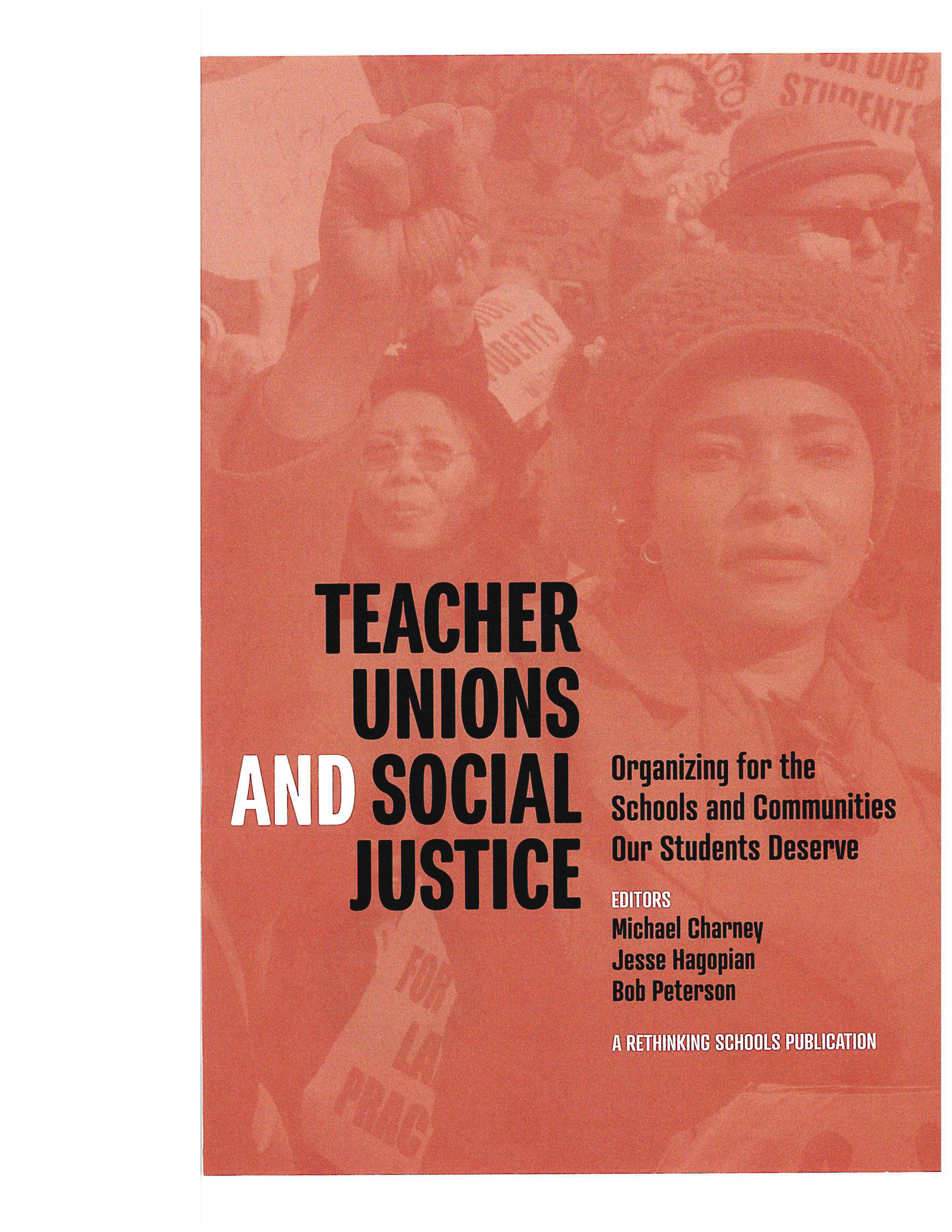




TEACHER UNIONS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

**Organizing for the
Schools and Communities
Our Students Deserve**

EDITORS

Michael Charney

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Bob Peterson

A RETHINKING SCHOOLS PUBLICATION

Teacher Unions and Social Justice:
Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve

Edited by Michael Charney, Jesse Hagopian, and Bob Peterson

A Rethinking Schools Publication

Rethinking Schools, Ltd., is a nonprofit publisher and advocacy organization dedicated to sustaining and strengthening public education through social justice teaching and education activism. Our magazine, books, and other resources promote equity and racial justice in the classroom.

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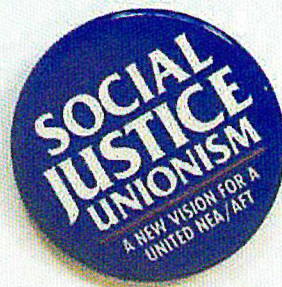
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We dedicate this book to Karen Lewis (1953–2021), past president of the Chicago Teachers Union. Karen's life work demonstrated the power of social justice teacher unionism. She inspired countless educators to learn from and organize with colleagues, students, and communities to transform our schools and our world.

Acknowledgements

The idea of *Teacher Unions and Social Justice: Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve* started out as what we thought would be a relatively easy project: publishing a second edition of the 1999 Rethinking Schools' book *Transforming Teacher Unions: Fighting for Social Justice and Better Schools*. We quickly adjusted that plan. Given the changes in the educational landscape and the union movement we decided to create an entirely new book that was more comprehensive and reflective of the times we live in. The book would not have been possible without the hard work and advice of many people.

The editors relied heavily on the talent of two people: Nancy Zucker and Leigh Dingerson. Nancy, who oversees the design and layout of our magazine as well as many of our books, brought a crisp layout, color, and the many engaging photos and illustrations to *Teacher Unions and Social Justice*. As production editor, Leigh's insights as a community organizer and education activist and her many organizational and editing skills made this book possible.

Rethinking Schools editors Stan Karp and David Levine provided ongoing support and critical advice. Gina Palazzari, Missy Zombor, and Lindsay Stevens oversaw printing, marketing, and distribution efforts. Copy editor and fact checker Tom Tolan and meticulous proofreader Lawrence Sanfilippo added their expertise. The overall vision and many of the particulars of the book were guided by the suggestions and advice of 12 people from across the country who served on an advisory committee. Their names and brief bios are listed on the following page.

And finally, a special thanks to the many book contributors, photographers, illustrators, and union activists and leaders who are building social justice unions and organizing for the schools and communities our students deserve.

—Michael Charney, Jesse Hagopian, and Bob Peterson

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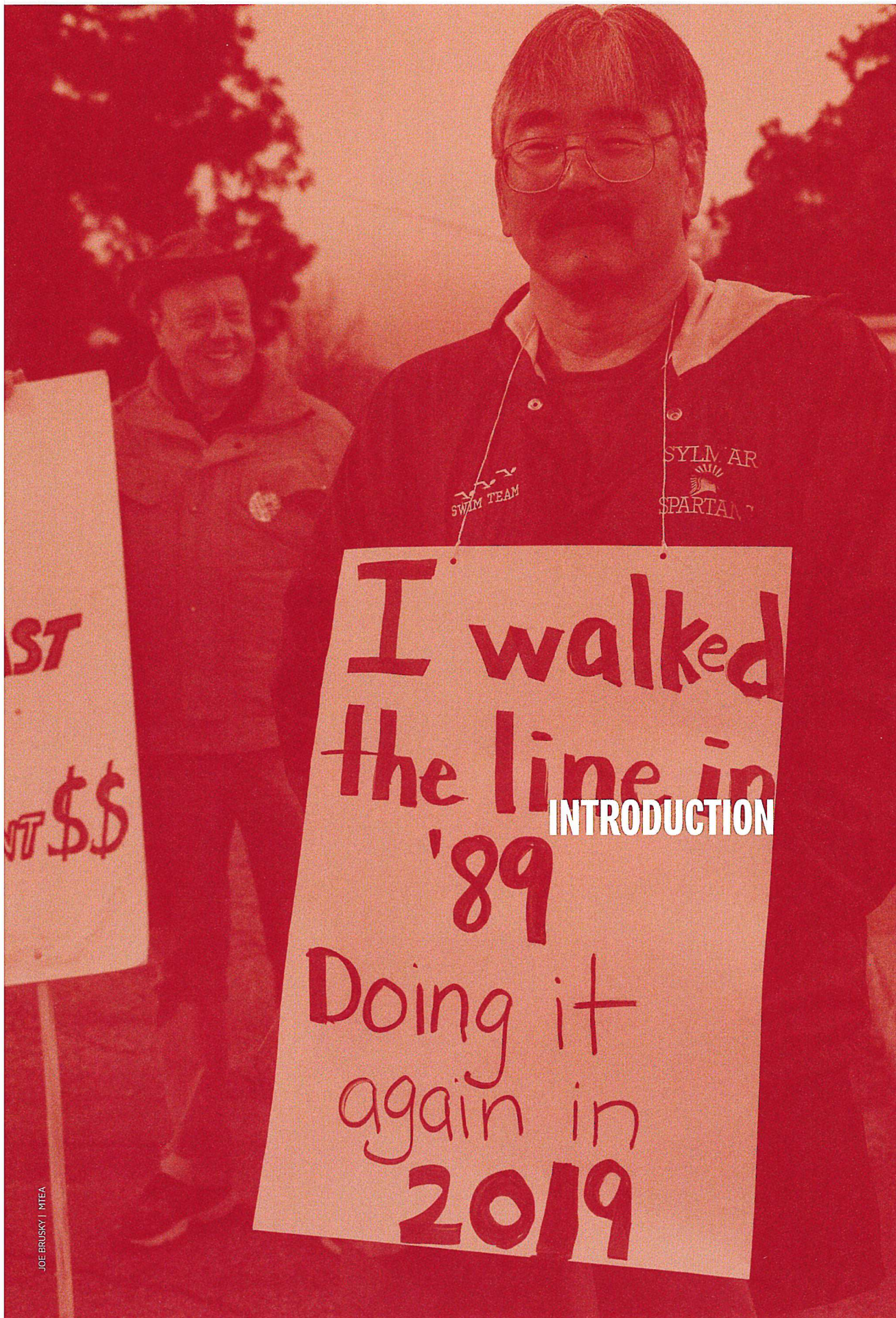
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INTRODUCTION



DAVID BACON

Teacher Unions and Social Justice

Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve



SHARON CHANG

More than two decades ago in the first edition of this book, *Transforming Teacher Unions: Fighting for Better Schools and Social Justice*, we promoted a vision of social justice teacher unionism. We argued that such a vision was essential to improving our schools, transforming our unions, and building a more just society.

Since then much has happened. Public schools, the entire public sector, and the basic notion of the “common good” have come under severe attack. Wealth inequality has reached an unsustainable level. The scourge of white supremacy has been intensified by rampant xenophobia. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc and death around the world, illuminating the grave weaknesses of social and public institutions. And our planet is still on fire.

But within our schools and the larger society, seeds of struggle have sprouted and grown. In the past decade, militant strikes have revitalized the teacher union movement. We’ve witnessed the birth of the Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Fight for \$15 movements, along with struggles for immigrant rights, climate justice, gun control, and an end to mass incarceration.

By the end of May 2020 the horrific murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade sparked a mass movement across the country and throughout the world demanding an end to police violence against Black people and other people of color. This unprecedented, multiracial Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement focused the nation’s attention on white supremacy and institutional racism and fundamentally changed the national conversation on racial justice.

The BLM movement also pushed teachers and school staff to reexamine their teaching and school policies and to put social justice and anti-racism at the center of our classrooms, schools, and our unions.

Contemporary Roots of Social Justice Unionism

The massive uprising by teachers in Wisconsin in the spring of 2011 set the stage for the Occupy Movement, that followed a few months later, and for an exponential growth in social justice unionism across the country. In 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) launched a historic and successful strike based on organizing members to move beyond a passive “service model” of unionism to embrace thoroughgoing rank-and-file engagement. As the CTU fostered internal democracy, it also built a strong alliance with the community by articulating and fighting for a comprehensive vision of how Chicago’s schools and neighborhoods needed to change. Presented in a sweeping report titled “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve,” this vision called for a halt to racially biased school closings, the dismantling of segregation, the hiring of more teachers of color, restorative practices in place of punitive discipline, the removal of police from schools, and other fundamental changes within the city’s schools. Just as important, the CTU championed a living wage, full employment, decent health care, affordable housing, and other measures to address structural class and racial inequality. This expansive commitment to transforming schools and communities moved the union to link its advocacy and organizing for educators’ interests to a broader strategy of “bargaining for the common good.”

The CTU was not alone. Teacher unions across the nation, including the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association, the Saint Paul Federation of Educators, United Teachers Los Angeles, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and the

Boston Teachers Union, moved toward social justice unionism. Inspired by the CTU, several of these unions worked with community groups to develop their own versions of “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve” and, where possible, started

“bargaining for the common good.”

We changed the title and subtitle of this new edition to emphasize “The Schools Our Students Deserve” as a way to frame the key *strategy* of building broad union/community coalitions to demand real investment—at the local, state, and federal levels—in our public schools. This means “bargaining for the common good” in states that allow bargaining, and militant, collective action including statewide strikes like those in the winter and spring of 2018 in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona. These and subsequent strikes and walkouts in LA, Chicago, St. Paul, and elsewhere shifted the national conversation about education and led public opinion to more favorable attitudes toward public schools and educators.

Following the lead of the Schools and Communities United coalition in Milwaukee, we added “and Communities” to the “Schools Our Students Deserve” slogan in recognition of the inextricable connections between the well-being of the broader community and the health of our public schools. These connections include the need for family sustainable jobs, adequate housing, universal health care, criminal justice reform, paid sick days and family leave, and an end to institutional racism.

To create the schools and communities our students deserve, we must reclaim our profession and our classrooms from the corporate reform agenda of standardized testing, scripted curriculum, and top-down control. In its place, we need to

make schools “greenhouses of democracy” in which teachers and other school staff collaborate deeply and hold each other accountable to provide all students with a rigorous and humane education. Such schools—sometimes called “transformative community schools”—welcome and support parents as respected partners. Such schools constantly work toward increasing equity and making classrooms places of deep learning and supportive, hopeful communities that foster civic engagement and concern for the common good among students.

To get such schools will be a struggle fought in the streets and in school boards,

city councils, statehouses, and Congress. It will mean the hard work of one-on-one organizing and building popular power in schools and elected positions side by side with mobilizing campaigns, demonstrations, and elections. Teacher unions are strategically located to help lead these struggles in our communities and to be allies in the various social justice movements of today. More than 5 million members of the NEA and AFT throughout the country engage daily with students and

**To create the schools and
communities our students
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from the corporate reform
agenda of standardized
testing, scripted curriculum,
and top-down control.**

We start this section with our overview of the characteristics of three types of teacher unionism—industrial, professional, and social justice—recognizing that unions often consciously or unconsciously draw on or blend together different aspects of the three models, or call them by different names.

SECTION TWO What Social Justice Unions Look Like

Our “Roots” section ends by examining key episodes of more recent teacher union history—a call for social justice teacher unionism in the 1990s by NEA and AFT union activists associated with the National Coalition of Education Activists, the historic 2011 Wisconsin teacher uprising, and the “RedForEd” wave of teacher strikes in 2018 that changed the landscape of current education politics.

justice-minded union leaders. ter- ing the issue of racism in our struggles and offers specific advice for new social Labor activist Bill Fletcher Jr.’s interview emphasizes the importance of cen- ship with the Black and Latino communities.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike that inflicted lasting damage on the union’s relation- ing the teaching of African American history and uniting with the community on groundbreaking work of the early Teachers Union in New York City in promot- highly gendered sector of the workforce. Historian Dan Perlstein describes the the important and increasing role women have played in teacher unions in this gle against corporate attempts to control our schools and our students. We note 1904 speech “Why Teachers Should Organize” and CTU’s long history of strug- We then highlight Chicago teacher union leader Margaret Haley’s famous our nation’s working-class struggles.

Zinn, who looks at the crucial yet imperfect role that labor unions have played in In this section we consider the historical roots of teacher unionism through the lens of social justice. We start with an interview with the late historian Howard

SECTION ONE Our Roots

guage examples, and resource recommendations. the book that contain more than 60 articles, interviews, documents, contract lan- such inspiration and learning. Below is a brief summary of the seven sections of that we inspire and learn from each other. We hope that this book contributes to To build a national trend toward social justice teacher unionism, it’s essential and student groups.

build lasting alliances with other labor, community, faith-based, civic, parent, side our unions, engage and organize—not just mobilize—our membership, and the broad social movements we need, we must ensure democratic practices in- cal to our national organizations—to embrace social justice unionism. To build provide such leadership it’s essential for teacher unions—from the smallest lo- economic challenges the majority of people face. We believe that to successfully their families. They are well placed to understand and help meet the social and

This section describes how teacher unions have worked for social justice through varied programs and organizing strategies—at times at odds with and at times in cooperation with district administrations. These initiatives include career ladders, home visits, restorative justice, peer assistance and review, and organizing for community schools. Many of these examples exemplify the “professional unionism” model. These articles emphasize that such programs are most effective when they incorporate key aspects of a social justice approach—heightening the involvement of union members and paying explicit attention to equity and the need to address white supremacy.

SECTION THREE Pushing from the Bottom Up

In many unions, sometimes the most dramatic changes stem from rank-and-file organizing that pushes leadership to take more militant, democratic, and radical action for social justice, and at times brings activists into leadership positions. Noah Karvelis describes how the savvy use of social media helped widely scattered educators organize a 2018 statewide strike in Arizona. Michelle Strater Gunderson, an experienced leader of the Chicago Caucus of Rank and File Educators, reflects on her experience and the role of caucuses across the country. Former CTV president Karen Lewis describes in detail the Chicago caucus and her first years as president. This section concludes with reflections on rank-and-file organizing in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and North Carolina.

