

A man with a beard, wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt, stands in a classroom. He is pointing his right arm towards a large map of the United States that is covered with numerous small, white sticky notes. The map is mounted on a wall. To the left of the man, there is a desk with a laptop, a printer, and some papers. On the wall behind the desk, there is a portrait of a man and some other posters. The entire image has a strong red tint.

SECTION SIX
TAKING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO
THE CLASSROOM



Teacher Unions and Anti-Racist, Social Justice Teaching

BY BOB PETERSON

Two decades ago, when I interviewed historian Howard Zinn for the first edition of *Transforming Teacher Unions*, I asked him what role teacher unions should play in promoting the teaching of social movements and unions.

Zinn responded, “If teacher unions want to be strong and well-supported, it’s essential that they not only be teacher unionists but teachers of unionism.” As a historian and activist, Zinn promoted a radical vision of unionism from the Industrial Workers of the World to the Congress of Industrial Organizations. This vision of unionism crossed racial divides and fought to empower the entire working class. To be a teacher of unionism in Zinn’s vision means to be a teacher of anti-racism and social justice.

Right-wing claims notwithstanding, teacher unions in the United States have rarely heeded Zinn’s advice.

But that is starting to change.

In recent years, for example, progressive teacher unions have encouraged members to participate in the annual Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. Around the country local and state teacher unions have supported social justice conferences and curriculum fairs organized by social justice teacher groups. And on the national level both the NEA and AFT have expanded their outreach and encouragement of social justice teaching.

But what does it actually look like? How does it compare to curricular approaches of industrial and professional teacher unions of the past? Why and how should teacher unions promote such teaching?

What Is Anti-Racist, Social Justice Teaching?

When Rethinking Schools started in 1986, a key purpose of the founders was to promote anti-racist, social justice curriculum and teaching. We envisioned classrooms as places where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society

we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality.

Our early books—*Rethinking Columbus* and *Rethinking Our Classrooms*—outlined the integrated components that we believe comprise a social justice classroom: grounded in the lives of our students; critical; multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice; participatory, experiential; hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary; activist; academically rigorous; culturally and linguistically inclusive; and empowering. (See *Rethinking Schools* editors, p. 380.)

We were inspired by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who wrote that teachers should attempt to “live part of their dreams within their educational space.” We agreed with his criticism of teacher-centered “banking models” of education. And we welcomed his “problem-posing” pedagogy that connected to the lives of students and encouraged students to not only “read the world” but to change it as well.

A Mixed History of Curriculum Advocacy

Prior to the late 1800s most teachers were men. A major argument for hiring women as teachers was they were cheaper to employ—so teachers’ fight for better wages, hours, and working conditions from the early 1890s to the 1960s was integrally tied to the struggle for women’s equality.

We envisioned classrooms as places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality.

Occasionally some unions such as the Chicago Teachers’ Federation led by Margaret Haley (1861–1939) also fought against “factoryizing education,” making the teacher an automaton.” She and her members opposed vocational tracking of students in junior high schools and the use of racist “intelligence” tests. Such efforts were important struggles, but they did not include the kind of critical teaching described above. (See Haley, p. 67.)

The women-led Milwaukee Education Association did address pedagogical issues. In the 1920s it promoted progressive child-centered teaching such as the interdisciplinary project method inspired by the democratic perspectives of John Dewey and William Kilpatrick. An example was described by Meta Berger, a friend of the union and a socialist member of the school board. She observed a 5th-grade class where the students were

... getting the history, English, arithmetic, art, and all kindred subjects while studying Daniel Boone. The boys were measuring and making log cabins; the girls were measuring and making dresses for the early Americans. Discipline did not enter the classroom for each child was so absorbed and interested that there was the most perfect of all discipline—i.e., perfect freedom and interest.

While such teaching was a significant improvement over the teacher-centered, rote learning that dominated U.S. schools in the early 1900s, it was far cry from social justice education. In fact, often it was labor groups outside of the schools that pushed for better representation of unions and workers' issues within the school curriculum—concerns that were not raised or even supported by teacher unions. For example, in 1919 the Milwaukee Federated Trade Council found a school play that negatively portrayed unions, and they demanded that the school board conduct an investigation and forbid “this and all similar . . . plays to be . . . acted in any of our public schools.”

Undoubtedly one of the most active and explicitly social justice teacher unions in the United States was the New York City Teachers Union (TU). In 1935 a left-led rank-and-file caucus took over union leadership and for the next two-and-a-half decades promoted anti-racist, social justice teaching. They fought for the teaching of Black history and intercultural education and to rid the schools of racist textbooks.

In their textbook campaigns the TU built community alliances with the NAACP and other groups, drawing on the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. In his 1935 work, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*, Du Bois critiqued high school textbooks for their white supremacist account of Reconstruction and their racist portrayal of African Americans.

In 1948 the TU created a pamphlet, *The Children's Textbooks*, that argued that the New York City textbooks made children susceptible to “anti-Semitism, Jim Crow, and racism.” The union also opposed the school district's ban of Howard Fast's *Citizen Tom Paine* and the *Nation* magazine.

According to historian Clarence Taylor, writing in his book *Reds at the Blackboard*, the TU “used a number of methods to promote Black history, ranging from the creation and distribution of pamphlets for teachers to use in the classroom to sponsoring events featuring scholars of American History.”

In 1951 the TU promoted “Negro History Week,” which had been established in 1926 by Woodson. The TU's anti-discrimination committee produced a special supplement to their *New York Teacher News*. The committee, according to Taylor, “believed that Black history was being neglected in the classroom because teachers just did not have enough material.”

The TU met its demise during the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era. (See Perlstein, p. 42.)

The Turn Toward Professional Unionism

In the late 1980s and early 1990s some AFT and then NEA locals started addressing professional issues more directly. Teacher unions until that time had mostly concerned themselves with the material demands of teachers' work, especially wages and benefits. However, in the aftermath of the 1983 release of “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” a report commissioned by President Ronald Reagan's education secretary, the stage was set for subsequent corporate attacks on public education, ranging from private school vouchers to national standards enforced by a growing number of mass standardized tests.

In 1996 Adam Urbanski of the Rochester Teachers Association and Helen Bernstein of United Teachers Los Angeles started the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), which sought to “expand collective bargaining to include instructional and professional issues” such as career ladders, peer review, and professional development. In a few years, more than two dozen major AFT and NEA locals joined the network to share ideas and influence their national unions.

But despite TURN’s commitment to prioritizing the needs of their students and teacher professionalism, the idea of unions promoting anti-racist, social justice teaching and curriculum was rarely addressed at their national meetings or in their publications.

It’s worth noting that while it is essential that unions take up these professional issues, and “reclaim our classrooms” in the face of burdensome scripted curriculum, data collection, and out-of-control testing, unions should do so by aligning their interests with the communities they serve. The ideology of professionalism can distance teachers on the basis of race and class from the students and families they serve, at times ending up in serious union-community disagreements. The most poignant example was when in 1968 the New York City United Federation of Teachers sought professional control over the curriculum and teacher assignments in the midst of demands for community control.

Why Promote Anti-Racist, Social Justice Teaching?

There are four powerful reasons why union leadership should encourage their members to teach anti-racist social justice.

The first, as Zinn says, is to mentor the next generation to become active, critical participants in our society, promoting justice and democracy. I’ve always viewed encouraging this disposition—and the critical skills necessary to accomplish it—as a moral and civic responsibility of a teacher.

Second, such encouragement politically educates teachers and changes their attitudes. This is based on a premise that I recognized early in my teacher career—if I was going to teach something well, I had to really know the subject.

Unfortunately, many teachers don’t know the “people’s history” of our nation well—they didn’t learn it in high school or in teacher education courses—whether it’s the heroic resistance of Native peoples, labor union struggles, the fight for women’s suffrage and rights, the Civil Rights Movement, or the struggle against U.S. imperialism and war. By promoting such teaching, unions simultaneously help their members learn this history and draw connections to current problems that affect their students and themselves. Such knowledge links past labor struggles and social movements to current struggles for justice.

