Social Movement Unionism: Teachers Can Lead the Way

By Lois Weiner

Teachers, students, and parents across the United States are experiencing wrenching changes in our system of education—from the way schools are run, to who gets to teach, and what may be taught. As students are robbed of meaningful learning and time for play or creativity—in short, anything that’s not tested—hostile politicians blame teachers for an astounding list of social and economic ills ranging from unemployment to moral decline.

In all but the wealthiest school systems in the United States, academic accomplishment has been reduced to scores on standardized tests developed and evaluated by for-profit companies. Parents, teachers, and students—education’s most important stakeholders—have little say in what is taught, while corporate chiefs, politicians in their thrall, and foundations that receive funding from billionaires who profit from pro-business education policies determine the substance of education.1 While almost every country in the world has experienced this chilling form of social engineering, in the U.S. it is sold to the public as essential to raising educational standards—making individuals and the nation economically competitive.

The architects of these policies—imposed first in developing countries—openly state that the changes will make education better fit the new global economy by producing workers who are (minimally) educated for jobs that require no more than a 7th or 8th grade education; while a small fraction of the population receive a high quality education to become the elite who oversee finance, industry, and technology. Since most workers do not need to be highly educated, it follows that teachers with considerable formal education and experience are neither needed nor desired because they demand higher wages, which is considered a waste of government money.2 Most teachers need only be “good enough”—as one U.S. government official phrased it—to follow scripted materials that prepare students for standardized tests.

Resisting “Free Market” Education

Education happens to be the last sector of the economy still mainly “owned” by the public and also one of the last that still has powerful unions. So, it’s not surprising that for-profit companies wishing to access the education “market” want the teachers’ unions eliminated, or at least housebroken to accept their “educational” reforms.

Privatization, school closings, and standardized testing are all advanced with the rhetoric of improving educational opportunity for those who have been excluded from prosperity. Persistent inequality within society and in education is at the heart of this project’s appeal. What should count most in persuading poor and working people to reject “free market” reforms is the fact that these so-called “put children first” policies actually increase inequality for the vast majority of children who most need improved schools.

We cannot rely on schools to replace the massive eco-

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Economic and social investment needed to diminish poverty and unemployment.\(^3\) At the same time, we need to improve what goes on in the schools that serve poor and minority youth by providing the support that can make a difference: smaller class sizes; high-quality professional development; a stable teaching force; and a school culture that respects what the children bring rather than blaming them or their families for what they lack.\(^4\)

**The Stakes in Reforming Teachers Unions**

The project in education reform—based on ideas identified as “neoliberalism”—has generated opposition wherever teachers and parents have the political freedom to resist. The aim of the architects of this project is to eliminate the space for critique and social justice teaching within the schools, and the voices of parents and community who want their children to have access to the kind of education being reserved for the few. The powerful elites who share information and policies across international borders understand—better than most teachers, unfortunately—that despite their glaring problems, teachers’ unions are the main impediment to the neoliberal agenda in education.

Even when unions don’t live up to their ideals, unionism’s principles of collective action and solidarity contradict neoliberalism’s key premises—individual initiative and competition. Neoliberalism pushes a “survival of the fittest” mentality, while labor unions presume that people have to work together to protect their common interests. Moreover, unions have institutional roots and have legal rights. They are a stable force with a regular source of income in the form of membership dues and can exercise institutional power. These characteristics give teachers’ unions an organizational capacity seldom acquired by advocacy groups or parents, whose involvement generally ends with their children’s graduation.

It is an unfortunate paradox that the very factors that make teachers’ unions stable and potentially powerful also induce hierarchy and conservatism.\(^5\) Neither unions as organizations nor union members as individuals are immune from societal prejudices that contradict the union’s premise of equality in the workplace. And despite the popular media image of teachers’ unions as “all powerful”, they are quite weak—with a disoriented and confused union leadership—where it most counts, viz. in the schools. It’s time for teachers and their unions to resist. The aim of the architects of this project is to eliminate the space for critique and social justice teaching within the schools, and the voices of parents and community who want their children to have access to the kind of education being reserved for the few. The powerful elites who share information and policies across international borders understand—better than most teachers, unfortunately—that despite their glaring problems, teachers’ unions are the main impediment to the neoliberal agenda in education.

