



Mary Ellen Riordan

(1920 - 2010)

Inducted: 2001 Locale: Detroit Era: Contemporary

Area(s) of Achievement: Education

Mary Ellen Riordan, President Emerita of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, Local 231, AFL-CIO, blazed the trail for collective bargaining rights for teachers. This action resulted in the Michigan Legislature adopting the 1965 Public Employee Relations Act that gave teachers and all public employees the legal right to collective bargaining. Detroit was second only to New York in obtaining collective bargaining rights for teachers, a trend that would sweep the United States five years later. At her retirement, Ms. Riordan was president of one of the largest local unions in the nation, totaling more than 12,000 members. Before Riordan, no other union headed by a woman had exceeded several thousand members.

Ms. Riordan and her bargaining team negotiated contracts that became the models for teachers' unions everywhere. Through her leadership, starting teachers' salaries in Detroit were finally raised above the salary level of factory production-line workers. This pay raise helped to relieve the critical educator shortage of the mid-and late-1960s. In the next decade, collective bargaining raised Michigan teachers' salaries to the second highest in the nation. As a labor activist, she was also a well-recognized and highly respected spokeswoman for the rights of teachers and an effective legislative advocate for the needs of the rapidly growing numbers of Michigan's poor and minority students.

Over the course of her career, Ms. Riordan has achieved many honors. For example, she was the only classroom teacher in Michigan to participate in President Kennedy's 1963 meeting on Civil Rights in Education. She served as delegate to President Johnson's 1965 White House Conference on Education, as well as the 1980 White House Conference on Families. She also met with President Carter on Urban School Problems as a member of the American Federation of Teachers Executive Committee. In addition, Ms. Riordan was the chairperson of the Education Taskforce of the 1972 Democratic National Platform Committee and was elected Commissioner of the Detroit Public Schools Employee Retirement System for nineteen years until it merged with the State of Michigan system. She was also named by the U.S. State Department to participate in its Agency for International Development's Union-to-Union Program in Brazil in 1969.