Let me give a tiny example. Several years ago, my local union asked me to do a workshop on the teaching ideas from a book I edited with Bill Bigelow, *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*. The union bought a copy of the book for each participant and more than two dozen people came. Several of them, including a couple of young African American teachers, stayed afterward and said that it was the first time they had been to the union

office, and that they were interested in coming to similar events. Another said the workshop helped him understand why the union must fight against school privatization.

The third reason why it's beneficial for unions to promote anti-racist, social justice teaching is that it improves student learning by increasing motivation and student ownership. It has the potential to build credibility with the broader community, particularly parents and communities of color.

And the fourth reason is that it attracts progressive, anti-racist teachers who might not otherwise be interested in joining or getting involved in the union. When teachers encourage the union to take action on these shared values, it establishes a pole within the union that in turn can attract even more members who can develop organizing programs around those values.

Yes, at times there might be opposition within the membership.

This was the case when I was president of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association. Our executive board decided to co-sponsor a Black Lives Matter protest after a Milwaukee police officer killed Dontre Hamilton, a 31-year-old Black man, shooting him 14 times during an altercation that followed the officer waking him up for sleeping on a park bench. We sent an email notice out to members encouraging participation. The next day three members called me and said they were quitting the union and disagreed with the union's position on this issue. Each one was married to a police officer.

When unions take positions or encourage teaching about what some view as a controversial issue—such as promoting teaching activities during the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action or Indigenous Peoples Day—there may be opposition, even strong opposition. That's why making sure there is a democratic process in place for making such decisions is important, and that leaders and members see the importance of having difficult discussions like those about race and white supremacy. These are not easy conversations, but they are the kind of discussions that are essential as we build multiracial unity in our schools, in our unions, and in coalitions with families and community members.

Anti-racist, social justice teaching improves student learning by increasing motivation and student ownership.

Promoting Anti-Racist, Social Justice Teaching

In 1987 the California Federation of Teachers, at the behest of several progressive teachers, established the CFT Labor in the Schools Committee. According to Fred Glass, one of the committee's founders, it had four original purposes: an information clearinghouse, curriculum development, teacher training, and building cooperation between labor and educational institutions.

The committee's initial project was the development of a video, *Golden Lands, Working Hands*, a history of the California labor movement, looking at it from the bottom up, not the "Great Man" approach to history. Started in the mid-1990s and

finished in 1999, it became a three-hour, 10-part series. The project was funded by teacher unions and other labor organizations. The video and accompanying teaching guides were popular among high school history teachers as well as local unions that used the videos for member education.

Drawing on experience and expertise from the School for Workers at the University of Wisconsin, and drawing on lessons in *The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States*, the committee developed role plays on collective bargaining and produced supplementary materials for the videos. With funding from a federal grant and the school district, two high school teachers were released for several years to do full-time professional development on labor history in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Using a unique approach, the trainers would stay in a high school class an entire week, modeling the collective bargaining role play and role plays of important conflicts in California's labor history, such as the 1934 Longshore Strike.

The modeling by veteran teachers demonstrated to other teachers: "This is what your students can do," and simultaneously shared content usually left out of the dominant narrative, and participatory pedagogy techniques. This deep professional development was provided to hundreds of teachers and ultimately affected tens of thousands of students.

Glass reflected on the committee's work over the years, saying unless unions "devote time and resources to bringing a picture of labor's accomplishments on behalf of working people to teachers and kids, they will grow up in a culture that has increasingly forgotten what labor's accomplishments were and are."

Support of Social Justice Teaching Conferences

Since the early 2000s teachers in different areas in the country have come together to form social justice groups. Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ) in Chicago was one of the first such groups. They have spoken out and organized on Chicago school issues—against school closings, for a democratically elected school board, and in support of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). They also hold an annual Social Justice Curriculum Fair for educators. Many of their members were active in or supported the Caucus of Rank and File Educators, elected to office in 2010. Since that time the CTU has supported and publicized TSJ activities.

Similarly activist teachers in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Tacoma, and Olympia, Washington, organize the Northwest Teaching for Social Justice Conference (NWTSJ), an annual one-day conference that in recent years has drawn more than 1,000 people and offered more than 80 different workshops led by classroom teachers. The NWTSJ receives financial support from the Washington Education Association, the Oregon Education Association, the Portland Association of Teachers, the Seattle Education Association, and the Social Equity Educators caucus in Seattle. The unions have also paid for printing of the programs, sponsored attendance of members, and promoted the events to members. Conferences have increased in recent years, with similar events and groups in the Bay Area, St. Louis, the Twin Cities, New York City, and Philadelphia.

Directly Providing Social Justice Professional Development

Increasingly, unions are taking on anti-racist, social justice education themselves. It can be as simple as setting up book circles, or getting a local authority on an important subject to come in for an evening discussion. In some cases unions develop their own materials, such as when the Cleveland Teachers Union developed and issued a teaching booklet on African American history (see p. 378).

In Milwaukee the teacher union released two teachers to lead teaching and learning activities of the union. Among their duties was coordinating teacher-to-teacher staff development. Three times a year, the union organizes a dozen or so workshops/book groups and invites all members to participate. The union also set up a nonprofit 501(c)(3) to get additional grants to fund the professional development. Workshops have included topics such as rethinking Columbus, climate justice, teaching for Black lives, National Board Certification, surviving as a new teacher, and restorative practices.

Some state organizations offer the professional development at annual conferences or through online classes. In New Jersey, early career teachers and others have pushed for more social justice, anti-racist professional development. Activists within the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) have worked hard, with some success in recent years, to lift up social justice themes and resources in union work and events and to connect the union to community and progressive groups.

NJEA Executive Director Steve Swetsky reflected on his conversations with members. “Members of color will speak highly of NJEA in the abstract, but when you ask about their personal experiences either in their locals or in looking at the *NJEA Review* or in so much else that NJEA does, they’re looking and not seeing themselves,” he said. “We are getting better, but we have a long way to go.”

That’s true in many places and for many unions. And even if the union successfully brings quality professional development to its members, there are many more educators who remain untouched. In other words, unions can’t do that job by themselves.

Increasingly, unions are taking on anti-racist, social justice education themselves.

Pushing for District Support for Social Justice Teaching

Unions have worked to overcome this challenge in two main ways.

One is to work directly with district officials and school board members to push/lead them to see the importance of promoting professional development on anti-racist, social justice teaching. Such teaching sparks student motivation, connects students to the curriculum, and engages them in critical thinking and action, with a result of better academic achievement in writing, speaking, critiquing, reading, and mathematics.

The second strategy is to work with already existing community efforts such as the Black Lives Matter, Indigenous Peoples Day, immigrant rights, and climate justice campaigns, and to encourage those groups and movements to work

jointly with the union to push the district to educate students about these topics. This might mean having the district share lesson plans to coincide with different historic days or create specific classes like ethnic studies or environmental

Campaigns against racist or biased textbooks or racist or stereotypical mascots or logos are also fertile grounds to do extensive education among students and entire communities.

sustainability courses or whole programs like bilingual education. Campaigns against racist or biased textbooks or racist or stereotypical mascots or logos are also fertile grounds to do extensive education among students and entire communities. Regardless of where such campaigns start, when the union and its members join together with students, families, and the broader community, the likelihood of success increases.

A historic example of this was when activists, students, and union members in Portland pushed their school board to pass a resolution mandating the creation of a K–12 climate justice curriculum, developed by teachers, students, and community activists. (See Bigelow, p 392.)

Another example is when the CTU embraced and helped implement the court-ordered Reparations Won curriculum dealing with police brutality and reparations. (See Johnson, p. 383.)

Other strategies include writing and speech contests. On the national level the writing contest of the National Association for Bilingual Education is a powerful model. The Wisconsin Labor History Society conducts a contest asking students to write about the importance of unions in their family and community. In Milwaukee, a local contest started decades ago by a rank-and-file caucus has grown over the years to a large annual Martin Luther King Jr. writing and speech contest celebrated on his birthday.

