

# Reading 5b

## Tricky tension for teachers

Archie Vergotine

*Teachers have the right to work for the protection of their own interests, but they should not allow this to impact negatively on their primary obligation to their pupils.*

### Reading

The interests of the child are not interchangeable with issues such as demands for fair salaries and working hours for teachers, or party-political considerations [...]

We cannot deny the fact that teachers, as citizens and workers, possess rights, including the right to fight for the protection of their interests. However, teachers are not ordinary workers. Protest action by teachers does not adversely affect production or the employer; rather it has a damaging effect on their pupils.

Children are central to the activity of teaching and the teacher–child relationship can be likened to that between a doctor and a patient, or a lawyer and a client. In the professional context, professionals must surrender their personal interests to those of their clients.

The tension that teachers experience as a result of their role as professional workers is therefore obvious. Where teachers place their own personal interests above the interests of the child, thus diminishing the child's chances in life, they cannot be acting professionally and cannot be exonerated by society. Under such circumstances, teachers should institute compensatory action to diminish the harm they have caused the child. Parents and the community as a whole have an obligation to ensure that this happens.

While there is this undeniable tension between teachers' professional obligations and their right to work to advance their own rights, there need not be a conflict between our professional conscience as teachers and a commitment to striving for a better society. Civil society needs teachers, and the concern of good teachers extends to the homes and

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life circumstances of their pupils – this is political consciousness. However, teachers who enter the political arena must do so soberly and circumspectly, always bearing in mind their professional obligations [...]

On us, as teachers, rests the heavy responsibility of dealing constructively with the tension that results from our dual role as professionals and workers, so as to ensure that our children's futures are not jeopardized by our actions. Children must be our primary concern and part of that concern is projecting to them an example of free and empowered career-people who do not allow their rights to be infringed or their self-worth to be diminished.

By earning the title of 'professional' and regaining the respect of our people, teachers can help to ensure a good future for our country as it struggles through the painful birth of democracy.