SECTION FOUR Reimagining Our Unions to Build Power

As union activists committed to social justice win elections and move into union leadership, they confront many challenges and opportunities. The first part of this section details the transformation of the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association and United Teachers Los Angeles. Arlene Inouye shares how new leadership transformed UTLA and provides lessons from the 2019 strike. Lauren Quinn shares how the solidarity of that strike convinced her to get involved and become a leader in the union.

The rest of the section describes creative strategies for transforming unions and building power, including through school visits by union leadership, using traditional and social media, and hosting “Art Builds,” where art activists and art teachers with union support hold mass events to create posters, banners, and parachutes for major campaigns.

SECTION FIVE Fighting the System

In this section we examine how austerity, white supremacy, privatization, school takeovers, and the corporate push for standardized testing continue to damage public schools and undermine the prospects for providing equitable, high-quality education to all students. We also look at how different state and local unions have responded to these attacks and draw lessons from their organizing. The responses range from a caucus-led boycott of the MAP testing in Seattle, to a Baton Rouge local challenging ExxonMobil, to a successful struggle for investment in public

The final section is a compilation of resources that we think will be helpful for union activists and leaders. This includes excerpts from several different contracts that may inspire or provide helpful language for struggles elsewhere. We also list organizations, periodicals, websites, and books/pamphlets that provide more discussion on many of the subjects covered in this book.

Some of the articles from the first edition of this book that were not included in this volume are available at rethinkingschools.org, along with our quarterly magazine that regularly covers issues related to teacher unions and educational justice. Please stay in touch with us.

SECTION SEVEN Resources

The imperative for teacher unions to work for social justice encompasses not only local, state, and national arenas, but also our classrooms. In a society that often fosters alienation, passivity, and disengagement, we need to foster a sense of community, vibrant connection through shared learning, and optimism about changing the world. We need to help them think deeply about the forces that shape their lives: white supremacy, wealth inequality, gender injustice, and climate change. Just as importantly, we need to help them understand how people have joined together in social movements to work to make things better.

Weaving social justice themes into the classroom enables educators to act in solidarity with the communities they serve, teaching critically about the issues that those communities care about. And when we engage union members about these issues, we educate them, and help them think more clearly about what unions can and should fight for. In this section we examine principles of social justice and anti-racist education, and provide several examples of how unions are increasingly promoting such teaching on issues ranging from climate justice to racial justice and economic justice.

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shared learning, and optimism
about changing the world.**

SECTION SIX Taking Social Justice into the Classroom

In order to remind readers that our struggle is international, we've included an interview with Angelo Gavrielatos, president of Australias New South Wales Teachers Union, who led a five-year anti-privatization campaign for Education International. We've also included an account of the teacher union movement in Colombia, where teacher activists and leaders have been assassinated and kidnapped by right-wing militias. These articles underscore the need for social justice unions to act in solidarity with educators and students around the world.

schools in Massachusetts, to a victorious effort to remove a pro-privatization governor in Puerto Rico.

While we use the word “teacher” in the title of our book we know that many current teacher unions include “non-teacher” educators and other school staff. We also know that relations between these different groups of workers have at times been divisive. We support democratic, wall-to-wall unionism in public schools and acknowledge just because all public school workers might be in one union, equity is not a given, and that it’s essential that all union members are able to fully and equitably participate in union activities and decisions. We look forward to exploring efforts to unite all school workers into single public school worker unions and to publishing articles on this topic in future editions of *Rethinking Schools*.

A note on the term “teacher unions”

Michael Charney
Jesse Hagopian
Bob Peterson

Editors of *Teacher Unions and Social Justice*

As this book goes to press at the end of 2020, our world is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic with no clear end in sight. While much will be written about the pandemic in the months and years to come, one lesson is already clear: Well-funded, democratically run public institutions led by competent and vision-ary officials, accountable to public oversight and review, are essential to the overall welfare of our society and the survival of the entire planet. All justice-loving people have an important role to play.

Given the size and breadth of teacher unions, social justice unionism is an essential pillar of the activism needed to create a more sustainable and just future for the children who will inherit the earth.

* * *

...Imagine if Your Union...

Ran a mentoring program in cooperation with school administration to provide every new teacher with ongoing help from a mentor.



Worked in an ongoing alliance with community, parent, and labor groups to promote the schools and communities our students deserve.



Had so much respect in the community that when a parent has a problem in a school, the parent not only would talk to the principal and their child's teacher, but also to the union rep.



Had a diverse leadership and membership that was more reflective of the district's student body.



Had an outreach program in which union members regularly spoke at community and neighborhood groups, sororities, and fraternities, and places of worship to garner support for public education and exchange ideas.



Operated a professional development center where teachers taught teachers and those being instructed earned university credit for participation.

Invited members of community organizations and other labor unions to gatherings to discuss issues of mutual concern.



Sponsored afternoon social justice curriculum-sharing sessions at the union's offices.



Started programs for high school youth to serve as union interns and learn about the labor movement.

Offered opportunities for members to engage and interact with members of other unions—nationally and internationally.



Maintained a resource center with working copiers, supplies, tech support, and a professional library of journals and books that served as a hub for common teacher planning.



Had a program to fight racism and prejudice, with a place where teachers could turn to for professional development, curricular resources, and support.

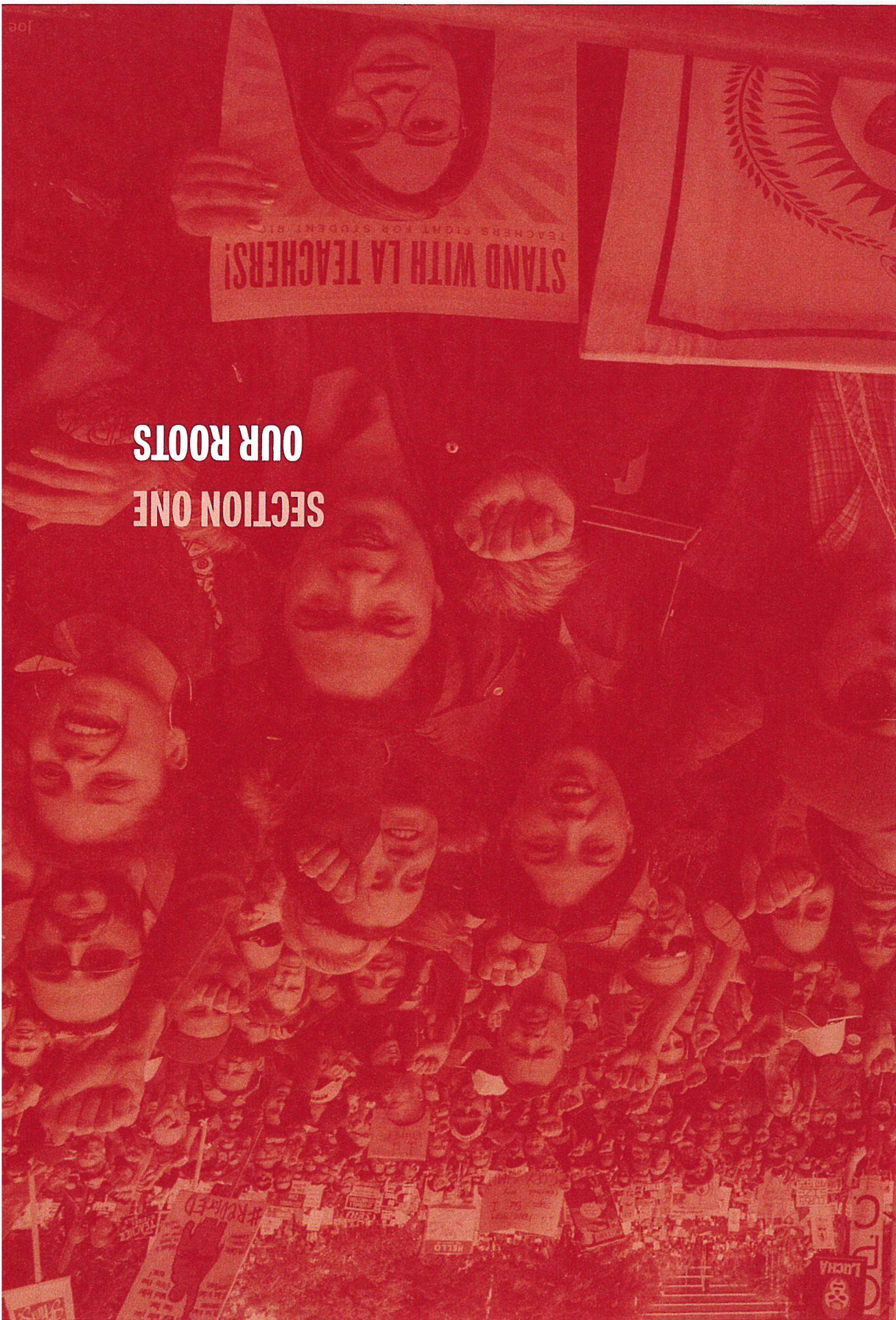


Held membership meetings that were lively exchanges on important educational and social issues, rather than top-down assemblies of leadership speeches and reports.





SECTION ONE OUR ROOTS



-Howard Zinn

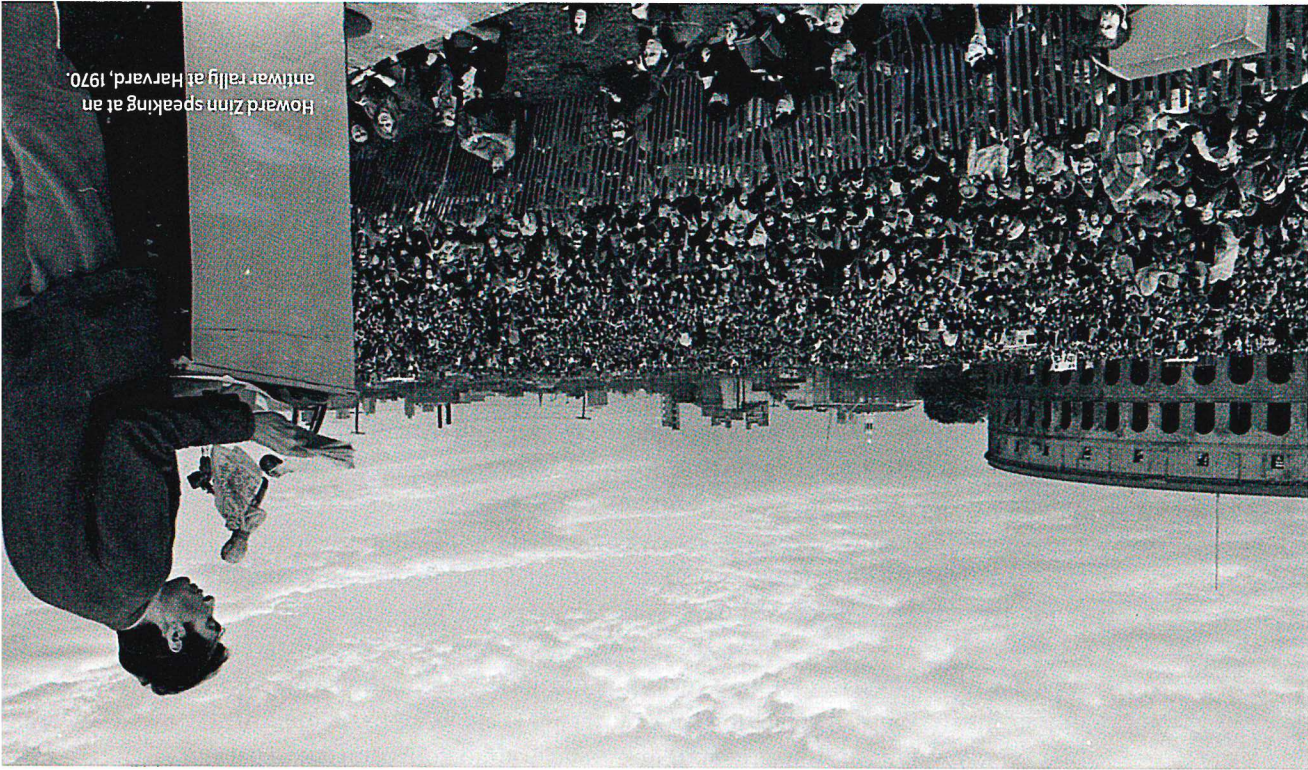
leave."

they are told to
and **STAY** when
supposed to say

they are not
to go, **SAY** what
are not supposed
GO where they
People should:

Why Teachers Should Know History

An interview with historian Howard Zinn



Howard Zinn speaking at an antiwar rally at Harvard, 1970.

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The following is condensed from an interview with historian Howard Zinn, author of A People's History of the United States. He was interviewed by Bob Peterson of Rethinking Schools.

How has the labor movement contributed to the economic well-being of people in our society?

There is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that guarantees economic rights such as decent wages, or decent hours of work, or safe working conditions. As a result, working people have always been forced to act on their own. One way they have done this is through the labor movement.

Without the labor movement, it's doubtful that working people would have won the eight-hour day. Not only did workers not have government on their side, the government was on the other side. All through the latter part of

the 19th century and the early 20th century, the government was using the police and the Army and the National Guard and the courts to break strikes throughout the country.

In the 1930s, workers organized to extend the benefits of labor organization beyond the small percentage of workers covered by the AFL (American Federation of Labor) craft unions—that is, to extend the benefits to the women, people of color, unskilled workers, and immigrant workers who were excluded from the AFL.

This led to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). A more recent example is the farmworkers organizing on the West Coast in the 1960s to bring at least a modicum of decent conditions to people who had been left out of organized labor for a long time.

It's interesting that this country boasts so much about our standard of living compared to that of people in other countries. While that's generally true, this higher standard of living did not come as a result of governmental initiative—or some action by Congress, or the Supreme Court, or the president. It came as a result of working people organizing, going on strike, facing off with police, going to jail, getting beaten, getting killed. The history of labor struggles in this country is one of the most dramatic of any country in the world.

Why do you think that today less than 14 percent of the workforce in the United States is unionized?

For one thing, the history of working people and of the labor movement is not taught in this country. It's not in the schoolbooks and it's not in the mass media. So workers are unaware of past labor struggles, and this can have a debilitating effect.

It's also harder today to organize workers because of changes in the economy. Manufacturing has shrunk while the service industry has grown. But service and white-collar workers are much harder to organize than blue-collar workers in large factories. Now there is also the problem of organizing in an increasingly global economic structure.

One reason the American workforce has been so little unionized, even in its best years, has been the tensions between white and Black, men and women, played upon by the employers. But also, unions themselves have discriminated against people of color and women.

positions in trade unions. And often, unions have not fought hard on the issue of equal pay for equal work for women and minorities.

Then there is the intimidation factor. President Reagan broke the strike of the

One reason the American workforce has been so little unionized, even in its best years, has been the tensions between white and Black, men and women, played upon by the employers. But also, unions themselves have discriminated against people of color and women.

Have there been times when the U.S. labor movement has played a noticeably more progressive role, going beyond bread-and-butter issues for its members?

Here's one example. During the late 1930s, when fascism was rising in Europe, the progressive labor unions in the United States refused to work on ships from Germany. They also tried to establish boycotts of goods from Germany and Italy. In the 1930s, the labor movement was farther to the left than it is today. The CIO, which later joined with the AFL, took a lot of important stands for peace and justice. There were CIO conventions where they talked about health care, job security, even basic changes that needed to take place in the social structure. This broader focus, however, changed almost immediately after World War II. The ferocious anti-communism of the Cold War led to demands that trade union leaders take loyalty oaths and swear they weren't involved with the communist movement. It was at this time that the labor movement dropped its concern with broader issues of peace and justice and international solidarity.

If you go back to the early 20th century, you have the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which was more than a labor movement and which fought for the total restructuring of society. The IWW went far beyond the focus of the AFL, which was to simply get higher wages and better working conditions for its narrow band of workers. Of course, the IWW was destroyed by the government during and after World War I.

In fact, one of the functions of war is to give the government an opportunity to get rid of troublesome, rebellious movements in society. The government in this country has been very good at taking the patriotic spirit that exists during war and using it to whip up hysteria and justify putting labor leaders into jail.

During World War I, for instance, the government put virtually all the IWW leaders on trial, for conspiracy to hinder the draft and encourage desertion, and gave them long prison sentences. And after World War II, during McCarthyism and the Cold War, progressive leaders of the labor movement were forced out of their positions. You have to remember that the Cold War and McCarthyism were not just phenomena of the Republican Party. They were part of a clearly bipartisan effort to get rid of the radical forces in the labor movement and get rid of the larger issues that the CIO was concerned with.

What role did the labor movement play in the Civil Rights Movement?

In my experience, the labor movement was not involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the South, one reason being that the labor movement has never been well organized in that part of the country. When the Civil Rights Movement began to act on the national level, there was a distinct difference in the way the unions

air traffic controllers almost as soon as he came into office in 1981, and that put a great fear into workers who might have been thinking about going on strike. Also, the National Labor Relations Board has, in recent decades, become more of a tool of corporations. Nor have the courts been quick to support workers' rights. All these factors are serious obstacles to workers trying to organize.

bad. It all depends on what class the government is favoring. Remember the slogan that Clinton threw out during his last campaign? "The era of big government is over." That slogan shows how poorly people in this country have been taught our history. It is so misleading and hypocritical for Clinton to talk about the era of big government being over. For most of our history, government has been used to support the rich and the corporations. It is only relatively recently, in the 20th century—particularly in the 1930s with the New Deal and in the 1960s with programs such as Medicare and food stamps—that the government has responded to the demands and interests of ordinary people. For most of our history, in fact from the very beginning with the establish-

can we draw from history? This issue of the popular attitude toward government is very interesting. I believe this attitude is by and large created by politicians and the media. They have managed to take this very complicated question about the role of government and very cleverly make it seem like it's wrong when the government does something for poor and working people. It's important to point out that big government in itself is neither good nor

Currently a debate rages about the role of government in society. What lessons

ments you've participated in?