Changing State Law

Demanding new state laws or educational requirements on social justice issues is another means by which unions can discuss important topics among members and, if successful, force the state to provide resources and professional development for curriculum or courses on important subjects. For example, the Washington Education Association supported passage of a state law requiring ethnic studies classes in high schools. After a major conflict around Native fishing rights in the 1980s in northern Wisconsin, the Legislature passed a law that requires “that all public school districts and preservice education programs provide instruction on the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of Wisconsin’s 11 federally recognized American Indian nations and tribal communities.” The state teacher union lobbied in favor of the law. Similarly, after many years of lobbying, the Wisconsin Labor History Society got a law passed to require the teaching of collective bargaining in high schools. Ironically, that law passed just months before Gov. Scott Walker banned collective bargaining for most public employees.

Conclusion

Howard Zinn's words from decades ago still ring true: "... it's essential that they not only be teacher unionists but teachers of unionism." He added, "We need to create a generation of students who support teachers and the movement of teachers for their rights."

For teachers and teacher unions, Zinn's advice should be taken to heart. Our students deserve not only social justice in their schools and communities, but in what they study. Anything less would be a disservice to the next generation that will need to confront enormous challenges of racism, inequality, and climate chaos. 🌱

Bob Peterson, the former president of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, is now a member of the Milwaukee School Board. He taught 5th grade more than 25 years at various Milwaukee public schools, and was a founding editor of Rethinking Schools.

SOURCES

Bigelow, Bill, and Bob Peterson, eds. 1998. *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*. Rethinking Schools.

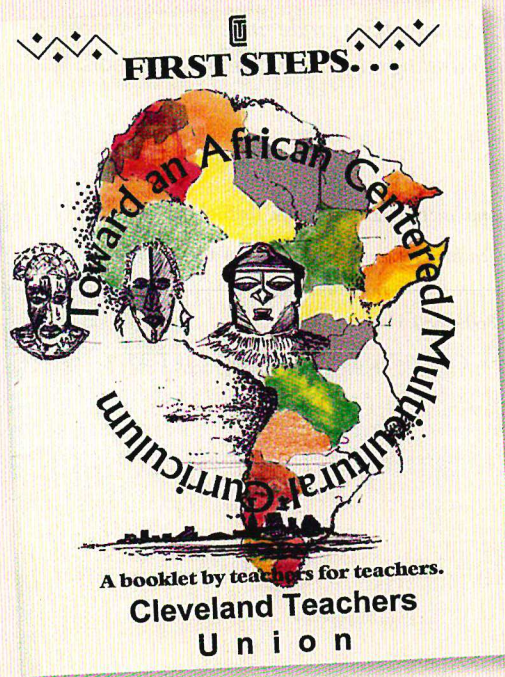
Bigelow, Bill et al., eds. 2007. *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Volume 1*. Rethinking Schools.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1935. *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*. Harcourt Brace.

Taylor, Clarence. 2011. *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union*. Columbia University Press.

A Union Promotes African-Centered Teaching

BY MICHAEL CHARNEY



In the early 1990s African American activists pushed Cleveland Public Schools to institute an African-centered curriculum. I was a member of the executive board of the Cleveland Teachers Union (CTU) at the time, and convinced union leadership of the importance of supporting this effort. Across the country similar proposals generated controversy, so we decided the CTU should provide lesson plans to help teachers move away from the Eurocentric focus in their classrooms. We worked with the district's Afrocentric Studies teacher specialist and assembled a group of teachers from across curriculum areas to produce a booklet of lessons to support teachers in this transition.

We called the 82-page booklet *First Steps Towards an African Centered/Multicultural Curriculum*. We added "multicultural" to the title to encourage inclusiveness and called it "a booklet for teachers and by teachers." The CTU leadership supported this effort and gave substantial funding. The pamphlet's introduction used the metaphor of curriculum being both a mirror and a window—students could see themselves while also looking at the outside world. The lessons varied across the curriculum and were practical without an explicit ideology. I contributed an article highlighting part of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* where Malcolm Little's 8th-grade shop teacher dismissed Malcolm's desire to become a lawyer, saying he wanted him to use his hands, not his mind—a classic example of lowering expectations for a bright African American student. Yet as I pointed out, Malcolm X did in a sense become a lawyer, spending his adult life putting white society on trial.

Unfortunately, as the district started focusing teachers' attention on mind-numbing high-stakes testing—effectively sidelining most curriculum innovation—we never produced a sequel. Still, teacher unionists should never underestimate how much influence they can have creating and promoting anti-racist, social justice curriculum. 📖

Michael Charney served on the CTU Executive Board for almost 20 years. At the time of First Steps he was the professional issues director and a social studies classroom teacher.

[illegible]

Key Principles of Equitable and Social Justice Classrooms

BY THE EDITORS OF RETHINKING SCHOOLS

As educators, we begin from the premise that schools and classrooms should be laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in. Unfortunately, too many schools are training grounds for boredom, alienation, and pessimism. Too many schools fail to confront the racial, class, and gender inequities woven into our social fabric. Teachers are often simultaneously perpetrators and victims, with little control over planning time, class size, or broader school policies—and much less over the unemployment, hopelessness, and other “savage inequalities” that help shape our children’s lives.

But *The New Teacher Book* is not about what we cannot do; it’s about what we can do. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote that teachers should attempt to “live part of their dreams within their educational space.” Classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality.

No matter what the grade level or content area, we believe that several interlocking components comprise what we call a social justice classroom. Curriculum and classroom practice must be:

Grounded in the lives of our students. All good teaching begins with respect for children, their innate curiosity, passions, and their capacity to learn. Curriculum should be rooted in children’s needs and experiences. Whether we’re teaching science, mathematics, English, or social studies, ultimately the class has to be about our students’ lives as well as about a particular subject. Students should probe the ways their lives connect to the broader society, and are often limited by that society.

Critical. The curriculum should equip students to “talk back” to the world. Students must learn to pose essential critical questions: Who makes decisions and who is left out? Who benefits and who suffers? Why is a given practice fair or unfair? What are its origins? What alternatives can we imagine? What is required to create change? Through critiques of advertising, cartoons, literature, legislative decisions, military interventions, job structures, newspapers, movies, agricultural practices, or school life, students should have opportunities to question social reality. Finally, student work must move outside the classroom walls, so that scholastic learning is linked to real-world problems.

Multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice. In the book *Rethinking Columbus*, Rethinking Schools used the discovery myth to demonstrate how children’s lit-

erature and textbooks tend to value the lives of Great White Men over all others. Traditional materials invite children into Columbus' thoughts and dreams; he gets to speak, claim land, and rename the homelands of Native Americans, who appear to have no rights. Implicit in many traditional accounts of history is the notion that children should disregard the lives of women, working people, and especially people of color—they're led to view history and current events from the standpoint of the dominant groups. By contrast, a social justice curriculum must strive to include the lives of all those in our society, especially the marginalized and dominated. As anti-racist educator Enid Lee points out in an interview in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, a rigorous multiculturalism should engage children in a critique of the roots of inequality in curriculum, school structure, and the larger society, always asking: How are we involved? What can we do?

Participatory, experiential. Traditional classrooms often leave little room for student involvement and initiative. In a "rethought" classroom, concepts need to be experienced firsthand, not just read about or heard about. Whether through projects, role plays, simulations, mock trials, or experiments, students need to be mentally, and often physically, active. Our classrooms also must provoke students to develop their democratic capacities: to question, to challenge, to make real decisions, to collectively solve problems.

Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary. The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about—by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won't share real thoughts and feelings. Discussions will be tinny and dishonest. We need to design activities where students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to building that society. Together students and teachers can create a "community of conscience," as educators Asa Hilliard and Gerald Pine call it.

Activist. We want students to come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers. If we ask children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories for cynicism. Although it's not a teacher's role to direct students to particular organizations, it is a teacher's role to suggest that ideas should be acted upon and to offer students opportunities to do just that. Children can also draw inspiration from historical and contemporary efforts of people who struggled for justice. A critical curriculum should be a rainbow of resistance, reflecting the diversity of people who acted to make a difference, many of whom did so at great sacrifice. Students should be allowed to learn about and feel connected to this legacy of defiance.

All good teaching begins with respect for children, their innate curiosity, passions, and their capacity to learn. Curriculum should be rooted in children's needs and experiences.

