

The Student Strike

The ruling members of the board of education are not wanted in their places anymore. The people of San Diego are not only tired of their petty politics, but disgusted with the result. The thing for those members is to slide quietly out, resign, quit. It will save a lot of trouble and expense for them to do it as quickly as possible.

--San Diego Union, June 7, 1918.

Politics and education mixed poorly in the spring of 1918 when the San Diego Board of Education abruptly fired nineteen teachers at San Diego High School. The action would lead to a mass walkout of students from the school and local newspaper headlines that rivaled news of the war in Europe.

San Diego's school superintendent that year was Duncan MacKinnon. The 33-year-old, Canadian-born educator was respected and popular among students and faculty. He enjoyed considerable autonomy in the administration of the city school system. But many in the community were uncomfortable with the unmarried professor who smoked cigars in public and enjoyed dining in restaurants that served wine—this on the eve of national Prohibition.



Duncan MacKinnon

MacKinnon's tenure was threatened in April 1917 with election of three new people to the five-member Board of Education. The "solid three"--L. G. Jones, John Urquhart, and Laura Johns—decided to curtail the superintendent's responsibilities and adopt for themselves unprecedented personal involvement in San Diego education.

The new board began by sending a questionnaire to all teachers, requesting their opinions on their jobs, stating the recent "vote of the people indicated that certain changes in the schools" had become necessary. To the teachers, who served without tenure under one-year contracts, the questionnaire appeared threatening—almost like a loyalty oath to the board.

Ninety-one out of 94 teachers met to discuss the unusual questionnaire. They agreed to not reply individually but send a collective response to the board, which included a request that the practice of tenure be considered for qualified teachers.

The summer passed quietly, but in the fall the board announced that Duncan MacKinnon's term as superintendent would expire at the end of the school year. The action was immediately denounced in the community. When the board announced the imminent hiring of a new superintendent, MacKinnon quietly resigned.

Next, the board decided to limit the authority of San Diego High's principal, Arthur Gould. The principal was asked to turn in his keys to the school custodian. Board members began sitting in classrooms with pencil and notebook to monitor teachers, and the editor of the student newspaper began fielding unwanted editorial advice from the board.

As the school year neared a close the board took a critical step, posting on June 3 “a notice to be sent to teachers whose services would not be required for the ensuing school year 1918-19.” The list named nineteen teachers including Principal Gould. Reasons for the dismissals were not offered, though the teachers were all known “friends of MacKinnon” and each had signed the collective response to the board questionnaire the previous year.

The next day a boisterous assembly of 1800 students met in the City Stadium (Balboa) to consider action. They approved a resolution vowing to leave school and not return until the board explained the firing of the teachers.

The students decided to present their resolution to the board in person. After a quick telephone call to the Chief of Police requesting permission to stage a parade, the students gathered in front of the school and then, led by their senior class president, nearly the entire student body marched nine blocks through downtown to the school board offices at the Southern Title Building on Third Street.

After handing their resolution to an embarrassed secretary, the students marched back to school, picked up their books, and went home. On the following Monday twelve students showed up for class. All the teachers faithfully reported for work but for the remainder of the school year, classrooms were empty.



For the next three weeks the student strike was headline news for San Diego’s newspapers. Abraham Sauer, the sharp-tongued editor of the weekly *Herald* joined the *Union* in calling for the recall of the school board’s “blundering incompetents,” writing in an editorial, “their asinine work is becoming a public menace.”

Civic and business leaders joined the condemnation. A Citizens’ Recall Committee of prominent San Diegans met with an attorney to plan recall proceedings against the board members.

The drama ratcheted higher on Sunday, June 16, when the *Union* carried a ¼ page paid notice from the school board. Addressed to “the Parents and Students,” the notice stated the board’s intention to “not in any manner recognize the insurrection and the alleged resolution of the so-called student body of the High School,” and emphasized that “each and every student” would be expected in the classroom on Monday morning. But the strike continued and a school holiday was declared for the remainder of the term.

On June 22 the *Union* published a letter from the board meant to clarify their current position. The letter began by saying that there would be no dialogue with the teachers regarding their dismissals. It ended with a stunner:

At the time the order was made dropping certain teachers we were informed that several among those dropped were under surveillance by the authorities for Pro-Germanism and these teachers were dropped for that reason.

The letter was quickly reviewed by the Recall Committee who then contacted the Justice Department and the Army. Government officials assured the committee that no teacher had been investigated for disloyalty.

San Diego High School began its fall semester on August 31 with a new principal and new school superintendent. A few of the teachers had been reinstated but most had found jobs elsewhere. A recall election was finally held on December 3. By a vote of more than 3 to 1, the “solid three” were turned out of office.

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