During the movement against the war in Vietnam, there also was a distinct difference between rank-and-file workers and some of the more progressive unions on the one hand, and the national leadership of the labor movement. The progressive forces were involved in the antiwar movement from the start. But the national leadership, which then as now was tied to the Democratic Party, was slow to join the forces against the war. It did so only when the country as a whole was disgusted with what we were doing in Vietnam.

What has been the role of organized labor in other peace and justice move-

who supported the Civil Rights Movement. But not all unions responded positively. For example, in 1964, the Civil Rights Movement fought for the rights of Blacks to be at the Democratic Convention and opposed [seating] an all-white delegation from Mississippi. That's when Fannie Lou Hamer, a courageous African American from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party—the name given to the disenfranchised Black people organizing their own political party in the summer of 1964—went on national television and appealed to the nation. But the top leadership of the AFL-CIO—then-head Walter Reuther, for example—wanted the Mississippi people to accept a very pitiful, token representation in the Mississippi delegation. They didn't want the Blacks to even have a vote, but to just sit there at the convention.

responded. The progressive ones such as District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union and Local 1199 of the Drug, Hospital, and Health Care Employees Union reacted very positively and were helpful in fundraising and in giving support. There were also rank-and-file workers from across the country

ment of the U.S. Constitution, the government has favored the upper classes. The Constitution was intended to create what we might call big government, a strong central government, for the purpose of aiding the bond holders, the slave holders, and the land speculators.

On the other hand, when government is affected by popular movements, citizen movements, or protest movements, it is possible that occasionally the government will do something that helps the people who are in need. We have examples of government doing very good and useful things. One thinks immediately of the G.I. Bill of Rights, right after World War II, when government funding enabled millions of WWII veterans to have a college education, and that democratized the educational system of the country almost overnight.

Today, interestingly enough, complaints about big government have been centered around welfare, Social Security, unemployment security, minimum wage. These are examples of where government is absolutely necessary, yet they are being attacked.

On the other hand, we have big government today in the form of the Pentagon—government contracts to manufacture of nuclear weapons and military hardware, jet planes and aircraft carriers. That's a very, very big government involved there.

I think it's important to point out the distinction between the historically pro-business actions of the government and the occasional pro-people actions of the government.

What role could teacher unions play in terms of promoting such an understanding?

If teacher unions want to be strong and well supported, it's essential that they not only be teacher unionists but teachers of unionism. We need to create a generation of students who support teachers and the movement of teachers for their rights. In many cities, the teachers are mostly white and the students are mostly students of color. How has the labor movement hindered or helped in the struggle against racism?

This is an important issue. Racism has historically been used in the United States to divide white and Black workers from one another. Sometimes people ask why is there no great socialist movement in the United States as has developed in other countries. One of the reasons is the division among workers. And the biggest division is the racial division that employers have used again and again. Very often,

Racism has historically been used in the United States to divide white and Black workers from one another. Sometimes people ask why is there no great socialist movement in the United States as has developed in other countries. One of the reasons is the division among workers.

the result has been that unions have been racist. The AFL consisted of white-only craft unions, and Blacks were excluded.

On the other hand, the IWW at the beginning of the century welcomed everybody, and the CIO organized in mass production industries such as auto, steel, and rubber, which had large numbers of Black workers who had come up from the South after World War I. The CIO had to organize both white and Black workers, and they struggled together during the strikes of the 1930s. That was a very positive movement in the history of race relations in the trade union movement.

But racism is a constant problem and remains a problem today. It raises the question of labor unions thinking beyond their most narrow interests and thinking in terms of larger social issues like racial equality and sexual equality. You would think that unions would be in the forefront in fighting against racism and sexism, but in fact unions have very often been obstacles.

I think progressive people who work in labor unions need to enlarge the social view of the labor movement, so that it understands that labor is most powerful when it can unite people across lines of sex and race, foreign born, native born, and so forth. This unity serves not only the immediate and practical purpose of strengthening the labor movement, but also speaks to the larger moral reason of doing it because it is the right thing to do.

Why do labor unions have a tendency to become bureaucratic and undemocratic?

It's for the same reasons that all organizations have a tendency to become bureaucratic: Success creates top-heavy leadership, and the accumulation of a treasury creates opportunity for corruption and high salaries. Also, union leaders negotiate with employers and begin to get closer to employers than to their own members. Labor unions aren't the only ones who suffer from this problem; it's a constant struggle in all organizations to maintain the power of the active rank and file. What it means is that members of unions cannot be complacent. Every union has to have a constantly active rank and file, defending their rights every day. It's analogous to society at large, where citizens cannot just simply vote people into office and then relax.

What do you think about labor/management cooperation for teacher unions?

It's a delicate matter, because there is nothing wrong with cooperating on certain things with administrations or school boards, as long as you don't give up the independent strength of the teachers. It's also important that teacher unions become more inclusive and include part-time teachers, service workers, librarians, and secretarial staff—in other words, to become industrial unions rather than narrow craft teacher unions. That will strengthen the teacher unions, and then when they do things jointly with administration, it will help guarantee that they are not dominated by the administration in those joint activities. &

A Hard Lesson from History

BY BOB PETERSON



BENEDICT J. FERNANDEZ

A friend who works for a teacher union recounted a discussion in which an anti-union teacher asked my friend why she supported unions. Her reply was simple. She said that without unions, particularly the one her dad had been in, she would have grown up in poverty.

For many that's reason enough to support unions.

It's an issue of survival and has been for 160 years, since the birth of the labor movement in the United States. But the labor movement's track record of promoting the general welfare of working people is uneven, as some people—particularly people of color and women—have been excluded or discriminated against by certain unions.

I saw this firsthand when I worked on the Milwaukee docks in the early 1970s. I witnessed the resistance of the International Longshoremen's Association to allowing women into the union. The ILA was continuing a long, nefarious tradition of some sections of organized labor. One of the first strikes in Milwaukee, for example, was in 1863 by typesetters at the *Milwaukee Sentinel* who struck to protest the hiring of women.

In these cases, the unions weren't just defending workers from greedy bosses; they were also "defending" unionized workers from other workers. Historian Robert Allen, in his book *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States*, documents how in many unions throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries, white workers attempted to keep workers of color out of many jobs. As late as 1931, Allen notes, 14 national unions prohibited African Americans from membership.

This has been a historical weakness of unionism in the United States: fighting to improve conditions for certain poor and working people while undercutting the interests of other poor and working people. In other words, the dilemma of defending the interests of a sector of working people instead of the interests of all. Or to put more generally, developing a social pact for some versus social justice for all. Often this problem is racialized.

When unions have overcome this weakness and united workers regardless of race or gender, as did the Congress of Industrial Organizations during the 1930s, they became powerful social forces. Many workers in these unions had both an understanding of themselves as workers and a sense of social justice. The United Packinghouse Workers of America, for example, aggressively promoted both racial and gender equality among its diverse membership, making it a powerful union.

Teacher unions have faced similar issues. In the early 1960s, for example, there were still 11 segregated National Education Association (NEA) state associations; as late as 1974 the NEA still had a segregated Louisiana association. (Since that time the NEA has changed dramatically, as exemplified in its affirmative action staff hiring policies and in guaranteeing significant minority representation at its national conventions.)

But this historic dilemma for the labor movement—balancing the interests of its own members with broader issues of justice for all working and oppressed people—still persists.

For teacher unions, the challenge rests no longer in exclusion policies or segregated locals, but in more complex ways.

One such way is when teacher unions' defense of their members' rights and benefits conflict with the needs of students and the broader community. Perhaps the most prominent example of that was the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike in New York City. The conflict centered on the extent to which local communities (in this case, mainly African American communities) could control their schools, particularly with respect to staffing. (See Perstein, p. 42.)

Twenty-five years later, a similar conflict boiled over in Milwaukee regarding the staffing at two African American immersion schools. The schools were specif-

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.

ically set up to deal with high academic failure rates among African Americans. Because of the unique nature of the schools the community requested that one-third of the schools' teachers be African American. The union opposed the request because it violated contract provisions that set a maximum percentage of 23 to 28 percent African American teachers at district schools—even though no white teachers wanted to transfer into the two schools to fill existing vacancies.

In both these cases the unions won their battles, but at a daunting price, as members of African American communities summed up the actions of the unions as examples of racism on the part of white-dominated unions.

Another challenge that persists in many unions is an internal one—whose voices are listened to, who is hired as staff, and who is in leadership? While progress has been made, too often white males still dominate staff and leadership positions. Does leadership support caucuses that speak directly to racial and gender inequalities? Does leadership development target women and teachers of color? Does the union promote anti-racism and anti-bias among its members?

Addressing these and other challenges is particularly important given the crescendo of attacks on public schools and teacher unions and the need for unions to ally with communities to defend public education.

Teachers should recognize that their self-interests can no longer be defined using solely "narrow trade union" or even "professional" terms. Our interests and our future require teacher unions to balance those matters with a social justice perspective that places the education and welfare of our students in school and in society at the top of our agenda.

My friend who works for a teacher union and who argued about the value of unions did not talk only about her father's union. She talked of how early teacher union activists were mainly women, many of whom were involved in the suffragist movement. She explained the broader labor movement's influence on social policy legislation such as the minimum wage, unemployment compensation, and Social Security. She noted that the United Auto Workers were major backers of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement.

It is in the tradition of that sector of the labor movement—the one that promotes social justice for all—that we should situate our teacher unions. §

Organizing in Defense of the Public Sector

An interview with labor union activist
and writer Bill Fletcher Jr.



ARLENE HOLT-BAKER

Bill Fletcher Jr. has been active in workplace and community struggles as well as electoral campaigns. He has worked for several labor unions in addition to serving as a senior staff person in the national AFL-CIO. He's authored or co-authored several books on unions and is a syndicated columnist. This interview combines parts of an interview that appeared in the first edition of Transforming Teacher Unions with one done in 2020. Both interviews were conducted by Bob Peterson.

Public sector workers serve the public and are paid through tax dollars. They play a different role from autoworkers, steelworkers, or shipbuilders working for a private business. Given these differences, what special roles do public sector unions play in society?

Public sector unions play three roles. First, they defend the interests of their mem-

bers. Second, and a lot of public sector unions talk about this so much that it's almost a cliché, they must look out for the interests of the community. A third role, which is not talked about a lot in the United States but is around the world, is that they must defend the public sector.

This third role is critical right now. Public sector unions need to articulate a coherent and credible defense of the public sector—to explain the role of the public sector and show why any kind of civilized society must have a public sector. I don't think public sector unions do that very well. As a result, they tend to come across as merely defending the interests of their members.

When I speak about the "public sector," I am not just talking about government jobs. I am referring to the larger question of public services and public space. For example, parks and recreational facilities are collective necessities that aim to improve people's quality of life and living standards. Many of these "spaces" and other public services were won through struggles over decades. I would argue that many, if not most, of these functions cannot and should not be operated with the profit motive in mind. Such services must be the concern of public sector unions. Thus, this defense of the public sector goes way beyond a matter of job protection; it speaks to a defense of society itself.

In recent years there has been increasing attention and fight back against school privatization. What's your take on the effort?

This fight back against various forms of school privatization is important, but we need to realize that there is no saving public education if the public sector as a whole goes down. It's not possible. There will be no public education sector island in the middle of a private sector ocean. To the extent that public school advocates are not engaged in the fight to defend the entire public sector, they will lose. That's the critical thing.

For 40 years we've witnessed a slow eating away of the public sector. In the U.S. the Clinton administration was one of the real problems on the progressive side of the aisle. That administration moved a neoliberal agenda with a velvet glove, and many progressive forces sat back and said nothing. Those forces lost significant credibility in their unwillingness or inability to fight the austerity budgets and privatization when articulated by political liberals.

We need to build a public sector reform movement that unions lead and that includes, but is not limited to, public education. Such a movement needs an alternative strategy and vision of the way that public sector should operate, who it should serve, and how it should be funded.

In 2009 when Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. proposed a constitutional amendment creating the right of public education for every person, I supported that plan. I thought it was brilliant because it would have automatically changed the funding formula for education. I was dumfounded and remain dumfounded that neither the NEA or AFT ever took that up. I have never been able to figure it out. Why not take that up? It's that type of thinking that we need to change.

One criticism of teacher unions is that they are part of a "government monopoly"—that public education is better served through privatization and other mechanisms to spur competition. What do you think?

The notion that the private sector is somehow more efficient is a complete fallacy. There are plenty of historical examples—the railroads, for instance. Why did railroads become part of the public sector? Because they were destroyed by private sector interests. Why did the subway system in New York City, which had been run by three private companies, become a quasi-public agency? Because it was being destroyed by the companies.

Public sector unions have to expose that kind of history. But we also need to talk about the fact that there are things necessary for a civilized society that cost money and may not always result in a profit.

In most school districts the public schools are governed by democratically elected school boards. Despite labor/management disagreements at times, it's in the interest of education workers to unite and cooperate with school boards to improve and defend public education. What's your take on this tension?

Terms such as labor/management collaboration have become very loaded, so I prefer to talk about issues such as "worker participation." It's important to look at the substance of the proposal, not simply the form and rhetoric.

For example, every time a union signs a collective bargaining agreement with an employer, it is agreeing to cooperate. That's a reality. It's actually part of the reason the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) wouldn't sign collective bargaining agreements.

The labor movement has rejected the IWW approach, and recognizes that in a collective bargaining agreement we are agreeing to cooperate on certain things. To me, the question is not so much one of cooperation, but the terms of the discussions. Unions also need to challenge what are seen as management rights—issues such as the future of the institution, the quality of the service or product, how best to serve the customer, and budget decisions. These are things that workers should have a say in, not necessarily as individuals but collectively through their union.

When you talk about public arenas such as public transportation or public schools, the unions should be a way for the rank-and-file workers to get involved in such discussions. If we want to be candid, we have to recognize that part of the problem is that many unions do not have ways for rank and file to become involved, and then the workers become alienated from their union and, on an individual level, much more susceptible to management's view.

Historically, teachers have vacillated between viewing themselves as professionals—who want individual control over working conditions—and as workers who see the need for collective action. What would you say to those who think teachers should be treated as professionals and are hesitant about being associated with "blue-collar unionism"?

I think teachers should be treated and respected as professionals, because they are. But being professional shouldn't be seen as being superior. I come out of the industrial union mode of thinking on these questions, and tend to think that wall-to-wall is the best way to build power. It's not about whether teachers like janitors or janitors like teachers. The question is: How do you strengthen the power of the workers?

This issue is very much related to the question, which has come up in both the AFT and NEA, about who should be in the bargaining unit. I think that is a tactical matter that should be settled on the basis of an analysis of power. It's also a question of how you go about building a sense of identity.

Children and youth of color are large majorities in many school districts, and yet in many places teachers are majority white. What are the implications for teacher unions? What are ways that anti-racist union activists and leaders deal with white supremacy?

One of the things we should remember about the 1968 New York teacher strike is that the New York City school system was deeply segregated and there was an insufficient number of teachers of color. As far as I can tell there had been no systematic demand by the AFT—in that case it was the UFT—for the full desegregation of schools or significant hiring of teachers of color and other education staff. And that to me is representative of a major problem. And it's not just a problem that afflicts teacher unions; it's a problem that afflicts many unions where there is a transformation from a largely white workforce to a more diverse workforce. You see that in the skilled trades. What you may hear is "we are against discrimination," but what you don't get is any kind of active campaign on the part of the union to fight for fair hiring practices. Teacher unions need to argue for affirmative action and for the recruitment of teachers who look like and understand the issues of the student population. That's the minimum.

A second thing that teacher unions should do is change the nature of their internal member education and push for similar changes in districtwide professional development. To be blunt, there needs to be ongoing examination and understanding of the history of racism and the many ways racism manifests itself. The same is true for sexism and class issues. This understanding of history or race—both racist oppression and resistance—must be distinguished from so-called "diversity training." People need to critically examine U.S. history because the aim is not only about people getting along better, but also for teachers to really understand the system in which they are operating and to be able to relate to the issues that their constituencies—in this case their students—are grappling with.

Things that school districts do—Black History Month, Latino History Month, and all of that—are important, but not as important as integrating those histories of marginalized populations into the overall narrative of this country that is addressed in the curriculum.

I think about when I was in high school—and obviously this was a long time ago—and we actually talked about unions in my social studies classes, but the dis-

cussion never dealt with any issue of race. It was looking at a phenomenon very much from the outside and where the people who looked like me were erased. Unions should work with students and community allies to make sure the people who get elected or appointed to school boards have that kind of awareness and consciousness.

In 2011 we had the Wisconsin Uprising followed the next year by the CTU strike. Rank-and-file caucuses pushed social justice-minded activists into leadership roles across the country. In the spring of 2018 the red state strike wave surprised the nation. And then in 2019 we witnessed more strikes, including Los Angeles. What are some of the lessons from these uprisings?

I'll start with the positive example of Chicago and the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTBEA). In both cases, the leaderships embraced a social justice unionist approach—whether they called it that or not—that included making the union in effect an instrument to advance and change education by aligning themselves with the interests of the students.

That model is very different from the Albert Shanker model. His method was in effect lifting the model of the steelworkers and the autoworkers and implanting it into the public sector. In the beginning it worked because the teachers were so poorly treated and badly paid that almost anything represented an improvement. But at a critical time, that model simply failed, because it wasn't intersecting with the real needs of the community.

I think what you folks did in Milwaukee and Chicago represented a very different approach. It necessitated that your unions, and the others that tried to follow a similar path, recognize that it wasn't just about rhetoric, but that the actual work of the union had to change and that there would be internal resistance to that and it would be difficult.