Academically rigorous. A social justice classroom equips children not only to change the world, but also to maneuver in the one that exists. Far from devaluing the vital academic skills young people need, a critical and activist curriculum speaks directly to the deeply rooted alienation that currently discourages millions of students from acquiring those skills. A social justice classroom offers more to students than traditional classrooms do, and expects more from them. Critical teaching aims to inspire levels of academic performance far greater than those motivated or measured by grades and test scores. When children write for real audiences, read books and articles about issues that really matter, and discuss big ideas with compassion and intensity, “academics” starts to breathe. Yes, we must help students “pass the tests” (even as we help them analyze and critique those tests and the harmful impact of test-driven education). But only by systematically reconstructing classroom life do we have any hope of cracking the cynicism that lies so close to the heart of massive school failure, and of raising academic expectations and performance for all our children.

Culturally and linguistically inclusive and empowering. Critical teaching requires that we admit we don’t know it all. Each class presents new challenges to learn from our students and demands that we be good researchers, and good listeners. This is especially true when our racial or social class identity, or our nationality or linguistic heritage is different from those of our students. As African American educator Lisa Delpit writes in her review of the book *White Teacher* in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, “When teachers are teaching children who are different from themselves, they must call upon parents in a collaborative fashion if they are to learn who their students really are.” Teachers need to challenge all forms of privilege, especially white supremacy, in ways that respect and empower the communities and students they serve. And we must embrace students’ home languages, helping them preserve their linguistic heritages while also helping them navigate in English-dominant settings.

We’re skeptical of the “inspirational speakers” whom administrators bring to faculty meetings, who exhort us to become superteachers and classroom magicians. Critical teaching requires vision, support, and resources, not magic. 📖

This essay was published in its original form as the introduction to Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Volume 1 and revised for The New Teacher Book, 3rd edition—both published by Rethinking Schools.

BY JENNIFER JOHNSON



TAKING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO THE CLASSROOM 383

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Reparations Won curriculum. I was nervous because our membership includes members whose political orientations vary in their thoughts about police and policing. While our CTU leadership is committed to a racial justice platform, including protecting people of color from being victimized by systems of policing and incarceration, not all educators see taking a position on this as a priority for our union.

But I should have felt confident before Cannon spoke: The CTU leaders and members *had* amassed a record of rejecting the violence of policing in Chicago. In November 2015, we participated in the large Black Friday protests generated by the police shooting of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald.¹ In December 2015, our House of Delegates endorsed a resolution to support the creation of a Civilian Police Accountability Council in Chicago.² In January 2016, the same body endorsed a resolution calling for the resignation of Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez,³ who ultimately lost her reelection bid because of her failure to swiftly prosecute McDonald's killer.⁴

While I believe teachers and our union should fight alongside our communities for social, economic, and racial justice, not all educators share that view. Some argue for neutrality. Yet "neutrality" is invoked unevenly. For example, some CTU members argue against taking a position on whether the city should have democratic accountability mechanisms for police, despite agreeing that CPS should have an elected rather than mayor-appointed school board.

As Chicago educators, we *should* feel an imperative to fight for racial justice. Our jobs are about the Black and Brown young people who attend CPS. Between 2002 and 2019 CPS enrollment declined from nearly 440,000 to just over 355,000, as a result of systemic neighborhood disinvestment.⁵ The decline was used to justify the closing of roughly 50 mostly Black schools in 2013. Black teachers were disproportionately laid off. The percentage of Black teachers in CPS declined from 40 percent in 2000, to 21 percent in 2018 when 36 percent of the student population was Black.⁶

By 2018, 52 percent of CPS teachers were white, though only 10 percent of students were.

For some, the Reparations Won curriculum tells a particularly challenging history. However, educators can and must teach this story about how Black survivors of police torture in Chicago won an unprecedented and historic reparations package.

The Long Fight to Win Reparations

Plainly stated and sparing the awful details, Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and officers beneath him tortured more than 100 Black men between 1972 and 1991.⁷ The physical and psychological abuse was varied and extensive and was used to elicit mostly false confessions that led to convictions and long prison sentences.⁸ Even though survivors recanted their confessions and attested to the torture they experienced, they were not immediately believed.

In 1983, days after Cannon's abuse occurred, he drew a stick figure for his lawyer and described the torture he experienced: a cattle prod to his testicles, shot-

gun in his mouth, berated with the N-word, all while handcuffed.⁹ He was only exonerated and released from prison 21 years later.¹⁰

A group of survivors, calling themselves “The Death Row 10,” demanded new court hearings in the 1990s and brought needed attention to their torture. Their efforts led to some pardons and commutations, and contributed to the moratorium on the death penalty that passed in Illinois in 2011. Another group, Black People Against Torture, called for reparations and successfully lobbied for official condemnation from the United Nations’ Committee Against Torture.¹¹ Though Burge was fired from the Chicago Police Department in 1993, he was not prosecuted and convicted until 2010. Even then, Burge was sentenced to serve only four-and-a-half years for perjury and obstruction of justice. He never was convicted for his role in the torture itself and received a police pension even after his prison term. He died in 2018.

While there were victories, there was no reckoning or acknowledgement of the full breadth of the torture until 2015. The grassroots organization Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM) formed in 2011 and developed a pivotal campaign for an alternative version of justice including reparations. CTJM hosted an art exhibit in 2012 called “Opening the Black Box,” where an early version of a city ordinance, penned by Joey Mogul, CTJM co-founder and longtime People’s Law Office attorney, was on display along with more than 70 designs for speculative memorials about the torture.¹² Events in and outside of Chicago helped advance demands for reparations: The demonstrations led by Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) in response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin’s killer; Ta-Nehisi Coates’ 2014 article, “The Case for Reparations”;¹³ the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was killed by police; and the national Movement for Black Lives galvanized public pressure and attention. Just three months after Michael Brown was killed in 2014, young Black and Brown Chicago activists in We Charge Genocide (WCG) traveled to the United Nations and named the violence of the Chicago Police Department.¹⁴ Protests after the killing of Laquan McDonald that same year, and the exposure of the cover-up after Rahm Emanuel’s re-election as Chicago mayor in 2015 heightened the cries for redress.

Years of protest and political pressure finally led to the passage on May 6, 2015, of an unprecedented city ordinance¹⁵ that included:

- An acknowledgement and condemnation of the torture.
- A formal apology to those affected by the torture.
- The formation of a commission to disseminate monetary reparations to the survivors.

Educators can and must teach this story about how Black survivors of police torture in Chicago won an unprecedented and historic reparations package.

- The formation of a fund of \$5.5 million to provide up to \$100,000 to each torture survivor with a credible claim.
- The creation of a counseling and training center on the South Side for survivors, family, and anyone impacted by police abuse.*
- Free city college tuition for the survivors and their family members.
- Job placement assistance to formerly incarcerated survivors.
- That CPS teach a curriculum in 8th and 10th grades about the history of the torture and the fight for justice.
- Hearings for torture survivors still in prison.
- The creation of a public memorial honoring the survivors and their fight.
- A minimum of \$20 million for the reparations, counseling center, curriculum, and memorial.
- Legally pursuing the ending of Jon Burge's police pension.

Chicago is the only municipality that has offered reparations to victims of police abuse. The comprehensive reparations package is a model for “reimagining what justice looks like” according to CTJM co-founder and longtime activist Alice Kim, and what can be won when we dream audaciously and strategize out of the legal box.

Making Reparations Teachable

Darrell Cannon had a toothache when I met him for the first time in November 2016. It was at an orientation session for a small group of teachers about to pilot a near-final draft of the curriculum. He gritted through his pain that day and explained why teaching the curriculum was vital. He joked about never using profanity and afterward he gave me a warm hug and called me “sister.” Funny and kind, he reminded me of my father. It could have happened to my father.

My CTU involvement provided an avenue to connect to the reparations victory. Because I was a native Michigander, the Burge torture was new to me. I taught high school history in CPS for 10 years, but I left my classroom in 2013 to work full time at the CTU. When the ordinance passed, despite being eager to teach this material, I no longer had a classroom. Winning a commitment to teach the reparations fight was just the beginning. Actual curriculum had to be created. A couple of colleagues and I participated periodically in meetings convened by the CPS social studies office to work with teachers and other experts to write, pilot, and implement what became the Reparations Won curriculum units for both middle and high school. To their credit, the district staff worked diligently to manage the differing expectations for the curriculum, and it went through many revisions. It could not possibly be perfect, but there was real effort to make it as accurate, powerful, and teachable as such a complex history could be. (To see the full curriculum, go to websites listed at the end of this article.)

