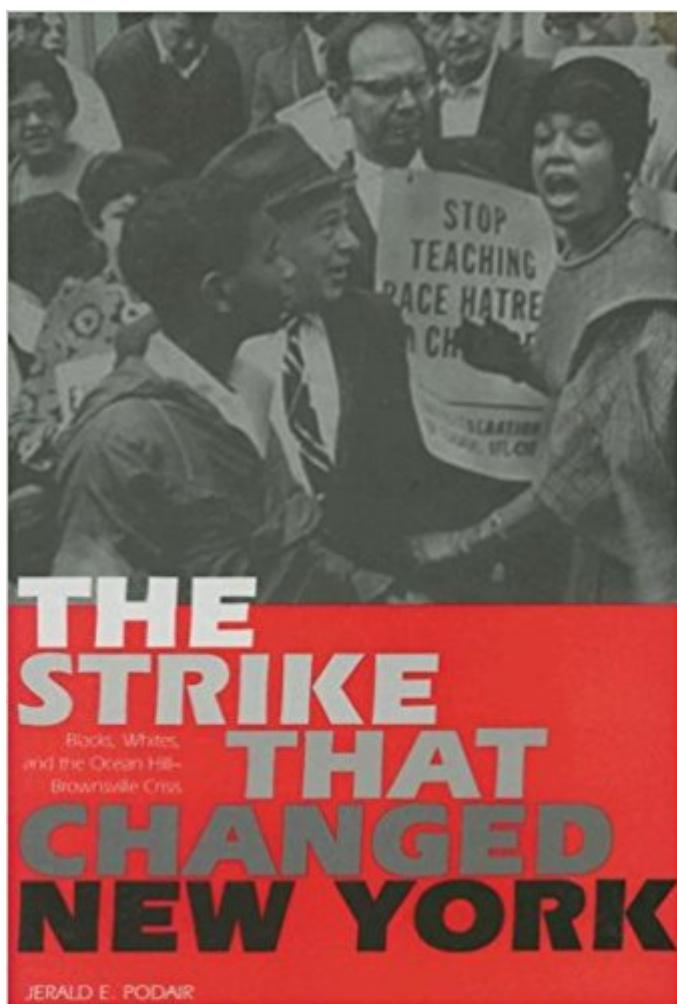


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# The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, And The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis



## **Synopsis**

On May 9, 1968, junior high school teacher Fred Nauman received a letter that would change the history of New York City. It informed him that he had been fired from his job. Eighteen other educators in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area of Brooklyn received similar letters that day. The dismissed educators were white. The local school board that fired them was predominantly African-American. The crisis that the firings provoked became the most racially divisive moment in the city in more than a century, sparking three teachers' strikes and increasingly angry confrontations between black and white New Yorkers at bargaining tables, on picket lines, and in the streets. This superb book revisits the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis—a watershed in modern New York City race relations. Jerald E. Podair connects the conflict with the sociocultural history of the city and explores its legacy. The book is a powerful, sobering tale of racial misunderstanding and fear, a New York story with national implications.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this fascinating volume, Podair . . . brilliantly chronicles the events and far-reaching impact of the infamous, racially charged 1968 teacher strike that shut down the New York City public schools. . . . Podair's vivid account of this debilitating breakdown of trust reads more like tragedy than history. It offers great insight into the racial separatism that school systems nationwide struggle with to this day. David Ruenzel, Teacher Magazine Jerald Podair's new book does an admirable job of telling all sides of the story itself in a clear and compelling fashion Richard D. Kahlenberg, Washington

Monthly Podair does a fine job of untangling the various threads of this complex story, which illuminates the nuances of racial politics in the post civil rights era within the context of the pluralistic concerns and conflicts arising in a key northern city. John A. Kirk, American Studies "Podair deftly weaves a complicated story about class and race, labor and civil rights. . . . There are no faultless heroes or thoroughly evil villains here only human beings struggling to make sense of their world and achieve justice as they understand it. This quality distinguishes Podair's book from many other civil rights and labor histories. Highly recommended." Choice "[This] well-written and admirably balanced book will most likely stand as the definitive account of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis for some time. . . . Future scholars of New York history, as well as those who want to understand 1960s American, will find Podair's engrossing and judicious book indispensable. Vincent J. Cannato, New York History An engrossing, astute, and scrupulously fair book on the bitter, school-based racial conflicts that shocked and transformed New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. Jerald Podair has finally given those conflicts and the city in which they occurred the history that they deserve. Gary Gerstle, author of American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century Podair's telling of the racially polarizing Ocean Hill Brownsville crisis is outstanding: clearly written, deeply researched, and admirably balanced. James T. Patterson, Brown University The eruption over the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district in 1968 was a gut-wrenching affair that forever changed the politics of race and liberalism in New York City. Only with the passage of three decades, and with the arrival of a greatly talented and fair-minded historian, is it possible to begin making sense of what happened. No one will agree with everything in Jerald Podair's excellent book. But everyone interested in comprehending the furies of the American 1960s will need to read and reflect on it. Sean Wilentz, Dayton-Stockton Professor of History and Director of the Program in American Studies, Princeton University This well-conceived and deeply researched book raises serious, difficult questions. Jerald Podair advances our knowledge of the emergence of two New Yorks one white, one black and opens the door to potentially illuminating and undoubtedly painful, discussions. Arnold R. Hirsch, University of New Orleans"