The upsurges of teacher unions and the strikes in conservative states have been really amazing. The challenges are twofold. One, to what extent can viable organization be built and rooted? And the second, to what extent can these upsurges be translated into the building of a progressive education movement that includes community-based organizations and parents?

Some people were surprised a state like West Virginia had such a powerful strike just two years after 68 percent of the people voted for Donald Trump. What do you make of that?

Terminology is very important. Some talk about "conservative workers" and say that "workers voted against their own interest." The problem with that formulation is that we are assuming these workers see their own interest in the same way that we do. The second problem is a direct result of racial capitalism—that we exist in a situation where class consciousness and class awareness are always affected by the prism of race. There are countless historical examples where you have militant trade unionists who are white supremacists.

So when you see the teacher militancy in West Virginia and say how is this

possible given that many voted for Trump, I think that for many of these workers there is no inconsistency. They look at Trump as the guardian of white republic and the white republic's values—and they see him as someone who is speaking out against the so-called elites and bureaucrats. Teachers hate bureaucrats and elites. And the fact that these elites may be a code for Jews or a code for something else doesn't always rise to the surface. So many of the same people who are out fighting the good fight see no inconsistency between carrying out that fight and voting for Trump. We have to be very careful, and that's why the fight against right-wing populism needs to be central to the work of trade unionists in this era.

What suggestions do have for someone whose colleague in the classroom down the hall holds such views?

I would ask questions, not lecture. It's really important for class-conscious teachers to engage their colleagues in the dangers of right-wing populism and the dangers inherent in Trump and people like him by asking key questions. When people say Trump looks out for us, you have to have class-conscious teachers able to respond and say, "Let's look at the tax reform bill of 2017—how does that benefit working people? Who does it benefit?" That means people have to be on their toes, but members can learn how to do this.

In the past I've heard you say that having an education director in each union is essential. Why is that?

At different points in U.S. history, trade unionism member education was treated with significant value. However, in the context of the Cold War and the civil war that broke out in organized labor in 1948, internal education was reduced in importance by the more conservative forces that came to dominate many unions. They looked at member education as an unnecessary distraction, in some cases a base for the political left. So they reduced resources and education departments. To the extent they continued at all, the departments became holding pens for people the leaders didn't need or want around.

Part of the roots of this problem is that too often people in the U.S. dismiss the importance of education per se. The epitome is the saying "those who know, do, those who don't, teach." It's quintessential American. I can't imagine the saying being used in China or France. Not only do we put down education in general, but accurate history is dismissed and instead people hold on to myth. Simple myths like George Washington cutting down the cherry tree to the much more significant myths like that of the original Thanksgiving and treatment of the Native peoples at that time.

Honest member education is incredibly important because it is about vision. Our union education programs should help shape the consciousness of workers and provide a framework so that when workers read the news they can make sense out of it. That's a big part of a union leader's job, because if you are making sense of the world, then, to borrow from a famous writer, you are in a better position to change it. That's why the education role is so important.

Sounds good, but how does that work in smaller unions or union locals?

In smaller unions there is always a resource problem when it comes to such work. This is where central labor councils and regional or state union bodies can play important roles. Using webinars and online classes can help minimize expenses. A number of universities also have good labor education programs, and many have been under attack, as in Missouri and Nebraska. Unions should fight to defend such programs.

What advice do you have to new union leaders as they work to transform their unions into social justice unions?

First thing is to do an assessment of the union in terms of what's working and what's not. Then engage in some kind of planning process—a minimum of six to 12 months—to outline what the new leaders hope to accomplish. Fundamentally they need to come up with a basic and compelling vision about what it is they want to bring into existence.

There also needs to be a way of making the organization both fun and interesting. The organization needs to become an instrument for learning, including about the struggles going on in other parts of the country and world. That means everything from setting up informational programs, speakers, and webinars, to fun social events, cultural performances, or sponsoring a Little League team, so that their members feel like this is their family.

Create a community advisory committee where you get some key opinion makers from the community that you've worked with over time and meet with every month or two—to get their evaluation of how you are doing and what they think you should be doing and also so that the union can convey to them some of their concerns and where the union leaders might need help.

The top leaders are going to need coaching, and many will not think that they do or insist that they don't have time. The reality is that—particularly in a transformative moment—many leaders have no one to talk to confidentially.

Finally, there is one other thing that top leaders need. And that is a culture established from the very beginning, that the bubble that invariably develops around the leader is regularly burst. Too often such a bubble keeps out bad news with no one telling top leadership that certain things are not going fine.

What would you say to new leaders coming into a union local that has been staff-run and members are conditioned that when they have a problem they call the one or two staff people to solve their problem. You know, the union that is viewed as a third person singular—"they, it, the union"—versus first person plural—"We are the union"?

You have to seize on opportunities for members to win some struggles. That might be in the form of broader campaigns or specific demands at the school site. This means educating shop stewards [building chairs/representatives] and field staff about their role. They are not glorified paralegals—they are fundamentally organizers. The leadership has to say from the very beginning that the members need

to run this union. That we can't spend all our resources on a relatively small number of people who have problems. Because most members don't. Most members have collective problems as opposed to individual problems, so we want to spend most of our resources on the collective issues. And that point needs to be made time and again because we get hung up on that small number of people who have problems on a regular basis. And members know this, and that's one of the ways that the anti-union forces often operate and say to people, "Look, you never have a problem. Why are you paying dues?" as opposed to us saying, no, this is our collective thing. This makes me think of a conversation I had with Jack O'Dell, a top advisor to Martin Luther King who was redbaited out of that position. He was in the National Maritime Union during WWII. I became good friends with him. I had seen a documentary on the Merchant Marine years ago, and one thing that the documentary said was that these ships were 100 percent union and every ship had a union committee that led union on the ship. There were no staff people. These were members. When I talked to Jack, I said this is what I heard, is that true? And Jack said, "Yeah it's true, and we were expected to resolve issues while we were at sea. You weren't supposed to come back to New York and say there's a grievance and somebody's got to take care of it." They'd say, "No, resolve the damn thing on the ship." That's the model we need where the member organization is set up in such a way that [building] leaders and union committees are solving the problems at the site, and staff are training them to do that.

What role can teacher unions play in the future of the American labor movement?

Teachers help to shape the minds of the future generation. One important role is to help build awareness about unions and the labor movement. Some teachers don't want to talk to their students about unions; they see it as somehow unethical and misusing their position. That's ridiculous. Teachers need to help sow the seeds of the future of unionism.

Teacher unions also can play a pivotal role in fighting back against the attack on the public sector. Many years ago, I was talking with some teacher union officials about the attack on public education. I argued that they were absolutely right to raise this alarm, but that they needed to do so in the context of the overall attack on the public sector. They looked at me as if I were an alien from *Star Trek*. They stared and said, "Yeah, but we really have to defend public education."

I replied that if the public sector is destroyed, or the concept is so diminished that it's meaningless, then there will be no public education to defend. That's not to say we should ignore the specific importance of defending public education, but rather to emphasize that the attack is occurring in the context of an attack on the very premise of a public sector. ■

Visions of Justice:

Unions and the community in historical perspective

BY DAN PERLSTEIN



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American teacher unionists have at times joined with working-class community activists in a common battle to win more equitable and democratic schooling for all children. At other moments, teacher unionists have defended the centralized administration of schools against activists demanding community involvement in educational affairs. Unions both have been active participants in efforts to promote racial and gender equality and have opposed such initiatives. In a society marked by profound social divisions, notions of social justice in education are inevitably as varied as those proposing them.

Two tensions have been especially pivotal for teacher unionists. Although advocates of social justice in education sometimes seem to expect teachers to fore-

Teachers were torn between old neighborhood allegiances and the promise of a new professionalism. Unlike Chicago, where elementary school teacher Margaret Haley led a militant, community-based campaign that forced corporations to pay their school taxes and won a pay raise for teachers, leading New York teacher unionists shared the professional aspirations of elite reformers. Today's AFT flagship local, the UFT, traces its history to the Teachers Union (TU) and the Teachers Guild, inheriting from the two earlier organizations its commitment to professionalism. The TU was organized in 1916. Its founder Henry Linville possessed a Harvard PhD, and over the years, as the UFT brags, top teacher unionists included "PhDs, accountants, and even lawyers—men like Jules Kolodny, Dave Wites, and Charles Cogen."² The male-dominated TU showed little interest in gender equity. At the same time as the TU struggled to attract a handful of teachers to the labor movement,

Teacher unions arose at the beginning of the 20th century, when elite schools responded to the social conflicts of America's burgeoning cities with new mechanisms of centralized governance and administration, new bureaucratic procedures to sort students and divide work, and new forms of technical and professional knowledge to guide and manage educators. As historian Marjorie Murphy demonstrates, elite reformers hoped to isolate teachers, most of them women, from the working-class communities in which they taught, to win teachers' allegiance to male central office professionals, and thus to have schools help maintain order in America's fractious cities.¹

Unionism, Professionalism, and Gender Equity

In no city have the varied ideologies and alliances of American teacher unionism been more visible than in New York, and no city has played a more prominent role in the history of teacher organizing. New York's United Federation of Teachers (UFT) local continues to occupy a preeminent place in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Life in the epicenter of American teacher unionism has been in many ways atypical of conditions in the rest of the United States. Still, focusing on exceptional moments in American teachers' history can illuminate the obstacles to the pursuit of social justice teacher unionism as well as its richest potential.

A second tension involves teachers simultaneously making demands upon the state while serving it. That teacher unions won the right to bargain with the state at a moment in the 1960s when the American welfare state was rapidly expanding its disciplinary power mirrors the ambiguous role that the American state has played in efforts to secure social justice more broadly. Questions involving the relationship of self-interest to social justice and the relationship of working people to the state have shaped the history of teacher unions and their participation in movements for social change.

Teachers as agents and as beneficiaries of social justice. At issue is how teachers have understood the relationship of their self-interest (sometimes represented as business or bread-and-butter unionism) to broader political concerns (sometimes described as social justice or social movement unionism).

Today's UFT traces its ideological and organizational roots to New York's Teachers Union, formed by Linville and other social democrats. Through electoral campaigns and labor organization especially, social democrats sought to extend political democracy to economic life. They believed that the United States could evolve gradually toward socialism without a fundamental reordering of its political structure; that if distinctions of class could wither, other, more superficial social divisions would disappear even more easily; and that the U.S. might achieve a universal held culture, with universal standards of judgment, into which all would assimilate. Racial problems, in this view, were largely caused by and subservient to class conflicts. The social democratic response to American racism received its most famous expression from Eugene Debs, who proclaimed socialism a "slavery-destroying" movement capable of offering "inspiring music" to Black Americans "doubly enslaved" by the "unspeakable crimes" of the white race. Still, he claimed, "The Socialist Party is the party of the whole working class, regardless of color," and therefore it had "nothing special to offer the Negro."⁵ Aspiring to professional respectability while espousing a mildly reformist vision of socialism, New York's social democratic teacher unionists placed more faith in discrete lobbying campaigns than in mass demonstrations. Until the 1930s,

The Teachers Union

New York's Interborough Association of Women Teachers, under the leadership of Deputy Superintendent Grace Strachan and with the support of Carrie Chapman Catt and other suffragists, organized 14,000 women teachers with demands for equal pay. Commitment to the social justice ideal of gender equity served the self-interest of most teachers, but also required participation in a movement of white women to transform their political status.³ Acceptance of male privilege and insensitivity to women's concerns, together with the intersection of gender and racial dynamics, have been ongoing issues in teacher union politics. Although women filled 50 percent of the TU Executive Board as early as 1925, and in the 1930s they outnumbered men at union meetings, when Linville's ideological descendants founded the UFT New York organizations, when Linville dismissed women as potential unionists. "When teachers loudly and publicly bicker with each other, when tongue-clucking talk and futile hand-wringing are substituted for vigorous action," UFT President Charles Cogen argued in urging teachers to abandon other organizations, "how can we expect anything but contempt?" Cogen labeled an "old woman" a teacher "of any sex or age who . . . accepts unquestioningly . . . [the] dictates of anyone in authority over him, and who refuses to protest—even mildly—any unwarranted transgressions into his professional domain." In the early 1960s, the UFT's founders focused their efforts on angry young men in the junior high schools—and were completely unaffected when thousands of female elementary school teachers participated in early UFT actions. When, in the late 1960s, the UFT was locked in bitter conflict with Black community activists rather than with central administrators, union leaders would again view inflexibility as a virtue rather than a failing.⁴

Linville and his followers retained firm command of the Teachers Union, but amid the growing activism and radicalism of the Depression years, teachers began to demand that the union take a more militant stand on school issues and broader political questions. When a communist-led rank-and-file coalition won control of the TU in 1935, the original socialist leadership bolted and formed the Teachers Guild, an organization that soon won the backing of the American Federation of Labor and in 1960 gave rise to the UFT.

Following the 1935 split, commitments to social justice animated both TU and Teachers Guild activities. But they were not always the same commitments. The communist-led TU, notes historian Clarence Taylor, attracted large numbers of teachers by simultaneously fighting to improve salaries and working conditions while also offering a compelling analysis of racism and class oppression and building a movement of civil rights, community, and labor activists to end poverty, racial discrimination, and other forms of social, economic, and political oppression. Despite the exodus of the social democratic faction and opposition from school officials, the TU grew from perhaps 1,500 members in 1935 to more than 6,000 in the late 1930s.⁶

One of the most significant differences between the TU's new leadership and Linville's more moderate group was its response to school racism, which the TU now made a major focus of its work. Although Blacks constituted only a small percentage of New York's students in the 1930s, school segregation and discrimination were already well established. "Old, poorly equipped, and overcrowded" schools were a primary source of Black discontent, a 1935 city investigation reported, and "many of the white teachers" assigned to Harlem schools "regard the appointment as a sort of punishment." Even after he became disillusioned with communism and left the party, former communist leader George Charney fondly recalled TU's militant activism:

Pressing their demands for better schools, more schools, textbook revisions, Negro teachers and principals, free lunches, and so forth . . . mothers came [to meetings] en masse to organize programs, assign delegations, and join in citywide activities. In every school, white teachers, with the active support of the Teachers Union, came forward to collaborate with the parents in this inspired effort to transform a community through education.⁸

Alice Citron, a leader in the overlapping communist and Teachers Union circles of the 1930s, epitomized Depression-era anti-racist school organizing. In her Harlem classroom, Citron replaced textbooks written by New York Klan administrators that portrayed happy, dancing slaves and defended the Ku Klux Klan with lessons inspired by Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History Bulletin*. After school, she compiled bibliographies on Black life for other teachers, organized campaigns to rectify derelict school facilities, and earned a reputation throughout the streets of Harlem for her role in battles against American racism.⁹

The Teachers Guild and the UFT

Even in the heyday of the TU, Guild activists were promoting an alternative vision of teacher unionism, one that would lead directly to the establishment of the UFT and through it to the transformation of teacher organizing across the U.S. Within the Guild, a younger generation of teachers combined the mild reformism of Linville's generation with the militancy of their communist competitors. The Guild, according to veteran socialist and future UFT leader Jeannette

Teachers Union members joined with parents and community activists to organize pickets against the brutal corporal punishment of Black students and to secure the construction of Harlem's first new schools in decades.

The theory on which the TU based its anti-racist campaigning originated in the American Communist Party. Extrapolating from the role played by national minorities in the Russian Revolution and influenced by demands for African American self-determination, communists reasoned that the union of the anti-capitalist working-class protest and Black community organizing could catalyze a movement to overturn class and race oppression in America. Even if the communist vision of self-determination for an "oppressed Negro nation" has rightly been dismissed as "a bit of fatuous romance," notes historian Mark Solomon, it led communists "to deal with racial issues and attitudes in ways that were totally beyond the awareness and comprehension of most white Americans," and gave rise to "the most determined efforts of a predominantly white organization to achieve equality since the abolitionists."¹⁰

TU members joined with parents and community activists to organize pickets against the brutal corporal punishment of Black students and to secure the construction of Harlem's first new schools in decades. For almost 20 years, TU-led coalitions remained New York's most militant and effective grassroots school reform effort. Although most teachers never joined the TU's radical campaigns, its principled efforts improved working conditions, enriched teachers' work and aligned teachers with efforts to democratize the wider society.