* The Chicago Torture Justice Center opened in May 2017 and, among myriad other programs, is running a speakers bureau. Schools and organizations can request that a torture survivor or family member come tell their story.

During the pilot implementation phase, I accompanied CPS officials on visits to three schools. I saw middle school students at a predominantly Black elementary school on the South Side engaged in an energetic debate about how people should be treated when stopped by police. Middle school students at a largely Latinx elementary school read primary and secondary source documents about the torture itself. Lightbulbs and chatter broke out in the room when they realized that Burge served only three-and-a-half years in prison. High school students at an all-Black South Side school grappled with the time and range of people it took to win the ordinance.

In their final forms, the middle and high school curriculum units use primary and secondary sources to allow students to uncover the history of the Burge torture and the decades-long fight that led to the city ordinance, and the development of the curricula itself. Since both the 8th- and 10th-grade curricula are required to be taught, they are not identical. Students are presented with a foundational understanding in middle school and then are asked to go into more historical depth in high school. Both curricula units incorporate social-emotional components such as restorative circles and journaling, to let students reflect and process their reactions to this tough history. Both units profile the causes of the torture, testimonials of torture, and the broad array of people who sought justice for years.

Each unit has unique and, I believe, radical features. The middle school unit focuses on the roles and responsibilities of police. Early on, students are asked to imagine that they are creating a new city and they must decide if they want their new city to have a police force. If they do, they must write a rationale and describe what the mission of police should be. It is a huge victory that the unit boldly allows students to question the assumption of the need for police in the first place. Without forcing students to take a certain position, this exercise allows the abolition of police to be a rational vision for the future. In the closing activity, students stage a classroom town hall aimed at developing strategies to improve community-police relationships. The students' final assessment is to write their own individual op-ed pieces based on what they've learned.

Building on the middle school unit, the high school one is framed around four main factors that allowed the torture to occur, and how major failures related to each of the factors enabled survivors to be victimized, incarcerated, and dismissed for years. At the end of the unit, students evaluate whether the reparations package was sufficient to provide justice for the survivors. For the high school final assessment, students design their own proposal for an appropriate memorial connecting them directly to the outstanding work of fulfilling the ordinance's promise of an actual city memorial. The recent opening of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, dedicated to remembering America's obsession with lynching Black people, is a timely reminder of how significant physical places that allow us to contemplate racism can be.

The comprehensive reparations package is a model for reimagining what justice looks like.

Responding to Pushback

Pushback has emerged from predictable communities: predominantly white neighborhoods with a high concentration of police officer residents. We have tried to meet this challenge.

In January 2017, while the curriculum was being piloted, CTU colleagues and I received about 40 responses to a survey of social studies teachers. How much did educators know and what did they feel about this curriculum? What excited and worried them about teaching the curriculum?

A sample of comments demonstrates their range of thinking:

- “I believe this is an inappropriate intrusion into the classroom. I would expect the CTU to stand up for the expertise and autonomy of social science teachers and refuse to support a court-ordered curriculum.”
- “Most importantly, won’t this further divide Chicago youth and Chicago police officers? Have you considered the conflict of interest regarding CPS teachers being asked to teach such a curriculum? Many of us are children, spouses, and parents of Chicago police officers.”
- “It will allow individuals who suffered injustice [to] have their voices and experiences heard and lessons passed on to future generations.”
- “We’ve been discussing the role of the police at great length since Ferguson. Even children of cops have strong opinions about what should and should not happen, including alternatives to policing.”

We expected this varied reaction. Winning a broad understanding of the value of teaching the Reparations Won units requires time and ongoing education. After the pilot phase, CPS invited all schools to send social studies teachers and counselors to a three-and-a-half-hour mandatory professional development (PD) session in April 2017. I attended one session on the far north side in Uptown. Most of the educators were white. The teachers were quiet, especially when torture survivors Anthony Holmes and Darrell Cannon told their stories. The reactions of teachers at many of the South Side PD sessions, I was told, were different. Majority-Black educators emoted vocally about the imperative to do right by the curriculum.

While the district PD was well done, we at the CTU thought that we could and should provide teachers an optional, more in-depth experience. I convinced a racially mixed group of six rock star CTU teachers to develop and facilitate our own PD. We created three modules: one that focused on what teachers should do before teaching the curriculum, one on the best practices for teaching it, and the final one on how to engage students in reflection and action after learning the curriculum. The teachers and I designed a six-and-a-half-hour PD with several goals in mind. We wanted to:

1. Provide teachers tools to create a **classroom climate of support and inquiry** needed in order to responsibly teach the curriculum.

2. Emphasize the importance of teaching **institutional racism**. The torture happened to Black men. It occurred due to the endemic racism in our society that is a part of what scholar Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery.”¹⁶ Only in naming racism and how it operates can students lead us in undoing it.
3. Give teachers time to **examine the middle and high school curricula** so they themselves are familiar with it and the facts.
4. Emphasize the need to teach the curriculum in **historical and current context**. The Burge torture and the long fight for justice did not occur in a vacuum. Considering how the Burge torture is related to the War on Drugs, the Vietnam War, and the rise of “tough on crime” policies and mass incarceration cannot be understated. Teachers must help students connect the history in the curriculum to recent and present struggles.
5. Ask teachers to **partner with their students in reflecting** on what they learn from the curriculum and to provide them a framework for doing so. Students are capable learning partners who can assess what worked and what did not. While the assessments in the curriculum elevate student voice and creativity, students may want to take concrete action and teachers must be prepared to provide opportunities to do so.

Some educators are taking responsibility for addressing concerns on their own. I learned, after the fact, that a teacher at a (predominantly white) school in Jefferson Park, on the far northwest side of Chicago, ran a meeting in September 2017, with the support of her principal, where she took parents through the curriculum page by page to allay their fears.

Why the Unimaginable Must Be Taught

To my relief and elation, Cannon received a standing ovation at that January 2017 House of Delegates meeting. He had told his story probably hundreds of times to police, lawyers, reporters, and more. To our members, he stressed the profound significance of teaching the curriculum:

It is imperative that the teachers teach this curriculum, because if the children are not familiar with the past and the present, they are doomed in the future. It is imperative that you, the teachers, understand what happened to us for far too long and take a stance and teach our children about this ugly chapter of the past. We will teach our children about the Laquan McDonald case [too, because] Laquan McDonald would not have happened if we, the torture survivors, hadn't been tortured by Jon Burge and company . . .

Dustin Voss, one of the original pilot teachers and a CTU delegate, taught the curriculum again in the 2017–2018 school year and had Cannon come to speak to his class for the second year in a row. Of this visit, a student wrote: “You could tell that he wasn’t here just to tell his story. Darrell Cannon came to inspire us to make

change where we see it needs to be made. . . . He was motivating us to want to fight to fix the problems that might affect us deeply by telling us how he changed his own life and the lives of many other people.”

As a burgeoning Freirean educator, I believe teaching is political. Our role as educators is to help students become critical agents of change who understand the systems of power operating on their lives. Based on this student’s reflection, the Reparations Won curriculum allows educators to do just that.

Perhaps ironically, a demand for curriculum was not in the original draft of the reparations ordinance. The final inclusion of curriculum was inspired by teachers who were already teaching about the torture and had submitted syllabi to the “Opening the Black Box” exhibit.¹⁷ Alice Kim said that the curriculum was the one part of the ordinance that she thought “would never get passed.” She stressed

that now that the curriculum exists, if we fight to make sure that it is taught and continues to be taught, Chicago students will be better equipped to confront and work to end the violence of policing.