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**The Chicago Teachers’ Strike and the Struggle for a New Unionism**

*By Bill Fletcher Jr.*

One of the most striking features of the Chicago Teachers’ strike was the level of community support for the teachers. Contrary to public expectations, the strike turned into a social mobilization around education rather than a battle for the special interests of teachers. This feature did not come out of nowhere, but actually reflected an on-going effort to shift the direction of labor unionism in America, and in this case, labor unionism among teachers.

As successful as teacher organizing has been over the last 50 years, there has been an increasing gap between teachers and communities. This achieved catastrophic proportions in the disastrous 1968 New York City Teachers’ Strike, which pitted African American and Puerto Rican community-based organizations against the largely white United Federation of Teachers (affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers) over the issue of community control of schools. While the teachers’ unions became increasingly successful in winning a better living standard for their members, they frequently became a source of resentment for many parents and community-based organizations which no longer saw the unions as being at the vanguard of the struggle for genuine education reform.

The battle in Chicago was representative of an effort not only to democratize the Chicago Teachers Union, but also to place it on the frontlines of the fight for an education system focusing on the needs of the children and their teachers, rather than the needs of corporations. Corporate America—in both its liberal and conservative clothing—has been actively seeking to alter public education so that it utilizes inappropriate private sector methodology to teach our children. That, combined with an effort to link the school systems with the needs of the so-called free market, has created a school culture where critical thinking is not promoted, but test-taking is.

It is in this context—after years of struggles within the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—that the elements of a more social justice-oriented unionism have begun to emerge. New, progressive leaders have taken the helm of several teachers’ unions, leaders who recognize that teachers cannot fight their battles alone. Not only do teachers need allies, but the brand of unionism practiced by teachers must share a deeper connection to the larger struggle for progressive reform.

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acknowledge that while they did not create educational inequality, they have been silent partners in maintaining it from the very start of mass public education. They must now focus on countering the well-orchestrated and extravagantly financed anti-teacher, anti-union neoliberal propaganda through their actions. After all, many of the policies of the 1960s and ‘70s that helped reduce inequality in school outcomes could not have been enacted without support from teachers, teachers’ unions, and organized labor. And the recent Chicago teachers’ strike showed that unions can provide the kind of muscle that parents and advocacy groups lack but very much need.

The stakes are very high. If we fail to make the unions what they should be, most students in the U.S. will end up trained for a life of menial labor, poverty, or imprisonment.

**It’s Time for Social Movement Teachers’ Unions**

It will take broad political and social resistance to reverse the tidal wave currently destroying public education. Teachers have to find an alternative to the service or business model of unionism which dominates most U.S. unions. Under the current model of unionism, members are mostly passive except when it comes to voting on a contract and electing officers every few years. The union’s goals are also restricted to members’ immediate economic concerns.

In a social movement union on the other hand, the union derives strength from its ability to mobilize members to struggle on their own behalf. Power comes from the bottom up, as it does in social movements, and the union’s organizational form is just as important as its purpose. Within a social movement union, the members’ self-interest would be broadly defined—going beyond immediate economic and contractual concerns. Such a union struggles for its members’ stake in creating a democratic and equitable society, and allies itself with other movements also working for social justice, peace, and equality.

History has shown that when teachers’ unions limit their responsibility to their members’ immediate economic concerns, they end up taking positions that come back to haunt them. The union often uses its resources to win a skirmish today at the expense of building consensus with potential allies whom it may need at a later date to win more important battles. A prime example of this short-sighted approach is the matter of health care, where teachers’ unions—along with the rest of the labor movement—used their political power to obtain health care coverage for their members but did not fight for universal health care, such as exists in Canada and Western Europe. Now politicians have easily convinced taxpayers that teachers and other public employees should not have the benefits that most voters lack. As a result, teachers have been isolated in trying to save their benefits, which have been drastically reduced.