But the TU's ability to simultaneously promote the interests of white teachers and of Black communities provided it little protection from the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era, when hundreds of activist teachers were forced out of the New York school system and parents were cowed into ending association with "subversives." In 1950, the Board of Education declared that school administrators were no longer permitted to "negotiate, confer, or deal with or recognize [the Teachers Union] in relation to any grievances or any personal or professional problems, nor grant to said Teachers Union any of the rights or privileges accorded to any teacher organization." The ban, which lasted until 1962, destroyed the TU and cleared the way for the rise of the UFT.¹¹

Dilorenzo, "was a social movement as well as a trade union movement." Like many future UFT leaders, Dilorenzo had grown up in a home where "the religion" was "being part of an international movement." She studied socialism and Marxism at the Rand School and honed organizational and leadership skills in the Young People's Socialist League. Through countless meetings, debates, and bare-knuckle ideological and organizational battles, future UFT and AFT leaders mastered a vision of teacher unionism that they would maintain steadfastly through future decades. "I never stopped to analyze whether it was good people I was working for," Dilorenzo would remember. "It was the idea; it was working for a better world."¹²

When the Civil Right Movement arose in the South in the 1950s, the Guild's response was shaped by its continuing commitment to the Debsian ideal of equality for workers of all races. Prodded by the Guild, the AFT voted as early as 1951 to charter no new locals that practiced racial discrimination, and by 1956 the union ordered Southern affiliates to desegregate or be expelled. The AFT's efforts contrasted with those of the National Education Association (NEA), which did not fully desegregate until the 1970s.¹³

A vision of uniting all teachers and a strong commitment to unionism remained hallmarks of the New York AFT local when the Guild reconstituted itself as the UFT in 1960. "The goals of the embattled teachers," UFT founder Dave Selden claimed, "were the usual worker goals—higher wages, better benefits, and improved working conditions. Perhaps the ultimate goals were higher status and dignity."¹⁴ AFT President Carl Megel argued in 1962 against equating teachers with such professionals as doctors and lawyers: "A doctor or a lawyer is a businessman. A teacher is a worker. You are a day laborer."¹⁵

When the UFT initiated its organizing campaign, it received tremendous support from the labor movement. Unions donated tens of thousands of dollars and lent field workers for the 1961 election in which the UFT won the right to repre-

sent New York's 43,000 teachers. Noting that white-collar employees had come to outnumber blue-collar workers in the U.S., Cogen acclaimed the election as labor's biggest collective bargaining victory since the United Auto Workers organized Ford's River Rouge Plant in 1941.¹⁶

While portraying teachers as workers, UFT leaders also sought to promote teacher professionalism. If a teacher were "considered a production worker,"

Selden conceded, issues such as class size would be non-negotiable questions of educational policy rather than issues of working conditions. "But a teacher is not merely a production worker. He is a professional," and like other professionals, Selden argued, teachers had a right to be "self-directed and use their judgment in their work." By this definition, he argued, teachers might rightly negotiate over class size not because large classes "sweated" teachers into undue hardship but because teachers rightly had a say in pedagogical issues.¹⁷

Unionists' understanding of teachers' work was not the only reason they invoked teacher professionalism as well as industrial unionism. The emergence of teacher unionism signaled important changes in American economic and political life. After World War II, automation and deindustrialization led to a decline in the

number of factory jobs, and together with McCarthy-era repression and pro-man-
agement changes in labor law, to an even steeper drop in blue-collar unionism.
Meanwhile, the number of state and local government jobs mushroomed. New
York City alone lost 40 percent of its 1 million manufacturing jobs between 1950
and 1969, but increased its 375,000 government jobs by 40 percent.¹⁸

Union leaders were keenly aware of changes in the labor force, changes that
made organizing groups such as teachers crucial to the future of the labor move-
ment. When International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers President James
Carey addressed the NEA's 1962 convention, he pointed to the UFT's New York
campaign as a model for teachers across the U.S. The NEA's simple professional-
ism, Carey argued, "implies that your *craft* is somewhat above this world of ours;
it implies a detachment, a remoteness from the daily battle of the streets, in the
neighborhood, and in the cities." Without unions, he warned, teachers would lack
decent wages and thus the ability to "afford integrity and honesty" in their work.¹⁹
Another union official made the big picture plain. "How long will the file clerk go
on thinking a union is below her dignity," he asked *Business Week*, "when the teach-
er next door belongs?"²⁰

The synthesis of industrial unionism and professionalism proved immensely
popular with teachers in New York and across the U.S. Still, teachers' self-directed ac-
tivity involves the direction of other persons. Like the Progressive Era reorganization
of urban schooling, the new professional unionism distanced city teachers from the
urban communities in which they worked. Nowhere was the potential for conflict
between urban teachers and the families they serve more clear than in New York.
By the late 1960s, the racial politics of education, together with wider changes
in urban life, had undermined Black activists' faith in the goodwill of white teachers.
The UFT never applied to local race relations problems the militant commitment
to racial equality that informed its response to Southern struggles. Among the ac-
complishments of which the union boasted to teachers, for instance, was its having
"killed the superintendent's plan to force teachers to transfer to difficult schools."²¹
In 1964, when more than 400,000 of New York's 1 million students boycotted school
in order to press for integration, the UFT declined to endorse the protest.²²

Following the defeat of the campaign to integrate New York's schools, Black
activists increasingly demanded that school curricula and jobs be controlled by
Blacks themselves. In 1968, experimental local school boards in Harlem and
Brooklyn's Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood became the focal points of New
York's political life. After the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board attempted to remove
13 teachers from the district's schools, the UFT went out on strike for much of the
fall of 1968. By the end of the year, the UFT had won its strikes and effectively end-
ed the movement for decentralized "community control" of schooling.

In defense of the union's position, UFT leaders argued that the same vision
of professional autonomy, race-blind due process, and solidarity that had led them
to support the Civil Rights Movement (and that would soon lead the AFT pioneer
trade union advocacy of gay workers' right to be judged by their work alone and
not their identity)²³ justified union opposition to community control. Neverthe-

The same economic changes that led the labor movement to organize teachers and other white-collar workers also undermined the UFT's invocations of working-class interracial solidarity as a vehicle for advancing Black freedom. As factories disappeared, industrial democracy could no longer animate the imagination of New York's poor. Their grievances—welfare rules, police brutality, poor city services, urban renewal, and school policies—were the results of an oppressive state rather than an oppressive boss. Community activists in New York and across the U.S. increasingly abandoned residual faith in the promise of racial integration and

responsibility for their ineffectiveness. standards of instruction asserted teachers' professionalism while absolving them of widespread minority student failure, adherence to seemingly uniform, race-blind

Amid the troubling and visible tragedy of the teaching experience "arouses them,"²⁷ "rather than undermining these prejudices," poor minority children to their work, and future urban school reformer Deborah Meier has observed, brought prejudices against ty of teachers, New York teacher activist and decaying urban neighborhoods. The majority of teachers, from their students, who lived in retreats, from their students, who lived in ers, who could abandon cities for suburban cultural, and political gulf separated teachers were white. An increasingly wide physical, Black or Latino; meanwhile, most teachers 1960s, a majority of New York's students were ingness to distance themselves from the communities in which they worked. By the late school teaching contributed to teachers' will-of the moment, the very conditions of urban In addition to the heightened passions

any school or district where professional decisions are made by laymen."²⁶ should be surrendered." Union teachers, he declared, "will not continue to teach in nity participation does not mean that those decisions under professional control intent of the UFT," Al Shanker claimed in the face of Black demands, "that community that struggled for years to make teaching a profession."²⁵ "It has always been the come up. It's wrong and reactionary for them to pit their strength against a group UFT picket line, "but they shouldn't get it by pulling down others who have just pation."²⁴ "We don't deny their equality," a white teacher claimed while walking a struggle to create a respected profession from a beleaguered, downgraded occupation."²⁴ "We don't deny their equality," a white teacher claimed while walking a support civil rights and equal educational opportunity, but their commitment to AFT president Sandra Feldman claimed on the eve of the 1968 conflict, "in general creasingly dominated Debsian notions of working-class solidarity. Teachers, future less, in the context of the school conflict, invocations of professional autonomy in-

By the late 1960s, the racial politics of education, together with wider changes in urban life, had undermined Black activists' faith in the goodwill of white teachers. The UFT never applied to local race relations problems the militant commitment to racial equality that informed its response to Southern struggles.

embraced demands for Black Power. The people of Ocean Hill-Brownsville were a "community," as Black teacher activist Rhody McCoy argued, because "they were involved in struggles with poverty programs, with political machines. They've had common goals and interests."²⁸ Despite the changes in urban life, UFT leaders insisted throughout the 1960s that the social democratic politics of interracial solidarity remained the surest means of securing real power for Black Americans. Community control, Feldman argued, "strengthens segregation and places upon poor communities the burden of creating desperately needed, massive, substantive, programmatic changes in their schools." Only the federal government, Feldman insisted, "can provide the kind of resources needed" to substantially improve inner-city education "and only a massive coalition of forces can prod Congress into action."²⁹ By 1968, however, the commitment of the U.S. to social welfare programs and racial equity had already begun to ebb. When AFL-CIO leaders endorsed the UFT's 1968 fight against community control, it was because of the union's importance "not only for the future of teacher unionism but for the growth and expansion of white-collar and public service employee unions as well." Labor leaders' endorsement of the UFT signaled both the rise of public employee unions and the declining power of labor in American life.³⁰

The 1968 school crisis established the UFT's powerful role in school politics and urban life, a role that benefited teachers in later salary negotiations. Victory in 1968 was, however, expensive for New York's teachers. In the years following the school conflict, racial tensions demoralized school work and undermined the very liberal coalition that the union claimed to seek. In an earlier time, the UFT's rhetoric of equal opportunity, due process, industrial unionism, and professionalism might have enabled members to transcend narrower views and individual bigotry. In 1968, the UFT's anachronistic invocation of interracial working-class solidarity distanced teachers from the poor communities in which their students lived and legitimized racial inequality in the contested world of the schools.

The Past and Future of Social Justice Unionism

Self-interest alone is inadequate as a guide to personal action or social analysis in part because self-interest is never really clear. "Conditions," philosopher and AFT founder John Dewey observed, are not "fixed or even reasonably stable. . . . Social conditions are running in different, often opposed directions. Because of this fact the educator . . . is constantly compelled to make a choice. With what phase and direction of social forces will he throw in his energies?"³¹ Teachers' notions of their self-interest, the movements in which they participate, and the alliances they make inevitably reflect their interpretations of social reality.

Combating perceived threats from below left teacher unionists exposed to threats from above. With its 2018 *Janus* decision by requiring unions to offer services for which they are not paid, the Supreme Court joined the long-standing right-wing campaign to destroy the unions of teachers and other public employees. And even before *Janus*, teacher unions' lesser-of-two-evils fealty to the Democratic

Party and the state led them to give far more than they have received. In recent decades, Gates, Broad, the Waltons, and other billionaires have imposed their vision on the schools, while corporations have feasted at the schoolhouse trough. They and their advocates in government have promoted charter schools, vouchers, the outsourcing of teaching to the gig economy, and other neoliberal “reforms” that have undermined not only teacher unions but also the century-old system of school district governance and administration that constituted the conditions out of which the unions emerged.

In 2012, Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis, who is Black, led teachers in a strike against the complicity of government and union officials with the privatization of the city’s schools. Since then, soon after the election of Donald Trump gave rise to the notion that the white working class had fully embraced racist reaction, teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, back in Chicago, and across the country have walked off their jobs to demand justice for themselves and their students. Some of these strikes were launched and directed by unions; others were wildcat actions in places that ban public sector strikes.³²

Teacher unions have at times challenged the inequalities of American life, and fostered broader demands for the public good. At other moments, they have allied themselves with the state to place teachers’ immediate interests and privileges above more expansive ideals. At times, teachers have been served reasonably well by such visions, even if their more disadvantaged students have not been. But teachers are also harmed by theories that lead them to ally themselves with class, gender, and racial privilege. In order to protect both material self-interest and the joy of their work, public school teachers must, in the long run, protect the public interest. Will today’s attacks on schools and the political and economic conflicts they reflect lead teacher unionists to imagine ideologies responsive to today’s realities? It is too early to know whether recent strikes herald a new form of teacher unionism and with it a new relationship to the groups and movements seeking social justice in America. The history of teacher unionism raises questions that only its future will answer. ■

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An Agonizing Decision—Crossing the UFT Picket Line

BY HERB KOHL



Brooklyn parents demonstrated for their children's right to a quality education.

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As Dan Perlestein relates in "Visions of Justice" (p. 42), in 1968 a simmering conflict between teachers' self-interest and the demands of parents and community activists exploded in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of New York City. Herb Kohl was a teacher at the newly constructed Intermediate School #201. As the conflict between the union and the community ignited, Kohl made an agonizing decision. This is how he described it in his article "Facing Tough Decisions," which was included in *Transforming Teacher Unions*, the first edition of this volume.

This was 1968 during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Power movement was emerging and the Young Lords were organizing in the Puerto Rican community. With the refusal of officials to integrate the schools, parents and community activists abandoned the idea of desegregated schools and decided that the only way to create

Herb Kohl is an educator and writer whose most recent book is The Herb Kohl Reader: Awakening the Heart of Teaching.

quality education was to have community control of schools—something that had always been the case in affluent white communities.

... By this time Albert Shanker was head of the United Federation of Teachers. As the controversy at Intermediate School 201 erupted, the community ally took control of the school and staffed it with a variety of educators, activists, artists, and other community members who had skills and cared about children. The community demanded an African American administrator, community accountability, and respect for the children and the parents.

The UFT . . . set up picket lines around the school to prevent students and parents from coming in.

To me this was one of the greatest ironies I have encountered in education: teachers striking a school, trying to prevent children from entering the building, and keeping parents at bay. I saw it as an expression of scorn for the community and disrespect for the children's ability, tinged with racism. I had to take a stand for or against the parents and the community. I decided to cross the teachers' picket line.

Crossing the picket line was difficult—I worried about what my grandfather would think, remembering his union pledge and the unquestioned loyalty every working person was supposed to feel for unions. But, weighing the lives of the children and the attempt by the union to protect incompetence, I chose the parents and the children. This was one of the most agonizing decisions I have ever had to make and, though I would do it again if faced with the choice, I still worry about it making the spirit of my grandfather restless and angry.

If I was clear about anything after my first six years of being a teacher and an educational activist, it was that the first priority had to be the children. Loyalty to any idea, institution, or organization was secondary. ■

they were paid miserably. They made a fraction of what the teachers in the regular schools were getting. So we had just gotten the right to negotiate for them. That was a big issue.

And during this strike, Frank Rizzo was mayor. He's been in the news a lot lately, because his statue still stands in front of City Hall and many want it removed. I think most people know him now as the anti-Black Power, anti-LGBT rights police chief and mayor, but he was also the mayor going up against the teacher union during these strikes.

I remember I think the morning we're going to go back out on strike in January and the lawyers and the judges all went into chambers to discuss things. And we're all sitting around outside and all the reporters are there. And a reporter with Channel 10 asks me, "John, what do you think about what the mayor said about you today?" I said, "I didn't hear what the mayor had to say about me today." And he says, "You didn't hear what he said? He said, 'Ryan don't run this city.'" And I snapped back "Ryan do too." And that became a chant on the picket lines and people had it on picket signs.

And Rizzo threw you in jail during that strike?

Right. They got a judge to call an injunction. Frank Sullivan, the union president, and I went to jail for 19 days. Rizzo had friends including the cardinal archbishop. My wife was a daily communicant and went to Mass every day. But because the archbishop was close to the mayor, he decreed that no priest or nun should visit me or my family.

During that strike there were hundreds arrested. They would pick a school. They would load the buses up and they all got arrested. But Rizzo came to regret doing that immediately. Because the labor leaders then went to him and said, "You're going to have trouble from us. We're going to close this city down."

Right. During this strike the AFL-CIO called a general strike. Was it because you had built relationships with other labor unions in the city, or the national organization helped organize it?

Both. Actually, the main reason for it was Johnny Morris, who was president of Teamsters Local 115. Johnny was tough as nails. And he got a lot of it done. There were a lot of other local labor leaders who supported us as well. The president of the (local labor) council wasn't very keen on it, but he went along with it mainly because so many of the powerful unions were on our side. But that was a big reason why we settled. I think we would've gone through June if they hadn't called that general strike. We came to an agreement on the 27th and we had listed five things that we wanted. We got a lot more than that, but we got every one of those five, including big raises for the Get Set program. I think the minimum wage increase by the end of the contract was 20 percent, and for the Get Set program, some of the people went up 60 percent in three years. We got the class size down to 35. And then by the time I left in 1979 it was down to 33, which is pretty much where it's still at today. ❸

A People's History of the Chicago Teachers Union

BY JESSE HAGOPIAN

When America's great crisis is a story in the pages of history, there will be a significant chapter devoted to the unflinching sacrifice of the Chicago teachers, who are now carrying on under inconceivable difficulties, far beyond the point that might be fairly considered the limit of human endurance.

—National Education Association Journal, 1933

We've been fighting in Chicago for a long time, but our community and teachers have realized that the turning point of survival has kind of been met. Public education in Chicago is at stake, and if we don't take drastic measures, we're not going to have neighborhood schools that are available to all students.

—Jen Johnson, high school teacher, Chicago Teachers Union delegate, and founding member of Caucus of Rank and File Educators, 2012

When Jen Johnson spoke of the extended struggle that Chicago teachers have been engaged in, she may have been referencing assaults by such corporate education reformers as Arne Duncan. Yet the history of Chicago teachers putting down their pencils and grabbing picket signs to defend public education dates back to the late 19th century—and contains some of the great stories in labor's history.

Chicago emerged during the late 19th century as a major commercial, financial, and manufacturing center with the stockyards front and center. But in 1886, Chicago also became known as the center of the struggle for the eight-hour workday, a struggle that culminated in a police massacre at Haymarket Square, the trial and execution of four of the movement's leaders, and the establishment of May Day as International Workers' Day. This same brawl between capital and labor would soon break out in Chicago's schoolyards.

In 1898, William Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, proposed a sweeping reorganization of Chicago's public schools. Modeled on New York City schools, the plan was shaped by elites across the nation who sought to reorganize public education to suit the needs of a newly emerging industrial society. Their main goals were to control children during the day while both parents worked, provide basic education to the next generation of workers, and prepare

them for the rigid schedule of factory life. Harper sought to hire only teachers with college degrees, implement a new system of hiring and firing, and address the “feminization” of schools by establishing a sexist hierarchy—hiring more male teachers and raising their salaries above women. He also proposed to lease schools, property tax-free, to Chicago businesses for 99-year terms.

Chicago Teachers Federation and the “Labor Slugger”

But Harper was unprepared to play hardball with schoolteacher Margaret Haley, dubbed Chicago’s “Lady Labor Slugger.” Haley was the seminal figure in a class struggle approach to teacher unionism and an early leader of the Chicago Teachers Federation (CTF), a precursor to the Chicago Teachers Union.