I am proud to be a member of a teacher union that has not shied away from racially

Only in naming racism and how it operates can students lead us in undoing it.

charged issues. CTU members recently voted to add language to our Constitution to declare that one of the union’s purposes is “to promote racial, economic, and social justice in order to achieve educational justice and build community and labor coalitions to achieve that objective.”¹⁸ It is the right thing to do, but it is also in our interest. We have to do more political education with our members to help ensure that the curriculum is implemented responsibly, effectively, and consistently in all CPS schools. Other teacher unions and members have and are promoting teaching racial justice as demonstrated by the large national participation, including CTU’s, in Black Lives Matter at School Week. Where unions have not supported these efforts, members themselves must reject the argument that teaching our country’s racist past or supporting current anti-racist movements is divisive. Educators must seize these opportunities to be on the right side of history and not wait for history to play out. The Burge torture survivors waited long enough for justice. 🗣️

Jennifer (Jen) Johnson is the chief of staff for the Chicago Teachers Union. Before coming to work full time for the CTU, she taught high school history for 10 years at Lincoln Park High School, a north side Chicago public school.

TO ACCESS THE CURRICULUM, GO TO:

Middle school: https://blog.cps.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ReparationsWon_MiddleSchool.pdf

High school: https://blog.cps.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ReparationsWon_HighSchool.pdf

TO ACCESS THE CHICAGO CITY COUNCIL ORDINANCE ON THE CURRICULUM:

https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/ORDINANCE.pdf

ENDNOTES

¹ DNA Info Staff. Nov. 26, 2015. "Teachers Union to Join Black Friday Mag Mile Laquan McDonald Protest." *DNA Info Chicago*. <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20151126/streeterville/teachers-union-join-black-friday-mag-mile-laquan-mcdonald-protest>

² CTU Communications. Dec. 3, 2015. "CTU Endorses New Police Oversight Body." Chicago Teachers Union. <https://www.ctulocal1.org/posts/ctu-endorses-new-police-oversight-body>

³ CTU Communications. Jan. 7, 2016. "Chicago's Teachers Vote Overwhelmingly to Officially Call for the Resignations of Emanuel and Alvarez." Chicago Teachers Union. <https://www.ctulocal1.org/posts/chicago-teachers-vote-overwhelmingly-to-officially-call-for-the-resignations-of-emanuel-and-alvarez>

⁴ Bauer, Kelly. March 16, 2016. "How Did Anita Alvarez Lose So Badly to Kim Foxx? (TIMELINE)." *DNA Info Chicago*. [dnainfo.com/chicago/20160316/downtown/how-did-anita-alvarez-lose-so-badly-kim-foxx-timeline](https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20160316/downtown/how-did-anita-alvarez-lose-so-badly-kim-foxx-timeline)

⁵ Belsha, Kalyn. Dec. 19, 2017. "Thousands of Black Students Leave Chicago for Other Segregated Districts." *Chicago Reporter*. chicagoreporter.com/black-cps-student-migration

⁶ Chicago Public Schools. SY 2019–2020. "CPS Stats and Facts." cps.edu/SchoolData/Pages/SchoolData.aspx

⁷ "History." 2013. Chicago Torture Justice Memorials. chicagotorture.org/history

⁸ Conroy, John. Feb. 3, 2005. "Tools of Torture." *Chicago Reader*. chicagoreader.com/chicago/tools-of-torture/Content?oid=917876

⁹ Cannon, Darrell. May 13, 2015. "Darrell Cannon: Surviving Chicago Police Torture." Praxis Center. kzoo.edu/praxis/torture-survivor-darrell-cannon

¹⁰ Moore, Natalie. Jan. 6, 2016. "Victims of Chicago Police Torture Paid Reparations Decades Later." *Morning Edition*. npr.org/2016/01/06/462114331/victims-of-chicago-police-torture-paid-reparations-decades-later

¹¹ Taylor, Flint. June 26, 2015. "How Activists Won Reparations for the Survivors of Chicago Police Department Torture." *In These Times*. inthesetimes.com/article/18118/jon-burge-torture-reparations

¹² Kim, Alice. May 13, 2015. "Opening the Black Box: Reparations and the Power of Radical Imagination." Praxis Center. www.kzoo.edu/praxis/reparations-and-the-power-of-radical-imagination

¹³ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. June 2014. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631

¹⁴ Berlatsky, Noah. Nov. 17, 2014. "At the United Nations, Chicago Activists Protest Police Brutality." *The Atlantic*. theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/11/we-charge-genocide-movement-chicago-un/382843

¹⁵ City of Chicago. "Burge Reparations Information." chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/BurgeRESOLUTION.pdf

¹⁶ Hartman, Saidiya V. 2008. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

¹⁷ Kim, Alice. May 13, 2015. "Opening the Black Box: Reparations and the Power of Radical Imagination." Praxis Center. kzoo.edu/praxis/reparations-and-the-power-of-radical-imagination

¹⁸ Chicago Teachers Union. January 2018. "Chicago Teachers Union Constitution and By-Laws." ctunet.com/for-members/constitution

Teacher Unions for Climate Justice

BY BILL BIGELOW

As the climate crisis announces itself with greater ferocity, it has become more urgent for teachers to reflect on our responsibility to act—in our classrooms, in our communities, and in our unions. *Our* unions. The organizations that teachers own. The organizations where we can articulate the kind of workplaces we deserve, the kind of education our students deserve, and where organizing for a stable climate can support our struggle for an economic justice agenda. No doubt, we are still in the early stages of these efforts.

In Portland, Oregon, where I taught for almost 30 years and was a longtime teacher union activist, members of the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), along with retired teachers, students, parents, and activists with the local affiliate of 350.org, met through the winter of 2015–16 to draft a comprehensive climate justice education policy for the school district.

When we introduced it at a school board meeting in May 2016, the teacher union was one of more than 30 organizations to endorse it. The resolution called for increased professional development, more curriculum devoted to climate justice, abandoning textbooks that lie about the causes of the crisis and its severity, encouraging student climate activism, establishing a vision for career education that would create training opportunities for “living wage jobs in the just transition away from fossil fuels,” and making sure that school buildings themselves teach lessons in environmental responsibility. The school board, seven members elected citywide, passed the resolution unanimously. (That summer, the Representative Assembly of the National Education Association, meeting in Washington, D.C., called for NEA state and local affiliates to use the Portland resolution as a model to draft their own climate justice resolutions.)

Since 2016, the teacher union in Portland and others around the country and in Canada have offered glimpses of how unions can work for climate justice. This is still a work in progress, but with a ticking climate time bomb, teacher unions need to become more audacious in their advocacy.



It may be obvious, but a discovery we've made in Portland is that the more students study about the causes and consequences of the climate crisis, the more they want to take action. Curriculum matters. And our unions can play a key role in seeding exemplary classroom practice. In cooperation with the Portland Public Schools Climate Justice Committee, PAT has sponsored full-day and after-school "Teach Climate Justice" workshops.

One of the most powerful of these was with the Marshall Islands activist/poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, who in the fall of 2016 spoke to more than 80 teachers and community members at the PAT office in Portland, and performed spoken word poems like "Dear Matafele Peinam," "History Project," and "Tell Them," which concludes:

*tell them about the water
how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries
gushing over the sea walls
and crashing against our homes
tell them what it's like
to see the entire ocean__level__with the land
tell them
we are afraid
tell them we don't know
of the politics
or the science
but tell them we see
what is in our own backyard
tell them that some of us
are old fishermen who believe that God
made us a promise
some of us
are more skeptical of God
but most importantly tell them
we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands.*

A key piece of Portland's climate justice resolution is the centering of voices of people from frontline communities, those hit first and hardest by the climate crisis, and finding ways to expose our students to these perspectives. On a stormy fall afternoon, sitting in the packed basement of the union offices, with teachers and community members brainstorming ways to engage students with Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poems, I glimpsed how our unions can play a leadership role in nurturing climate justice curriculum.

PAT has continued to offer a home for our “Teach Climate Justice” afternoons, where teachers demonstrate exemplary lessons, launch curriculum work groups, watch student-friendly films to discuss teaching strategies, and find other teachers of conscience to collaborate with on this crucial work.