**Social Movement Unionism is Practical**

A social movement teachers’ union builds consensus with its potential allies on educational issues by examining how all stakeholders view the problem before taking action. Consider the difference in how a social movement union and a business union respond to school closings, ‘co-location’ of charter schools in existing school buildings, or the replacing of school districts with networks of schools run by nonprofit groups beholden to the agenda of billionaires. The damage in privatizing schools, creating charter schools, and charter school networks is well-documented⁶, but teachers’ unions have been incapable of stopping this trend because the current business model union assumes that its power consists of union officers’ expertise to win concessions.

In contrast, a social movement teachers’ union reaches out to members, parents, students, and other school employees, as well as unions representing other workers in the schools, and takes leadership in organizing a coalition that looks to mobilize more support within the immediate neighborhood and the larger community.⁷ What changes are needed to make the school more successful?
How can the union help win these from the School Board? The campaign to avoid school closings begins with mobilizing parents and school employees and is based on the principle that no decision of such importance should be made without consulting those affected. Campaigns in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Rochester have included demonstrations, packing Board meetings for presentations, circulating petitions to the Board and local politicians, and civil disobedience, such as occupying the school building. The protests are organized and publicized through social media to counter the “news” in the corporate media, which seldom explains the harm done in school closings.

Social movement unionism requires stretching the union’s definition of “what counts” for its members. Ideally, it would include reaching out to parents, community, and labor, and casting issues in terms of social justice, not just teachers’ immediate self-interest. Goals would be configured in light of how the school and school system currently operate, without shirking from naming systemic racism as one of the problems. The union functions as a connective tissue, linking struggles for a just and equitable society with teachers’ concerns for schools and education.

The reform leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union developed a program that laid out what schools should look like, based on what the children deserve but don’t receive because of educational apartheid. It used contract negotiations creatively to fight for improvements that affected children directly, such as giving teachers the right to distribute books on the first day of school and providing air conditioning on hot days. The union countered the Mayor’s insistence on a longer day for students—for more test preparation—and no extra pay for teachers, with a demand for a better day and the reinstatement of art, music, and physical education teachers.

Thinking Globally As We Fight Locally

The union is almost never strong enough to determine the contours of struggles—especially now when the unions and public education are under such sustained, brutal attack—so union activists and supporters in the community must often confront tough choices about how long and hard to fight, and for what. While unions must be pressed to win parent and community trust and continue to earn it, the advocacy groups must in turn keep in mind that though unions make strong allies, they are subject to limitations (legal and internal) that advocacy groups are not. This is a tension that we have to live with.

The attacks on public education and teachers’ unions are actually part of a global project, so our resistance must be international. It’s not enough for teachers in one community to organize, or for a union to have a strong national presence. Education policies are borrowed and adapted through collaborations of the wealthy and powerful at economic organizations and international summits.

Unions in the U.S. have an important stake in the success of teachers’ resistance elsewhere in the world because it helps weaken a common opponent. When Joel Klein, former head of the New York City school system, meets with Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of Britain, we can be sure that they don’t just exchange recommendations for good restaurants in their hometowns. We cannot duck this global aspect, any more than we can effectively address climate change by working within one community. Neoliberalism’s devastation of public education is a global epidemic that requires a global cure. International solidarity is not charity; it’s in our self-interest, as is democratizing and revitalizing teachers unions.

Endnotes
1. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) produces fact sheets that summarize relevant research on the effects of standardized testing. See <fairtest.org/fact%20sheets>.
3. David Berliner in “Effects of Inequality and Poverty vs. Teachers and Schooling on America’s Youth,” explains why powerful forces outside of schools make economic and social improvements essential for academic achievement across the board. Available at tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=16889.
4. Much has been written about helping teachers to see beyond what students lack, to identify and draw on the “funds of knowledge” in students’ families and communities. See <escholarship.org/uc/item/5tm6x7cm> for research supported by the federal government in the 1990s but jettisoned in favor of standardized testing.
5. See <newpol.org/node/579>.
7. See <ctunet.com/blog/text/SCSD_Report-02-16-2012-1.pdf> for a New York City panel discussion on the nuts and bolts of this type of organizing.

Lois Weiner is a life-long teacher, union activist, educator, and author. She has been an officer of three union locals and is internationally known for her work on urban teacher education. This article is adapted from her new book, The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice, published by Haymarket Press (haymarketbooks.org).
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