Haley’s father had been a member of the Knights of Labor, the first national labor union. In Haley’s first teaching job in Joliet, Illinois, she asked her superintendent for a raise from \$35 to \$40 per month. The superintendent at first agreed, but when he later stalled, Haley sent him an ultimatum: If he did not pay her a higher salary by noon of the first day of the fall term, she would resign. When he denied her raise, she took the next train to Chicago.¹

Haley successfully organized teachers to resist Harper’s 1898 school reorganization. Even though women lacked the vote, Haley reached out to women’s clubs—suffragist-leaning social networks of “high society” women—sending speakers to

win over the club members on the basis of feminism, as women made up much of the teaching force. Teachers organized their own afternoon teas at neighborhood schools, like the Hendricks School in one of Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods, located next to the stockyards and meatpacking district immortalized in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. This broad approach to struggle paid off, and the Harper bill to reorganize the schools failed in the Illinois state legislature.

This experience drew Haley to the CTF. Together with Catherine Goggin, Haley initiated the “Teachers’ Tax Crusade” that examined the Cook County tax rolls and discovered some \$2 million in unpaid taxes. Haley and the CTF forced the local tax boards to collect the money and provide it to the school system. After three years of legal wrangling by outraged businesses, a court reduced the amount to \$600,000. This still provided a substantial raise to Chicago’s teachers, and news of the campaign spread across the nation.

Yet Haley emphasized that the struggle was not for economic gains alone.

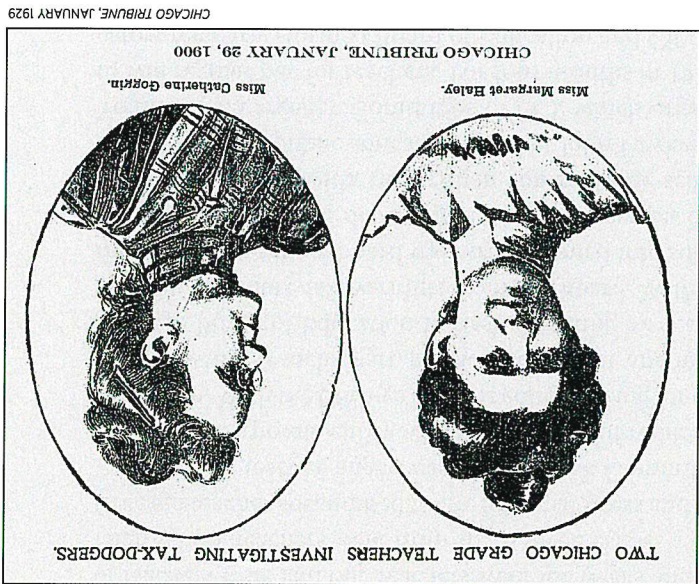
But [education reformer William] Harper was unprepared to play hardball with schoolteacher Margaret Haley, dubbed Chicago’s “Lady Labor Slugger.” Haley was the seminal figure in a class struggle approach to teacher unionism and an early leader of the Chicago Teachers Federation, a precursor to the Chicago Teachers Union.

Chicago Teachers and the Great Depression: The CTU Is Born

By the eve of the Great Depression, although Chicago had the most unionized teaching force in the country, educators were still deeply divided and belonged to a

Rousmaniere put it, "although an eloquent advocate of liberatory causes and human rights, she was profoundly ambivalent about African American political and economic rights, and she championed the cause of working-class whites—especially Irish Catholics—over any other group." During the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to Northern industrial centers during World War I, Blacks began the struggle for access to public education in Chicago. With few employment options open to African American women, teaching became the most popular occupation among young Black college-educated women—more than half of all Black college graduates became schoolteachers.³ This development contradicted Haley's approach.⁴ Nonetheless, her efforts helped the CTF achieve a groundbreaking, though modest, meeting of four local unions in 1916 that formed the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Haley's biography put it, "although an eloquent advocate of liberatory causes and human rights, she was profoundly ambivalent about African American political and economic rights, and she championed the cause of working-class whites—especially Irish Catholics—over any other group." During the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to Northern industrial centers during World War I, Blacks began the struggle for access to public education in Chicago. With few employment options open to African American women, teaching became the most popular occupation among young Black college-educated women—more than half of all Black college graduates became schoolteachers.³ This development contradicted Haley's approach.⁴ Nonetheless, her efforts helped the CTF achieve a groundbreaking, though modest, meeting of four local unions in 1916 that formed the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).



Haley was a powerful opponent of the increasing standardization of education that she saw developing in early 20th-century schools, calling it "factoryizing education." At the 1904 National Education Association (NEA) convention she spoke out against industrialists' efforts to turn the teacher into "an automaton, a mere factory hand."² (See Haley, p. 67.)

In 1902, Haley had inspired the CTF to formally join the Chicago Federation of Labor. Within a year, the teachers helped overthrow the corrupt labor leadership in Chicago. Under the reform president, John Fitzpatrick, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) began to organize women workers all over the city: milliners, pack-house workers, chorus girls, laundry workers, domestic servants, department store workers, garment workers, and more. For Haley, organizing women workers was closely related to winning the right for women to vote. Her approach of fusing the social struggle for suffrage with the labor movement was instrumental in winning suffrage in the state in 1913.

Haley's radical reform approach, however, had a key blind spot: It never included African Americans. As

variety of different unions. The Men Teachers Union (MTU) organized male high school teachers and prompted the formation of the Federation of Women High School Teachers (FWHST). There were the Elementary Teachers Union (ETU) and the Playground Teachers Union (PTU) as well. These unions were often at odds, as the MTU and the FWHST attempted to maintain the pay differentials of high school teachers over elementary school teachers while Margaret Haley's CTF and the ETU fought for parity for elementary school teachers.

With the Great Depression in full swing, the *Nation* reported the impact on teachers in May 1933: "Homes have been lost. Families have suffered undernourishment, even actual hunger. Their life insurance slashed, their savings gone, some teachers have been driven to panhandling after school hours to get food."⁵ Hundreds of teachers were laid off. Teachers went for weeks and months without paychecks. High school teachers went from six to seven classes a day. Class sizes swelled. One Chicago teacher succumbed to the financial stress and committed suicide.

Fueling teacher anger was the Citizens Committee on Public Expenditures (CCPE), a corporate entity with the purpose of reducing the investment in public education. With the *Chicago Tribune* editorializing for cuts in "fads and frills" in education—things such as art, physical education, and music—the CCPE pressed the Chicago Board of Education to slash spending by declaring that the banks would not buy any more tax warrants from the board. Without the financial support of the banks, the school board was strong-armed into submitting to the CCPE.⁶

With the unions divided and the bureaucracies of the unions too often seeking to collaborate with, rather than confront, the school board and the business elite destroying public education, teacher John Fewkes organized a new group, the Volunteer Emergency Committee (VEC), which organized mass demonstrations to win regular pay for teachers. For four months in 1933 thousands of fed-up educators regularly stormed Board of Education and City Council meetings.

In his account of teacher unionism in Chicago, *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1929–1970*, John F. Lyons writes that as many as 50,000 pupils from West Side to South Side schools went on strike April 5 to protest the delay in the payment of teachers' salaries. During the day, police were called to stop the student disturbances and to control a student demonstration that descended on the home of acting Mayor Frank J. Corr. A number of teachers in various schools staged a one-day strike by reporting themselves sick. There was, according to a *Chicago Daily News* reporter, "an endemic series of strikes, demonstration, and disorder in protest to the delay in the payment of teachers' salaries." It was, according to *Time*, the "biggest and most exciting school strike Chicago had ever seen."⁷

The VEC also organized boycotts of stores, hotels, and other businesses that were tax delinquent.

The high point of the struggle erupted on April 24, the first day of spring vacation, when 5,000 teachers marched on five large banks—First National Bank, Harris Trust & Savings Bank, City National Bank, Northern Trust Bank, and the Continental Illinois Bank—whose refusal to pay their taxes was depleting funds desperately needed in the classroom. Lyons writes:

Teachers threw ink on the walls, tipped over desks, and broke windows. Surrounded by teachers shouting "Pay us! Pay us!" the bank executives had to call for the police to remove the teachers. On the following Wednesday more than 3,000 male teachers armed with schoolbooks again confronted the bankers, invading the Chicago Title and Trust Company, breaking windows and ransacking the building. Mounted police clubbed the teachers as they hurled books at the police and their horses.⁸

On June 9, the last day of the spring term, 5,000 teachers, parents, and students fought with police as they protested in downtown Chicago against the bankers, the CCPE, and the politicians.

The actions inspired eight teachers' organizations, including the CTF, the MTU, the ETU, and the FWHST, to merge and form the Teacher Welfare Organization. As a result, the Chicago Public Schools rescinded many of the cuts to physical education, music, and the arts; most teachers went back to six classes per day, rather than the seven proposed; by September 1935, the board had reassigned all of the teachers dismissed in July 1933; and in August 1934 teachers finally received all of the back salary they had been denied. In October 1937, not coincidentally, the Chicago Teachers Union was born.

During and after World War II, the CTU worked alongside the Democratic Party and accommodated the anti-communism of McCarthyism. As CTU president Fewkes declared in 1949, "The increased heat in

the Cold War now in progress makes it imperative that teachers in our public schools leave no doubt as to their fundamental Americanism." Consequently, the union did not defend communists generally, or their allies, from persecution.

Still, Fewkes and the CTU did mount some important struggles in this era and even opposed some of the most egregious aspects of the Red Scare witch hunts. For example, after a May 1945 NEA investigative report found that city politicians had used their power to influence which teachers were hired and promoted, the CTU used newfound public support to threaten a strike against the City Council's decision to block teacher pay raises. This proved enough to back the council down. The CTU also led important opposition to anti-communist attacks on teachers and their curriculum, writing in

the union newspaper in 1941 against loyalty oaths that would prohibit communist teachers, "You cannot preserve freedom by taking it away! You cannot preserve democracy by totalitarian means!"⁹ In an era when hundreds of teachers had been suspended or dismissed for noncooperation with the House Un-American Activities Committee, the harassment Chicago teachers faced was not as severe as teachers elsewhere, in part because of the CTU.¹⁰

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Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Black Teacher Power

"The U.S. teacher used to be afraid to smoke, chew, cuss, or ask for a raise," *Time* magazine reported in 1963. "Now he denounces crowded classrooms, upbraids lawmakers, and goes on strike almost as readily as a dockworker. He even demands a say in things that school boards always considered their sole province. Teacher militancy is bursting out all over."¹¹

One of the momentous yet often ignored achievements of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements was their decisive contribution to the winning of collective bargaining rights for public sector workers in the 1960s and 1970s. As Aaron Brenner points out, "Between the early 1960s and 1981, American workers engaged in an extraordinarily high level of workplace militancy, exhibiting a sustained rebelliousness not seen since the 1930s. . . . Drawing on the Civil Rights, Black Power, feminist, and antiwar movements, and on the labor movements' own traditions of militancy, rank-and-file self-organization, and workers control, they advocated a more aggressive, inclusive, democratic, and politicized union movement that they believed could win greater rights for workers both on and off the job."¹²

Teachers in Chicago were certainly beneficiaries of the mass social movements that swept aside the stifling politics of McCarthyism that had long stunted labor's growth. In 1967, this labor and civil rights upsurge contributed to the CTU's first officially negotiated contract with the Chicago Board of Education, where the CTU obtained Christmas vacation pay (the first AFT local to do so), a \$500 per year salary increase, fully paid medical insurance, two personal days, a grievance procedure, class size caps, and a duty-free lunch period.

Yet while both Black and white teachers asked their union to negotiate higher wages and better benefits, Black teachers and Black community activists increasingly wanted the union to use its increased power to prompt school authorities to improve the quality of education in the inner-city schools—while too often their white colleagues wanted only a narrow focus on bread-and-butter issues. One simple fact highlighted the disparity within the union: Although about 60 percent of the students and more than a third of teachers were African Americans, the CTU negotiating team included no Black members.¹³

Another problem was that many Black teachers were categorized as Full-Time Basis (FTB) substitutes, which meant full-time work hours but not the benefits or job protection of certified teachers. They gave the FTB status to teachers who had met state certification requirements but not passed the Chicago Board of Education teacher certification examination required to teach in CPS. But many African Americans noted that they often failed the oral exam only because the racist board of examiners thought they had "unprofessional" Black Southern accents. One such teacher was Mamie Till Mobley, who campaigned on behalf of her son Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy whose murder in Mississippi in 1955 was one of the catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement. She began teaching in CPS in the 1960s, but she failed the oral exam because the board of examiners thought she was on an "ego trip."¹⁴

As the Black Power movement grew in Chicago, Black students and parents began organizing for the introduction of Black studies into the curriculum and for

the removal of white principals who would not embrace these changes. Unfortunately, the CTU leadership too often sided with the Board of Education and the

white principals in these disputes.

The FTB subs, about 90 percent African American, began their own sickouts and strikes in 1968 to pressure Mayor Richard J. Daley to make them full-fledged classroom teachers and to stop the high teacher turnover rate in Black schools. When the CTU did not come to their aid, the FTB subs threatened to leave the union.

The CTU authorized its first official strike in May 1969, with around 75 percent support of teachers, who were able to convince most of their wavering colleagues to stay away from school.¹⁵ Within a few days, Mayor Daley succumbed to the strike's pressure and negotiated a settlement that met all of the CTU's demands, including a \$100 per month raise, and the recruitment of 750 new teachers to help alleviate overcrowded classrooms in segregated schools. Scared by the threat of large numbers of Black teachers leaving the union, the CTU finally took action to pressure the Board of Education and Mayor Daley to give in to the demands of the FTB subs—and the board lifted the exam requirement for FTB certification.¹⁶

Moreover, following the strike, the Chicago Board of Education bowed to the pressure of Black community activists and Black union militants and introduced new classes that focused on Black history and Black literary figures.¹⁷

The CORE of Education: A New "Sluggo"

From 1969 until 1987, the CTU led seven strikes that won smaller class sizes, medical benefits, sick leave, and more preparation time.

But then for almost 25 years—in an era marked by neoliberal economic policies favoring privatization, deregulation, and the decline of unions—the unions' combativeness waned, capped by its failure to lead a campaign against then-CEO of the Chicago Public Schools (and later U.S. Secretary of Education) Arne Duncan's disastrous Renaissance 2010 plan that slated around 100 schools for closure—predominately in Black neighborhoods—and converted many to privately run, non-union charter schools or military academies. To make matters worse, the Great Recession hit in 2008, and the corporate education reform agenda kicked in to high gear as billionaires and their foundations, hedge fund managers, and their political sycophants in statehouses became determined to see teachers and public sector workers pay for a global financial crisis caused by rapacious Wall Street speculation. When the Chicago Teachers Union refused to mount the struggle needed to defend teachers and public education, several teachers invited Jimmy Sims, former president of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, to teach them how the BCTF went on an illegal strike in 2005 and won a huge victory for their students and class size reduction. These teachers then put theory together with practice, formed the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), and began organizing colleagues and communities to resist the closures of some 16 schools, turning out hundreds of parents to picket Chicago Board of Education meetings and to testify in defense of their schools. As a result of this bold campaign and other organizing initiatives, teachers from the CORE slate were elected to leadership positions in

the Chicago Teachers Union in the spring of 2010. Karen Lewis, the newly elected CORE president of the CTU, remarked at her acceptance speech:

Today marks the beginning of the end of scapegoating educators for all the social ills that our children, families, and schools struggle against every day. Today marks the beginning of a fight for true transparency in our educational policy—how to accurately measure learning and teaching, how to truly improve our schools, and how to evaluate the wisdom behind our spending priorities. This election shows the unity of 30,000 educators standing strong to put business in its place—out of our schools. Corporate America sees K–12 public education as \$380 billion that, up until the last 10 or 15 years, they didn't have a sizable piece of. . . Our teachers and paraprofessionals are poised to reclaim the power of our 30,000 members and protect what we love: teaching and learning in publicly funded public schools.¹⁸

In the spring of 2012, Chicago Mayor Rahm “1%” Emanuel and his appointed Board of Education made up of millionaires and billionaires, including Hyatt Hotels heiress Penny Pritzker, began contract negotiations with the CTU with a plan to further impose the business model on the schools that has been shown throughout Chicago’s history to not improve education. They proposed extending the school year without increasing pay for teachers; they suggested that class sizes could reach 55 students; and they sought to impose a merit pay scheme on teachers that would have narrowed the curriculum to drill-and-kill test prep.¹⁹

Shouting into a microphone outside of the Board of Education, CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey described the response of the union: “We have met the attack with wide-scale vocal opposition, we have met the attack arm in arm with our partners in the community. We’ve occupied schools, we have marched, we have filled auditoriums, we have filled streets, and yes, we have voted to authorize a strike.”²⁰ With more than 90 percent of educators voting in favor, the CTU began its first strike in a quarter of a century on Sept. 10, 2012, and held the line for more than a week in a strike that captured the imagination of workers around the country and headlines around the world.