But the union has also been an ally of climate justice work when the school district has dragged its feet. For example, in the days leading up to the Sept. 20, 2019, global strike for the climate, our Portland Public Schools Climate Justice Committee had secured the school district’s promise that student participation in the strike would be considered an excused absence, and the district office sent a forceful memo to all building administrators announcing this policy. The district also sent home an excellent letter to all parents in our 50,000-student-strong school system, indicating that climate justice is a part of the “core curriculum,” and citing the school board’s 2016 resolution. But strangely, the district delayed and delayed sending a letter to its own teachers announcing its position and offering teaching resources on the climate crisis. So the union did it instead—sending our letter out through its own distribution channels, announcing that: “September 20 is a day when PPS students can stand in solidarity with global youth and see themselves as activists and leaders for the planet, channeling anger and fear into hope and action,” and linking to a host of teaching materials, including the Zinn Education Project’s Teach Climate Justice site.

Other unions have been similarly full-throated in support of student activism. In the lead-up to the September strike, Teri Mooring, president of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, expressed “enthusiastic support for the School Strike for Climate movement and the climate strikes on the worldwide days of action,” and urged boards of education to make participation an excused absence and to support teachers planning to take students to the demonstrations. Mooring wrote: “Youth in Canada and around the world are deeply alarmed by our political leaders’ limited efforts to address the climate emergency. The BCTF wholeheartedly support the efforts of youth to have their voices heard on this critical issue.”

Merrie Najimy, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), organized a statewide conference call to discuss ways the union could support the student walkout: “Our legal department wrote an advisory where the gist was to say you have this right to participate, and as an organizer you can push your principal, your superintendent, to make this a field trip day.”

It may be obvious, but a discovery we’ve made in Portland is that the more students study about the causes and consequences of the climate crisis, the more they want to take action.

The Green New Deal

In our summer 2019 editorial, “The Green New Deal and Our Schools,” *Rethinking Schools* editors urged teacher unions to aggressively promote the Green New Deal,

launched in the streets by groups like the Sunrise Movement and in Congress by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Edward Markey. The Green New Deal would commit the United States to a rapid “just transition” from a fossil fuel-based economy to clean and renewable energy, cutting carbon emissions by 50 percent by 2030, and becoming net zero by 2050.

First, our unions need to educate members about the Green New Deal and initiate conversations about what it could mean in their school district and how it can be supported politically. They can insist that politicians seeking union endorsement announce their support for the Green New Deal, for climate justice education, and refuse to accept fossil fuel contributions. Unions can join with other unions to articulate and work for a Green New Deal social vision—one that also includes schools.

In *In These Times*, Rachel M. Cohen describes some early efforts to get teacher unions to push beyond their traditional arenas of activism. Kurt Ostrow, an English teacher in Fall River, Massachusetts, an MTA board member, and a member of the Sunrise Movement, successfully introduced a resolution putting the MTA on record favoring a teacher strike to support the Green New Deal. Ostrow suggested that one tactic might be taking collective sick days. “If you can take off to take care of your kids, well the fact is Mother Earth is sick,” he told Cohen.

In March 2019, shortly after the Green New Deal was introduced in Congress, the 120,000-member California Federation of Teachers passed a wonderful, farsighted resolution in support of the Green New Deal, to “address the two

great issues of our age—historic economic inequality and climate change,” building off an earlier 2016 resolution on climate justice. The comprehensive resolution calls for educating students about climate change, economic inequality, and potential solutions such as the Green New Deal; infrastructure development to respond to climate-related changes like rising

**“What good is it to negotiate
the assignment of overtime
when the sky is on fire?”**

sea levels; expansion of clean energy industries, with high wages and collective bargaining agreements; new apprenticeship programs; prioritizing projects in working-class and low-income communities, and communities of color that have been disproportionately affected by environmental and economic crisis; equitable “just transition” measures for workers who might be hurt in the short term by a new carbon-free economy; and greatly increased taxation on the wealthy, including a wealth tax, to pay for Green New Deal measures.

The California Federation of Teachers resolution launches exactly the kind of conversation that teacher unionists need to be engaged in right now: How can we simultaneously work to address the climate crisis and the crisis of economic inequality? How can our work in schools and classrooms contribute to this project of radical social transformation? What kind of alliances do we need to nurture with other unions, community organizations, and historically marginalized communities to fulfill the promise of the Green New Deal?

Bargaining for the Common Good

“What good is it to negotiate the assignment of overtime when the sky is on fire?” Nato Green asks in “Why Unions Must Bargain Over Climate Change,” in *In These Times*. As teacher unions join the broader movement to “bargain for the common good,” we need to ask what exactly that looks like with respect to confronting the climate crisis and using collective bargaining as a way to effect some of the vision articulated in the Green New Deal.

**Now is the time when we must
dare to “dream big, out loud,
in public, together.”**

Matt Reed, a social studies and American Sign Language teacher at Portland’s Lincoln High School and activist with PAT, took the teacher contract and began to imagine ways that a new contract might promote a web of climate justice goals:

- Dedicated professional leave time to collaboratively create climate justice curriculum with colleagues.
- Increased professional development trainings to learn more about the climate crisis and climate justice and ways we can apply it within our own classrooms.
- District-sponsored and district-supported student climate justice summits in order to deepen and facilitate more equitable student participation and engagement.
- District partnership with local, national, and international organizations that support climate justice education, with particular focus on frontline communities most impacted by the climate crisis, to support student and educator curriculum.
- The creation of a commission of students, educators, community leaders, and the district charged with identifying and recommending ways the district can reduce carbon emissions.
- Ensuring that future district construction and facilities upgrades are at least carbon neutral.
- Ensuring health and safety of students and staff as climate-related weather and natural disaster risks increase.

Looking toward upcoming contract negotiations, Reed went through his union-school district contract with a fine-tooth comb, finding specific articles and sections where alternative climate-forward language could be inserted. As Reed told me, “Too often, contract bargaining starts from the question of ‘What can we win in our next contract to make work better?’—avoiding broader social justice questions like ‘What do we want to see changed in our society and world?’ By focusing on what seems winnable in the short term, workers accept the prevailing political, economic, and social thinking that got us into the climate/inequality

crisis in the first place.” Reed is working with other teacher unionists to begin to turn the aspirations of the climate justice movement into the legal documents that govern our work lives.

* * *

As Naomi Klein writes in her foreword to *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*, now is the time when we must dare to “dream big, out loud, in public, together.” We are in the early stages of this work. Thanks to the lies of the fossil fuel companies and their propagandists like the Heartland Institute, who distributed tens of thousands of misleading climate change textbooks to elementary and high school teachers, we still have school curricula that sow doubt about the causes and severity of climate change. But things are changing quickly. Despite schools’ late arrival to climate reality, today’s climate strikes are filling streets across the country, and around the world, with young people demanding the right to a future.

Teacher unions need to be in the thick of this struggle for a new world. 🌱

Bill Bigelow taught high school social studies for 30 years. He is an editor of Rethinking Schools, co-editor of A People’s Curriculum for the Earth (Rethinking Schools, 2014), and co-director of the Zinn Education Project.

For a comprehensive list of books, lessons, films, and organizations, go to zinnedproject.org/campaigns/teach-climate-justice.

Books and Curricular Guides on the Labor Movement and Labor History

Editors' note: Look online for more in-depth summaries and reviews of these works. Many are listed at zinnedproject.org. Keep in mind that picture books can be appropriate for a wide range of students up through middle and high schools. Encourage education union members to use these books not only with students, but also with their own children and colleagues.

Picture Books, Nonfiction

Kids on Strike

By Susan Campbell Bartoletti
(HMH Books, 2003)

Describes the conditions and treatment that drove working children to strike, from the mill workers' strike in 1834 and the coal strikes at the turn of the 20th century to the children who marched with Mother Jones in 1903. Grades 4–8.

Kid Blink Beats the World

By Don Brown
(Roaring Brook Press, 2004)

The story of an 1899 strike by the children who sold newspapers on the street. Grades K–4.

Side by Side/Lado a lado

By Monica Brown; translated by Carolina Valencia; illustrated by Joe Cepeda
(HarperCollins Español, bilingual edition, 2010)

The life stories and activism of Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez, the two founders of the United Farm Workers (UFW), written and illustrated for young children.

Strike: The Bitter Struggle of American Workers from Colonial Times to the Present

By Penny Colman
(Millbrook Press, 1996)

An oversized book with illustrations summarizing U.S. labor history. Good for upper elementary and middle and high school.