"Podair's telling of the racially polarizing Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis is outstanding: clearly written, deeply researched, and admirably balanced." -- James T. Patterson, Brown University --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As a former teacher, now retired and a parent of small children who could not attend school during that time, I was on the picket line with the UFT(United Federation of Teachers) during the strike.

Having disclosed that I can say that the author did an outstanding job of researching and reporting what led up to the strike and how things changed. The teachers were wholeheartedly against the strike in Ocean Hill Brownsville and against Community Control. Teachers and principals were thrown out if they weren't black. There was a lot of prejudice. The author carefully explained who the players were; the mayor , community control advocates, school superintendents and supervisors. I recognized and remembered all those names. Those teachers and parents and supervisors who lived during that time will appreciate this book. Those who are too young to have experienced it or didn't live in New York City can learn a lot of history from it.Lorraine Fox

Excellent - well researched .

A good book that focuses on an important period in New York's history.

what a great read! you really feel like you are in it. among it. with it. strong research. tells all sides and you get a feel for the events that led up to the ocean hill-brownsville strike. I still go back to it for a quick history of NYC schools ref.

Excellent research went into this book. Podair was unbiased and fair in treatment of subjects, including Rev. Oliver Al Vann and Jitu Weusi saw clearly what was going on in the schools, and Podair put it in perspective. Perhaps the best book on the Ocean Hill- Brownsville struggle for community control of the schools in the sixties.

The review below shows the passion this episode created and can still evoke. To argue that Nauman wasn't "fired" is rather disingenuous. The letter he received stated "The Governing Board of the Ocean Hill Brownsville Demonstration School District has voted to end your employment in the schools of this district." Sounds like a pink slip to me. More importantly, as the reviewer below notes, is that "community control" was seen as the last-ditch solution to the persistent problems faced by African-Americans in the school system. They were (and are) getting third-rate educations. The argument was (and is): why? "Cultural" reasons? Racism? If the African-American community ran its own schools, the argument went, black children would learn better. For various reasons, many of them political, it didn't turn out that way. The most important result was to divide the city by race--especially the Jews from the blacks. One of the key points made by this book is that the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike had the effect of making New York Jews "white" in the sense that they joined

with their Italian and Irish outer-borough neighbors against the blacks. This seismic shift has largely remained intact. You can easily get by with reading only chapters 1-3, 5-6. Read this book if you have an interest in New York City history, politics of the "white backlash", and/or the rise of conservatism in the 1970s.

Fred Nauman and the other teachers were NOT fired by the Oceanhill-Brownsville local school district. They were dismissed from that district and reassigned to the Board of Education's main office. From there, they would have been reassigned to another local district, with no loss of pay or seniority. However, Albert Shanker and the American Federation of Teachers used this as an excuse to strike the entire district. Their goal was to cripple NYC's attempt to give local communities some control over their schools. The strike was totally devoid of any progressive content that unionists and their supporters could be proud of. It was a racist strike, aimed at African-Americans in Oceanhill, Puerto Ricans in East Harlem, and a multicultured district on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Shanker, it might be remembered, was cited in Woody Allen's movie, "Sleeper." The hero awoke to a world that had, at one time, been laid waste by nuclear weapons. When asked how the war started he was told, "It all started when a man named Albert Shanker got The Bomb." I was a student teacher in Oceanhill in 1969, the spring following the strike. I was also a member of the AFT for the five years I taught public school. This was a period just after the civil rights struggle had passed its peak. Community control was an effort to counteract the historical racial inequities that plague public school in this country. Readers who want a feel for a successful desegregation fight should try Davidson Douglas, *Reading, Writing and Race: The Desegregation of the Charlotte (NC) Schools*. I taught kindergarten there for two years during the height of the bussing controversy. See also *The Battle of Boston*, by Jon Hillson.

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