Kirstin Roberts, a CTU preschool teacher, described the impact of the strike on the rank and file, writing: “The outpouring of solidarity was matched by an outpouring of creativity on the picket lines and at the mass protests every afternoon. Teachers and staff who had long been stifled and forced to deliver rote lessons designed solely for test preparation began to paint and dance and sing their struggle.”²¹ While Chicago teachers were not able to defeat every last one of Mayor Emanuel’s corporate reforms—for example, the contract stipulates that only half of new teachers hired must be displaced CTU members—the list of gains for students and teachers from the strike reveals a decisive win for labor:

- CPS must hire more than 600 additional teachers in art, music, phys-

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portance of the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike: “In 2012, Chicago hosted the most dynamic and successful strike to occur in the United States in at least 15 years, and the largest teachers’ strike in nearly a quarter-century, all while fundamentally challenging a global movement to privatize and standardize public education.”²³

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One of the primary reasons for the CTU’s victory was this: It transcended a simple labor dispute and was transformed into a social movement, with the teachers fusing their struggle with that of the community they serve—organizing with parents for more than a year prior to the strike, making demands for increased resources for the students, advocating for racial equity in hiring, and joining in the Occupy Chicago movement that pointed out the root of societal problems—social and economic inequality. By striking not only for better wages, but also to defend and enrich public education for students of color and low-income families, the CTU’s strike garnered 66 percent support from the students’ parents²² and earned the citywide solidarity teachers would need to give them enough courage to walk off the job. *Jacobin* magazine summed up the im-

- ical education, and other subjects—helping to make the school day better, not just longer.
- The proportion that student test scores count toward teacher evaluations was lowered to the legal minimum.
- Language that promotes racial diversity in hiring at CPS to fight the loss of African American teachers in Chicago’s schools.
- Anti-bullying language to help limit administrator intimidation of teachers.
- A pool of funding for social workers, psychologists, special education teachers, classroom assistants, and counselors in schools with high caseloads.
- \$250 annual reimbursement for teachers buying classroom supplies.
- A 7 percent rise in pay over three years, maintaining “steps and lanes” so experienced teachers and those with master’s degrees earn more.

A longer version of this article originally appeared in the International Socialist Review No. 86. To read about the history of the CTU since 2012, see the next article by Jackson Potter (p. 70). For an in-depth article on Margaret Haley, see "Chicago Teachers Federation & Its Legacy" by Robert Lowe, rethinkingschools.org/TUSI.

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Why Teachers Should Organize

BY MARGARET HALEY



Teacher unions striking in Chicago in the early 20th century.

Editor's note: Haley, vice president of the Chicago Teachers Federation, gave this speech at the National Education Association convention in St. Louis on July 1, 1904.

Teachers organizations must be in harmony with the fundamental object of the public school in a democracy, namely to preserve and develop the democratic ideal. . . .
Nowhere in the United States today does the public school, as a branch of the public service, receive from the public either the moral or

financial support needed to enable it properly to perform its important function in the social organism. The conditions that are militating most strongly against efficient teaching and that existing organizations of the kind under discussion here are directing their energies toward changing, briefly stated are the following:

1. Greatly increased cost of living, together with constant demands for higher standards of scholarship and professional attainments and culture to be met with practically stationary and wholly inadequate teachers' salaries.
2. Insecurity of tenure of office and lack of provision for old age.
3. Overwork in overcrowded schoolrooms, exhausting both mind and body.
4. And lastly, lack of recognition of the teacher as an educator in the school system, due to the increased tendency toward "factoryizing education," making the teacher an automaton, a mere factory hand, whose duty it is to carry out mechanically and unquestioningly the ideas and orders of those clothed with the authority of position and who may or may not know how to minister to them.

The individuality of the teacher and her power of initiative are thus destroyed and the result is courses of study, regulations, and equipment that the teachers have had no voice in selecting, that often have no relation to the children's needs, and that prove a hindrance instead of a help in teaching. . . .

There is no possible conflict between the good of society and the good of its members, of which the industrial workers are the vast majority. The organization of these workers for mutual aid has shortened the hours of labor, raised and equalized the wages of men and women, and taken the children from the factories and workshops. These humanitarian achievements of the labor unions—and many others that space forbids enumerating—in raising the standard of living of the poorest and weakest members of society are a service to society that for its own welfare it must recognize. . . .

If there is one institution on which the responsibility rests most heavily, it is the public school. If there is one body of public servants of whom the public has a right to expect the mental and moral equipment to face the labor question and other issues vitally affecting the welfare of society and urgently pressing for a rational and scientific solution, it is the public school teachers whose special contribution to society is their own power to think, the moral courage to follow their convictions, and the training of citizens to think and to express thought in free and intelligent action. . . .

It will be well indeed if the teachers have the courage of their convictions and face all that the labor unions have faced with courage and perseverance.

How shall the public school and the industrial workers in their struggle to

secure the rights of humanity through a more just and equitable distribution of the products of their labor, meet their mutual responsibility to each other and to society? . . .

Two ideals are struggling for supremacy in American life today: one is the industrial ideal dominating through the supremacy of commercialism, which subordinates the worker to the product and the machine; the other, the ideal of democracy, the ideal of the educator, which places humanity above all machines, and demands that all activity shall be the expression of life. If this ideal of the educators cannot be carried over into the industrial field then the ideal of industrialism will be carried over into the school. Those two ideals can no more continue to exist in American life than our nation could have continued half slave and half free. If the school cannot bring joy to the work of the world, the joy must go out of its own life, and work in the school, as in the industrial field, will become drudgery. . . .

It will be well indeed if the teachers have the courage of their convictions and face all that the labor unions have faced with the same courage and perseverance. Today, teachers of America, we stand at the parting of the ways. Democracy is not on trial, but America is. ❧

Margaret Haley was the longtime leader of the Chicago Teachers Federation and a pioneer in organizing schoolteachers in America. According to PBS online, "Haley came to understand that it was up to teachers to fight for change, both in the schools and in society."

For background information on this speech, go to the Labor and Working-Class History Association, Document 7.2.: bit.ly/2JzhzFN.

Chicago Teachers Union Takes to the Streets Again

BY JACKSON POTTER



JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

Editors' note: In this article Jackson Potter, a longtime teacher activist and CTU leader, continues relating the CTU's history since 2012, the year the article by Jesse Hagopian ended.

Jesse Hagopian's article elucidates the arc of struggle from the robber baron era, when Chicago teachers fought to provide clean drinking water free of cholera to our students, through 2012, when we shook off a generation of austerity to jump-start a nationwide strike wave that has reinvigorated the labor movement. The story does not end there. The action in 2012 was largely a struggle to stop the full-scale assault on our public school system and demonstrate that teachers

and the broader public preferred investment over privatization and school closures. We won that fight, but it was not until our strike in 2019 that the tide turned definitively in our favor. That accomplishment is a testament to a sustained and protracted struggle that teachers waged to reverse decades of racist attacks on our students and their families. If there is one addition I would make to Hagopian's assessment of our fight, it's to emphasize our focus on racial justice as the centerpiece of CORE's efforts to transform schools in Chicago and beyond. When Karen Lewis lambasted the mayor and school board for creating a system of "educational apartheid," it galvanized Black and Latino parents across neighborhoods to support our fight. Ours is not simply a class struggle but a movement to establish economic

**Ours is not simply
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and racial justice. Now, that's all changed. After 52 years of struggle, and an 11-day citywide strike, in 2019 we were finally able to secure these critical demands—and more. We won 180 case manager positions, 20 English language program teachers, full-time staff for homeless students, up to \$35 million to lower excessive class size, and even nap time for our little ones. This dedicated effort to win seminal staffing supports and educational justice for CPS students did not happen overnight—it's been a long and protracted fight for the schools they deserve.

During the lead-up to the 2019 strike, the editorial pages of the two major newspapers in town, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, took turns slamming us for intransigence, greed, and idealism, often in the same sentence. The *Sun-Times* ran an editorial in the days before the strike that demanded we "Take the deal" and stated we "should accept the latest contract offer from the Board of Education, a sweet deal that most Chicagoans would just love to get." Prior to the strike, Mayor Lori Lightfoot offered a 16 percent raise over a five-year agreement, a salary offer that the CTU eventually accepted. However, none of the

lowest-paid paraprofessional members, or a dedicated article on early childhood education. Now, that's all changed. After 52 years of struggle, and an 11-day citywide strike, in 2019 we were finally able to secure these critical demands—and more. We won 180 case manager positions, 20 English language program teachers, full-time staff for homeless students, up to \$35 million to lower excessive class size, and even nap time for our little ones. This dedicated effort to win seminal staffing supports and educational justice for CPS students did not happen overnight—it's been a long and protracted fight for the schools they deserve.

For example, as a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) student from 1st grade through high school, and in my 17 years of teaching in the system, none of my schools ever had a full-time social worker or nurse every day of the week.

In the first contract the CTU secured in the era of legalized public sector bargaining, in 1967, the language states: "a plan shall be devised to make available to teacher nurses a list of vacancies to which they may indicate their desire to transfer." That language, providing no firm guarantee of staffing ratios, remained virtually unchanged for half a century. All subsequent contracts until 2019 include

"Schools Our Students Deserve."

central issues raised from when the strike began to when it ended had anything to do with that initial salary offer.

In the last months of 2018, the CTU collected hundreds of proposals from our 27,000 members. Of the hundreds of submissions, many described how to fix a broken and anxiety-ridden teacher evaluation system, how to ramp up preparation and collaboration time, adequate pay and benefits, and more. There were also a number of ideas that went well beyond a traditional collective bargaining agreement. One proposal demanded the school district provide housing for all 18,000 homeless students in the district by creating affordable housing through a real estate transfer tax, a corporate head tax, and utilizing the city's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program. Despite Mayor Lightfoot's claims to support a progressive agenda that reflected the CTU's vision for schools, reality proved more complicated.

Lightfoot campaigned on a promise to prevent a strike by addressing our key concerns and demands. Yet, during negotiations, her team refused time and again to meet them.

Once CTU went out on strike on Oct. 17, Lightfoot claimed the contract was not the "appropriate place" to address the needs of homeless students. While she promised to add more social workers and nurses to the school budget, she refused to put it in writing and make those commitments explicit within the collective bargaining agreement. By the end of the strike, we made sure that both supports for homeless students and guarantees for more social workers and nurses were indeed put in writing. At the inception of the strike, Mayor Lightfoot was adamant that there was no more money for our contract. But by the end, we won tens of millions more dollars in the new contract.

This contract fight wasn't the first time the CTU raised "common good" proposals to elevate broader demands not typically associated with a union contract. In 2010, we suggested that the Chicago Board of Education tap into the TIF program—a system where decades' worth of property taxes are frequently diverted from schools, parks, and libraries to support developments in the wealthiest parts of the city. At the time, Mayor Richard M. Daley's chief negotiator for the teachers' contract, Jim Franczek, told us that "TIF is too complicated" and that the funds were unavailable to schools due to a firewall between the city and school budgets. By 2016, we cracked the purported TIF firewall and forced then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel to unleash a record \$87.5 million to stave off a strike. In 2019, Mayor Lightfoot eventually followed suit and released another record TIF surplus of \$163 million to the public schools.

On top of winning new funding streams, our broader social justice demands built upon victories in the earlier Los Angeles teacher strike, as well as Boston's teacher contract campaign that won language on class size restrictions. In no small way, the 2019 CTU strike was connected to a rising movement of teachers nationally that has fundamentally altered the political and labor landscape in the United States.

When we struck in 2012, the action was largely defensive in nature and came on the heels of Scott Walker's attack on collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin. Our 2019 strike represented a move into offense—beyond efforts to stop school

Jackson Potter is a Chicago Teachers Union trustee, member of the Big Bargaining Team, and a teacher at Back of the Yards College Prep.

The labor movement will look back on the 2019 strikes in Chicago and LA as the time when #RedForEd began to supplant austerity and corporate reform with educational equity and investments into our Black and Latino school communities. Although we have a ways to go before public schools in Chicago match the school funding received by wealthy suburban districts, the 2019 agreement got us closer. One of the keys to our victory was labor solidarity. Chicago teachers struck alongside the 7,000 school employees in SEIU Local 73, which did not occur in 2012. These school workers also won large-scale victories in their contract, and by standing with us on the picket lines, they showed the power of true collective action. The victories in our strike built upon yearslong efforts to bring Chicago charter school teachers into the CTU, aligning 11 charter school contracts. This strategic choice led to the first charter school strikes in the nation's history and won provisions on class size and sanctuary schools that set the stage to win them throughout the district.

To win more, we teachers should consider partnering with private sector union struggles. Imagine if we had been able to join forces with the United Auto Workers in their labor struggle with GM, or coordinated with warehouse workers to shut down the region's supply chains. Such an approach could help build the social power necessary to advance a set of regional worker demands to significantly alter the political and economic landscape for all workers.

When I was a 1st grader in CPS in 1984, there weren't social workers or nurses in every school. There were no case managers, no coordinators for homeless students. Adherence to legal limits on special education, bilingual, and early childhood state laws was limited. On Nov. 16, 2019, more than 81 percent of CTU members ratified a contract that possesses all of those essential features. Although there are many demands we were unable to win, we made massive strides toward equity in the classroom.

Throughout history, social movement struggles have always been protracted. It's taken three contract cycles for the CTU to turn back nearly 40 years of attacks on our public schools. It's a shift made possible through strike action coupled with a burgeoning national teachers' movement—and taking risks to lift up working-class and racial justice demands that go far beyond traditional collective bargaining. **3**

The 1994 Call for Social Justice Teacher Unionism

In August 1994, a group of 29 teacher union activists from a variety of AFT and NEA locals held a three-day institute in Portland, Oregon, sponsored by the National Coalition of Education Activists. They issued a statement, "Social Justice Unionism: A Working Draft," which was printed at the time in *Rethinking Schools* and subsequently in the first edition of this book. It guided and inspired unionists for years.

The statement was a call to action and advocated a new model of unionism, including this warning:

... Without a broader conception of the interests of teachers and of teaching, our unions will find themselves on evermore shaky ground, defending fewer jobs and shrinking privileges against repeated attacks. Without a better partnership with the parents and communities that need public education most, we will find ourselves isolated from essential allies. Without a new vision of schooling that raises the expectations of our students and the standards of our own profession, we will continue to flounder. Without a new model of unionism that revives debate and democracy internally and projects an inspiring social vision and agenda externally, we will fall short of the challenges before us.

It went on to say:

Social justice unionism cannot be implemented in a top-down fashion. Nor can it be just words on paper. It will require both enlightened leadership and rank-and-file mobilization. It will mean learning to teach in new ways; restructuring local union activities in new ways; reaching out to different communities in new ways; and building alliances at both local and state levels. It will require the national unions, perhaps one merged national teacher union, to provide leadership to build a national movement for social and economic justice.

The statement detailed seven components of social justice teacher unionism, which are listed in the flyer on p. 75. Activists distributed thousands of flyers and buttons at subsequent NEA and AFT conventions where a merger of the two unions was debated—and ultimately rejected in 1998. ⁸

The Real Question

is not whether one is for or against the merger. The question is how to build on the strengths of the NEA and AFT and create an even better organization.



A new organization needs to retain the best of traditional unionism and borrow from "professional unionism." Given the attacks on the social safety net and on public education, it must not only defend the legitimate interests of its members but embrace a vision of social justice for all those so often denied the full benefits of this society. If we want our members and save public education with the students, families and communities is called "social justice unionism."

Such a vision would unite us. This vision of unionism we serve. This vision of unionism we serve. This vision of unionism we serve.

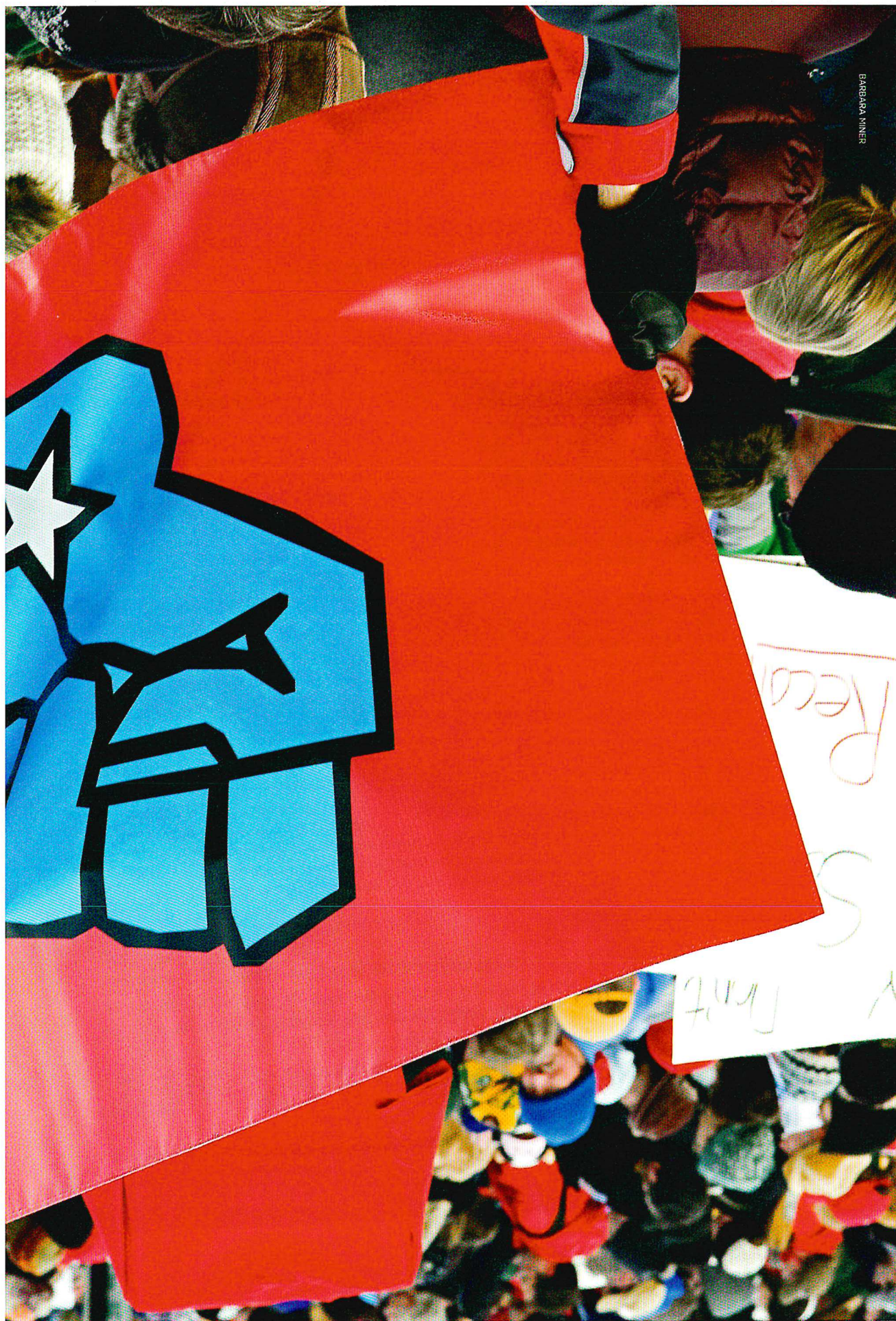
1. Defend the rights of its members while fighting for the rights and needs of the broader community and students.
2. Recognize that the families and neighbors of our students are key allies, and build strategic alliances with parents, labor unions, and community groups.
3. Fully involve rank-and-file members in running the union and initiate widespread discussion on how education unions should respond to the crises in education and society.
4. Put teachers and others who work in classrooms at the center of school reform agendas, ensuring that they take ownership of reform initiatives.