Which Side Are You On? The Story of a Song

By George Ella Lyon; artwork by Christopher Cardinale
(Cinco Puntos Press, 2011)

Tells the story of the classic union song of 1931 and the harsh conditions under which it was written. Grades 4 and up.

Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909

By Michelle Markel; illustrated by Melissa Sweet
(HarperCollins, 2016)

The struggle of early 20th-century female garment workers is brought to life in this biography of labor leader Clara Lemlich, who successfully instigated a citywide strike that led to a life of union activism.

That's Not Fair! Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice;/¡No Es Justo! La lucha de Emma Tenayuca por la justicia

By Carmen Tafolla and Sharyll Teneyuca; illustrated by Terry Ybáñez
(Wings Press, 2008)

Bilingual (Spanish and English) biography of labor activist Emma Tenayuca. Grades K–2.

Picture Books, Fiction

Joelito's Big Decision/La Gran Decisión de Joelito

By Ann Berlak; illustrated by Daniel Camacho
(Hard Ball Press, 2015)

Joelito, a 4th grader, faces a big decision when he and his family go to a fast-food restaurant and see a labor action by workers, including members of his friend's family. One of the few children's books that deals so directly with the struggle of low-wage workers. Grades 2–5.

¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can! Janitor Strike in L.A.

By Diana Cohn; illustrated by Francisco Delgado
(Cinco Puntos Press, bilingual edition, 2005)

A children's book based on the true story of the Justice for Janitors strike. Grades K–2.

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type

By Doreen Cronin; illustrated by Betsy Lewin
(Atheneum Books, 2000)

A barnyard struggle where the cows go on strike and the farmer is forced to negotiate. Available in Spanish as *Clic, Clac, Muu: Vacas escritoras*. Grades preschool–3.

Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968

By Alice Faye Duncan; illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

(Calkins Creek, 2018)

A fiction picture book that presents the story of 9-year-old Lorraine Jackson, who in 1968 witnessed the Memphis sanitation strike. Grades 4–7.

The Bobbin Girl

By Emily Arnold McCully

(Dial Books, 1996)

Historical fiction based on a true story about the Lowell textile workers. Grades 2–5.

The Carpet Boy's Gift

By Pegi Deitz Shea; illustrated by Leane Morin

(Tilbury House Publishers, 2003)

This fictional story honors the legacy of Iqbal Masih, who escaped from bonded labor to become an international leader against child labor. Excellent read aloud for elementary and middle school students.

Chapter Books/Young Adult Fiction (Upper Elementary Through Middle School)

Iqbal

By Francesco D'Adamo

(Aladdin, 2005)

A fictionalized account of a Pakistani child who escaped from bondage in a carpet factory and went on to help liberate other children like him.

Fire in the Hole!

By Mary Cronk Farrell

(Clarion Books, 2004)

Based on the true story of a silver miners' strike in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, the book shows the desperate conditions of miners' lives and how the striking miners were detained illegally in a late 19th-century version of Guantanamo.

Lyddie

By Katherine Paterson

(Puffin Modern Classics, 2004)

When Lyddie and her younger brother are hired out as servants to help pay off their family farm's debts, Lyddie is determined to find a way to reunite her family once again. Hearing about all the money a girl can make working in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, she makes her way there, only to find that her dreams of returning home may never come true.

Bread and Roses, Too

By Katherine Paterson

(Clarion Books, 2006)

Moving young adult historical fiction novel based on a major strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912.

Missing from Haymarket Square

By Harriette Gillem Robinet

(Atheneum, 2001)

Dinah, a 12-year-old African American girl, works long hours in a factory while her father helps organize workers in the midst of the famous Haymarket labor struggle and massacre in Chicago. A good book for introducing young readers to issues of race, immigration, labor, and the strategies used to oppress and divide workers and their resistance.

Dragon's Gate

By Laurence Yep

(HarperCollins, 1995)

The story of a teenage boy who migrates to the United States following the U.S. Civil War to work on the transcontinental railroad. A spellbinding story that weaves in issues of racism and class struggle, culminating in a massive strike by Chinese workers.

**Middle/High School/College/Adult
Nonfiction**

"They're Bankrupting Us!" And 20 Other Myths About Unions

By Bill Fletcher Jr.

(Beacon Press, 2012)

Fletcher takes on some of the most common contemporary myths about organized labor. This book is ideal for use in member education programs for unions and in high school civics and social studies classes.

A History of America in Ten Strikes

By Erik Loomis

(The New Press, 2018)

"A brilliantly recounted American history through the prism of major labor struggles, with critically important lessons for those who seek a better future for working people and the world." —Noam Chomsky

Journey for Justice: The Life of Larry Itliong

By Dawn Mabalon and Gayle Romasanta; illustrated by Andre Sibayan
(Bridge and Delta Publishing, 2018)

An engaging story of a Filipino labor leader and co-founder of the United Farm Workers, one of the most significant American social movements of its time. Readers will learn of the key role Filipinos played in the farmworkers' movement.

Bread & Roses: The Struggle of American Labor, 1865–1915

By Milton Meltzer
(Replica Books, 2001)

Original documents with overview for high school students. Key primary sources.

Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement

By Premilla Nadasen
(Beacon Press, 2015)

Through stories of African American domestic workers, this book resurrects a little-known history of domestic worker activism from the 1950s to the 1970s, offering new perspectives on race, labor, feminism, and organizing.

Big Annie of Calumet: A True Story of the Industrial Revolution

By Jerry Stanley
(Crown Publishers, 1996)

This oversize book tells the true story of an amazing woman unionist, most famous for her support of the 1913 copper workers' strike in Calumet, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Great photos. Can be used with Woody Guthrie's song "1913 Massacre."

Why Unions Matter

By Michael Yates
(Monthly Review, 2009)

A clear introductory book about why unions are important, their weaknesses and potential, and their connections to the broader progressive political movements.

A People's History of the United States

By Howard Zinn
(Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005)

The best single-volume history of the United States. A must for any teacher of social studies of any kind. *A Young People's History of the United States* is appropriate for upper elementary through high school.

Labor Films with a Conscience

For a listing and reviews of powerful films about labor struggles, go to zinnedproject.org/materials/films-with-a-conscience/#labor

Golden Lands, Working Hands video and supplemental materials

By the California Federation of Teachers

This powerful 10-part video series brings the hidden history of California working people to light.

Teaching Guides

A People's History for the Classroom

By Bill Bigelow

(Rethinking Schools, 2008)

Multiple engaging teaching activities that correspond to several of the chapters in Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. (Published in cooperation with the Zinn Education Project.)

The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States

By Bill Bigelow and Norm Diamond

(Monthly Review Press, 1988)

Role plays and writing activities project high school students into real-life situations to explore the history and contemporary reality of employment (and unemployment) in the U.S.

Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World

By Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, editors

(Rethinking Schools, 2002)

An extensive collection of readings and source material on critical global issues, plus teaching ideas, lesson plans, and rich collections of resources for classroom teachers. Issues of sweatshops, child labor, organizing, and much more are covered.

Labor Matters Teaching Activity

By Teaching Tolerance

Introduces students to the role of the labor movement in securing contemporary benefits such as the 40-hour workweek, the minimum wage, and workplace safety regulations. For information, see zinnedproject.org/materials/labor-matters.

On the Banks of Deer Creek

A play by 5th graders from La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee Public Schools, about the 1886 general strike in Milwaukee for the eight-hour day. Script and teaching materials available at rethinkingschools.org/TUSJ. Video available at bit.ly/2J7K7o6.

Labor and Climate Justice Education Committee of the California Federation of Teachers

cft.org/curricula

The committee has a variety of labor education publications, including *The Yummy Pizza Company*, a role play on work and unions for elementary school children, a comic book on farmworkers, a booklet on the history of the labor movement, and their video *Golden Lands, Working Hands* (see above) on labor history in California. Many of their items are available free as PDFs. Several publications are available in Spanish and one in Chinese.

Zinn Education Project

zinnedproject.org

The Zinn Education Project offers a wide variety of teaching activities for free, including several role plays on important conflicts in labor history. The Zinn Education Project is coordinated by Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, and many of the activities were originally published in the *Rethinking Schools* magazine.

For additional books on teacher unions and social justice unionism, see p. 428.

