battle for collective bargaining rights for public sector employees in Florida, and further illustrate how labor activism shaped liberal labor policies in an anti-union state. See "From Pork Choppers to Lamb Choppers," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 44 (January, 1991).

85 "Florida's Plan for Collective Bargaining for Public Employees," *The Spartanburg Herald*, December 15, 1975. Usery agreed with the collectively bargaining aspect of the plan, but feared the no strike provision would lead to more militancy from the unions.

such as Claude Kirk. Kirk served as the forbearer for this political mindset and his policies and business styled governance built the foundation for future Republican governors within the state, including Bob Martinez who in 1986 became the first Republican Governor of Florida since Claude Kirk. Moreover, Martinez's political evolution from union leader to Republican governor exemplifies the political transformation of the state. Martinez's career began as a teacher in 1957 in Hillsborough County where he became increasingly involved in the local teachers' union. By 1968 Martinez was named the director of the Hillsborough County Classroom Teachers' Association (HCCTA), leading the strike in the Tampa area. The strike became one of Governor Martinez's first forays into politics. A Democrat during the strike, his actions as the leader of the HCCTA represented the broader political activism of liberal teachers across the state. Martinez's political engagement during the strike did not end there, and by 1980 he was elected as Tampa's first Hispanic Mayor. While maintaining his Democratic Party affiliation during his early years as Mayor, Martinez embraced the 'government as a business' ethos of Republican leaders such as Kirk. In discussing his views on city management Martinez exclaimed, "being mayor is retail government. You're running a business."⁸⁶ Martinez's ideas on government as a business provided prominent Republicans with the opportunity to convince him to switch parties in the early 1980s. In the spring of 1983 Martinez made a trip to the White House at the behest of President Ronald Reagan. The purpose of the invitation was to convince Martinez to switch parties in the hopes of gaining an important Republican ally in an essential battleground state. Reagan introduced himself to Martinez stating, "Bobby, you're a lot like me. We were union leaders. I was once a Democrat. You were head of a teachers' union...We would sure love for you to be a Republican."⁸⁷ The meeting with Reagan sold Martinez and in July of 1983 his transformation from Democrat and union leader to Republican politician was complete. His political evolution came full circle during the 1986 governor election which elected Martinez as the first Republican governor since Claude Kirk. In describing his switch in parties, Martinez said, "I have always thought like a Republican. I really

86 Oral History Interview with Governor Bob Martinez. Conducted by Gary Mormino, 2008-2009.

87 Ibid.

didn't have to change any basic beliefs. I am businessman and see things like a businessman."⁸⁸

Martinez and Claude Kirk's belief in government as a business further illustrates how this ethos directly influenced Florida's political transformation, but their rhetoric and policies were only one side of the coin. As the state moved more towards a Republican-led and business influenced form of conservatism, education became a major area of focus for Republican officials. The fight against Kirk and his policies, exemplified by the teacher strike, illustrates that while new conservatism gained a major foothold in the state, an undercurrent of liberal activism remained that prevented new conservatism from reaching its total potential. By striking, Florida teachers left a legacy of teacher activism that continues to permeate the state. Regardless of the immediate outcome, Florida's teachers, both black and white, stood resolute in their mission to gain educational and professional improvements, and in doing so, initiated the country's first statewide teacher strike. Through their actions, they not only sought to improve schools, but also to address the racial inequities inherent in Florida's educational system and challenge society's notions of education as a "second rate" feminine profession. Their struggle not only centered on bread and butter unionism, but also social activism, a trend that permeated other post-World War II labor struggles. Moreover, by forcing the legislature to recognize union rights for public sector employees, teachers across the state played an influential role in the building of a modern Florida. In reflecting back on her participation Emma Evers summed the strike up perfectly, exclaiming that, "what I did was from my heart, I enjoyed it. Changes were made, and history was made. And I am a part of that history."⁸⁹

88 "New Party, New Fight for Bob Martinez," *Ocala Star Banner*, September 1, 1986.

89 Oral History Interview of Emma Evers, conducted by Krika Gubrium, *African-American Teachers Look Back*, 135.