6. Forcefully advocate for a radical restructuring of American education.
7. Aggressively educate and mobilize members to fight for social justice in all areas of society.

Adapted from "Social Justice Unionism: A Working Draft: A Call to Education Unionists," July 1994. For a complete version send \$1 to the National Coalition of Education Activists, PO Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572. rfb@aol.com.

❖ Social Justice Unionism ❖ A New Vision for a United NEA/AFT

This leaflet is published by Rethinking Schools, a grass-roots education reform journal. To follow ongoing discussions of social justice unionism subscribe to Rethinking Schools, 1001 E. Keefe Ave, Milwaukee, WI 53212. \$12.50/year. 1-800-669-4192. www.rethinkingschools.org. For "Social Justice Unionism" buttons contact Rethinking Schools.



The Wisconsin Uprising—2011

BY ELENI SCHIRMER

Following the Great Recession of 2007–2009, managers of the country's public institutions imposed austerity measures on workers. Perhaps nowhere were these budget cutbacks more dramatically enacted than in Wisconsin. But then again, perhaps no other place witnessed a fight-back so bold or inspiring. In February 2011, Wisconsin's newly elected Republican governor, Scott Walker, proposed surprise legislation curtailing public sector union bargaining rights. The legislation especially affected teachers, who in Wisconsin, as across the nation, represent the most unionized public employees. Immediately, teachers sprang into action. Within days of the bill's announcement, teachers coordinated massive sickouts, reporting to the halls of the state Capitol instead of their classrooms. Their bold leadership inspired others, including union leadership and Democratic Party officials. Soon workers and allies from across the state and country flocked to the Capitol in protest, drawing crowds of more than 100,000 people and occupying the Capitol for nearly two weeks. This massive popular resistance to attacks on public sector workers and institutions are today referred to as the Wisconsin Uprising. Both the Wisconsin attacks on union rights and the workers' resistance set precedents that would resonate across the country in years to come. This piece explores the origins of Wisconsin Act 10, its effects, and the historical uprising it inspired.

Where Did Wisconsin Act 10 Come From?

Wisconsin Act 10 took many by surprise. Removing public sector union collective bargaining rights had not been part of Walker's campaign. What's more, the state has a strong labor history. In the early 20th century, Wisconsin was home to the Progressive Party, and it boasted a legacy of socialist leadership in its largest city. In 1959, Wisconsin was the first state to grant public employees the right to unionize. How did the nation's first state to grant public sector workers' collective bargaining rights become the first to take them away?

While the long history of Wisconsin's weakened labor movement is beyond this article's scope, a key part starts with major political shifts that took place in 2010, when the midterm elections nationwide shifted political control to conservatives. In Wisconsin, Republicans gained majority control of the state Senate and Assembly, defeated longtime incumbent Democrat Russ Feingold in the U.S. Senate election, and won the gubernatorial office. Similar trends occurred across the country. Right-wing conservatism touted by the Tea Party movement gained

The language and inspiration for Act 10 came from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an organization funded by the Koch brothers to draft conservative legislation. Along with laws to roll back environmental protections, increase gun access, and restrict immigration and voting access, ALEC drafted legislation to weaken labor unions. Act 10 was one of its bills and affected three key dimensions of union power. First, it changed *what* public sector unions could bargain over. The law restricted public sector collective bargaining to wages capped at inflation, roughly 2 percent annually. No longer could teachers bargain over class size. Nurses could not demand lower patient-nurse ratios or shorter shift lengths.

What Was Act 10?

2010, Walker won the gubernatorial election by nearly 6 percent. So, when Walker took office in January 2011, he not only faced anemic pro-gressive opposition, but he also had the backing of a national conservative movement. He seized his advantage. As the financial crisis rolled into state coffers in 2011, Walker took the opportunity to impose “shock doctrine” policies. In the name of crisis management, Walker targeted a key pillar of the Democratic party: unions. Originally titled the “Budget Repair Bill,” Act 10 was designed to give public administrators “the tools”—in Walker’s words—to cut labor and healthcare expenses to cope with declining revenues.

ate, five of the nine newly elected senators were. In addition to the rise of conservative Tea Party-backed candidates such as Gov. Scott Walker, 2010 also saw deflated energy among Democrats. Especially compared with the 2008 elections, the previously energized young and progressive electorate had grown weary. Even Wisconsin Democrats had unfurled a public sector austerity agenda. Walker's Democratic predecessor, Jim Doyle, had enacted his own budget cuts and imposed furloughs on state workers in the wake of the 2008 crisis. And Walker's 2010 Democratic opponent, Tom Barrett, also held the public sector responsible for the state's financial problems. As mayor of Milwaukee, Barrett had cut public employees' benefits and pensions and called for mayoral takeover of the city's public schools. Unable to significantly distinguish between the Democratic and Republican visions for Wisconsin, many voters chose to sit the election out. In November

influence in the wake of the 2008 economic collapse. Conservative leaders capitalized upon people's financial and racial anxieties by promoting an ideological program that held public social programs and their beneficiaries accountable for the economic crisis, and called for an end to "big government." In the U.S. House of Representatives, 39 of the 129 newly elected representatives were Tea Party members; in the Sen-

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Power plant operators could not bargain over health and safety conditions in their workplaces. Health care and other benefits were no longer permissible bargaining topics. This was a particular sting for Wisconsin educators who, since revenue caps initiated in the 1990s, had exchanged wage gains for health insurance coverage. Second, Act 10 changed *how* public sector unions were organized. In order to be legally recognized by the state and thus gain these meager bargaining privileges, Act 10 required public sector unions to conduct annual recertification elections. However, these were not simply "get the most votes and win" elections. The new law mandated that to win a recertification election, 51 percent of all eligible workers in a unit must vote yes; any non-vote counted as a vote against the union. Act 10 also removed automatic dues deduction, in which union fees are automatically taken from workers' paychecks. Now, each member would have to be organized to agree to pay their fees. No longer could unions assume either membership or dues without organizing for them.

The third dimension of Act 10 was *who* was included in the law. The law applied to all public sector employees, with the exception of police and firefighters—who are disproportionately represented in public sector union membership suffered the most. As Walker himself admitted, his intention was to break unions by dividing and conquering—separating police and firefighters from other public workers, and public workers from private workers.

What Was the Wisconsin Uprising?

Immediately upon learning of Walker's proposed legislation, Wisconsin teachers jumped into action. Members of teacher unions in Madison and Milwaukee quickly initiated phone trees to organize teachers to call in sick and show up at the Capitol building in protest. Thanks to these local leaders' bold and decisive actions, union leadership across the state followed suit, calling on members to flood the Capitol in support. For nearly two weeks, protesters from around the state and country filled the Capitol building and grounds—refusing to leave until the bill had been killed. The 24/7 occupation of the Capitol lasted for two weeks, but large protests continued throughout the spring. During the uprising, solidarity was palpable. Protesters came from all sectors and backgrounds—public sector and private sector workers, the self-employed, the retired, students, community members, farmers.

The Wisconsin Uprising was the biggest labor protest in decades and offered key lessons in the coming years. First, it showed the power of direct action. Unions won public support by standing up and fighting for the public good, rather than waiting to play an inside game.

Second, the Wisconsin Uprising showcased the importance of rank-and-file leadership. Rather than waiting for the Democratic Party or union officials to announce their plans for resistance, workers themselves organized actions. (Just days before Walker proposed Act 10, the president of the state teacher union had offered serious concessions to Walker, to the surprise and chagrin of many teachers. Union

Eleni Schirmer reads, writes, and teaches about labor movements and education. She has a PhD in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

But the Wisconsin Uprising also inspired many progressive activists. Wisconsin's collective mobilization reminded workers and activists around the country of the power of standing up and fighting together. Within a year of the Wisconsin Uprising, other important movements emerged, such as Occupy Wall Street and the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike. Each of these were turning points in the fight against austerity; both took heavy inspiration from the Wisconsin Uprising. For example, Occupy Wall Street converted mathematical reality of income inequality into a collective identity—"We are the 99%." The Chicago teachers' strike reminded us that workers have the power to not just demand the public good, but also to strike for it with broad community support. Both of these movements grew from ground laid in Wisconsin. What started in Wisconsin continues forward. ⁹

Why Does the Wisconsin Uprising Matter?

leadership did not see its power as fighting against Walker's antagonism toward public institutions, but rather placating it.) Only when workers themselves took the lead to stand up and fight did Democratic Party leadership and top union officials follow suit.

Third, the Wisconsin Uprising demonstrated the potent energy of creative resistance. From the protest signs, to the chants, to the mutual aid networks that sprung into existence in the Capitol occupation, the Wisconsin Uprising offered a bold and energizing vision for the community and creativity demanded by resistance.

Fourth, the Wisconsin Uprising showcased the need for broad solidarity. Although the trigger for the uprising were attacks on public sector unions, the protesters came together from all walks of life and sectors. More than a particular group's rights, the Wisconsin Uprising was fighting for a broad public good—to defend workers' rights and to safeguard public institutions.

The 2018 Wave of Teacher Strikes: A Turning Point for Our Schools?

BY STAN KARP AND ADAM SANCHEZ



JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

When 50,000 auto workers went on strike in September 2019 seeking pay raises, better health care, and the reopening of closed factories, filmmaker and labor activist Michael Moore said: "Let's give credit to the teachers. . . . In West Virginia, they started this. People watched those strikes in other states and thought, 'Yeah, why aren't we using the power that we have?'"¹ The teacher strikes that swept the country in the spring of 2018 continue to find echoes across the U.S.

The West Virginia strike began in late February 2018 when some 20,000 classroom teachers and thousands of other employees shut down schools across all 55 counties. Across the state, teachers and school workers demonstrated for higher pay and other gains. Protesters lined the streets with signs, and in Charleston, strikers swarmed outside the Capitol building and, at times, took over parts of it. "This was a day that I will always remember!" wrote Tiffany Jones, a teacher at Bluefield High School in southern West Virginia, who was recalling one of the nine days of the strike. "The energy was palpable, and the enthusiasm could be felt across generations of educators."² This energy and enthusiasm, especially after the West Virginia strike won 5 percent raises for all public employees, inspired teachers in other states to take a stand, injected much-needed militancy into a waning labor movement, and fundamentally reshaped the struggle for public education. By May 2018, walkouts in Colorado and North Carolina followed statewide actions in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky. Some of these protests won significant, if modest, gains in teachers' salaries and funding for schools. Others won political promises that have yet to be redeemed. But all contributed to the groundswell of teacher walkouts that captured the nation's attention and changed the landscape of education and labor politics.

What Drove the Teacher Rebellion?

The protests were more than red state revolts. They were rebellions against the austerity and privatization that has been driving federal and state economic policy for decades. The dynamics and political landscape are different in each state. Almost all of the places where statewide actions initially occurred, however, were right-to-work states, which have seen the steepest cuts in school funding and the sharpest erosion of teacher pay and benefits. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that "teachers struck or engaged in other protests in five of the 12 states that cut formula funding particularly deeply after the last recession—Arizona, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and West Virginia."³

Right-to-work states are less likely to have collective bargaining rights and local district contracts. This puts more focus on state budgets and state decisions about health care, school funding, and pensions, and encourages statewide action focused on the legislature. Moreover, while most school funding comes from a mix of state and local sources and both are subject to political pressure, it is ultimately the state that is responsible for education funding. Consequently, many of the walkouts were more akin to mass political protests, seeking broad changes in public policy, than to labor strikes against a single employer such as a school district. But other common factors underlying these grassroots protests kept the rebellion spreading to "purple" states like Colorado (where there was a walkout in April) and North Carolina (May) and, beyond 2018, into blue states like California, where Los Angeles teachers won a landmark victory in January 2019, and Illinois, where teachers staged a bitter 11-day walkout in September 2019 that recalled their historic strike of 2012. Almost everywhere in recent years, in red states and blue states alike, budget and tax policy has been used to erode social services, shrink

public space, undermine union power, and transfer wealth upward, all the while making the lives of working people harder.

Teachers have been both key targets and witnesses to this class warfare. As Katie Endicott, a high school language arts teacher in Mingo County, West Virginia, told a solidarity meeting in New York City, "I first started teaching 10 years ago and it was a different county. . . . Coal was booming and . . . a lot of our students came from coal-mining families. So, dad was making more than \$100,000 a year as a coal miner. . . . Now some of these same families, 10 years later . . . we're having to hand out backpacks so they can eat over the weekend. . . . [Teaching] is now the best paying job that we have."⁴ Yet teachers in West Virginia have seen their inflation-adjusted salaries fall by more than 11 percent since the 2009 recession.⁵ Nationally, teacher pay is down nearly 5 percent.⁶

"Not surprisingly," noted an Economic Policy Institute report, "striking teachers live in states with some of the largest pay gaps. In Arizona, teachers earn just 63 cents on the dollar compared with other college graduates. That gap is 79 cents in Kentucky, 67 cents in Oklahoma, and 75 cents in West Virginia. These gaps amount to vast differences in earning over a career."⁷ While the chronic underfunding of public education has always been a fundamental fact of school life in the United States, in many states it's been getting worse. As middle school science teacher Rebecca Garelli, one of the key organizers of the Arizona strike, told us, "Here you have to have two or three jobs, or you can't have a family." Whether teachers are forced to work a second or third job or sell plasma to make ends meet, it's clear that compensation in the states that have borne the brunt of federal and state austerity is at crisis levels.

Nationally, the number of public K–12 teachers and other school staff has fallen by 158,000, while the number of students rose more than 1.4 million.⁸ The cuts to public education mean larger class sizes, old textbooks, and in Oklahoma and Colorado, a four-day week in many school districts. And in addition to lower salaries, teacher pensions and health benefits, where they exist at all, have been slashed. Often the reductions have been accompanied by high levels of disrespect. As the *New Republic* reported, "In West Virginia, Mingo County special education teacher Brandon Wolford said it was the insurance changes that started the wave of outrage: 'They were trying to make us wear Fitbits. If we didn't get so many steps per day, our premiums were going to increase \$25 per month.'"⁹

These economic attacks paralleled more than a decade of bipartisan corporate "reform" that included test-based evaluation plans, reduced job security, the expansion of privatized charters, and the erosion of professional status—leaving teachers battered and demoralized. From No Child Left Behind, through the Obama administration's Race to the Top, national education reform politics has been a bipartisan exercise in creating a narrative of failure about public education and using it to justify repeated attempts to "fix" schools while blaming those who work in them. But the struggle in West Virginia showed teachers around the country that a different path was possible. In Oklahoma, where organizing for a strike had begun

In Arizona, Gov. Doug Ducey and a Republican Legislature tried to quell the rebellion by belatedly promising pay increases and some modest restoration of school funding cuts. But at the same time, Ducey and the Koch brothers were pursuing the wholesale privatization of Arizona schools through voucher and charter schemes. Recent state budget proposals to "phase in" salary and school aid increases in response to the teacher walkouts also include millions for obscenely misnamed "Freedom Schools," which are actually right-wing think tanks housed at

Indeed, part of Oklahoma's funding crisis comes from the fact that legislators have consistently cut taxes on oil and gas companies and the wealthiest Oklaho-

nothing for people like us.¹³

The poor and working class . . . have already paid more than enough into the system. It's time to ask those who can best afford it to pay their fair share too. That means we stop starving public education just so we can feed Big Oil. That means we reform our income tax system. It means that we eliminate useless deductions that only benefit the rich and do

As the walkouts spread like wildfire, they came into conflict with some of the biggest corporate interests in the country, who on the one hand were increasingly desperate to contain the upsurge, and on the other were determined to press ahead with their plans for austerity and privatization. For example, as soon as the ink was dry on the West Virginia bill that gave public employees a 5 percent raise, Republicans began claiming they would fund the raise through cuts to services and Medicaid. But the final bill contained no such provision. According to West Virginia Spanish teacher Emily Comer, "Basically, they're kicking the can down the road. We're engaged in an ongoing fight to raise taxes on corporations and extractive industries; we don't want to see cuts to essential services, and we don't want to see regressive taxes like a soda tax or a cigarette tax. We don't want our raises funded on the backs of poor people."¹² High school student Cameron Olbert made a similar connection when speaking at a student rally during the Oklahoma walkout:

Who's Afraid of the Teachers?

before the West Virginia walkout, Larry Cagle, a Tulsa high school teacher and the creator of the Oklahoma Teachers United Facebook page, stated, "To have West Virginia teachers out there showing us what it was going to look like was important: the morale boosting that we weren't alone, that a whole state of teachers could stand together."¹⁰ Likewise, Arizona middle school teacher Sarah Giddings wrote for the Rethinking Schools blog that before the West Virginia strike, "a growing number of teachers, including myself, began to feel overwhelmed, demoralized, and paralyzed in a system that worked to undermine our ability to be the effective and meaningful teachers that we could be." The West Virginia teachers' strike, Giddings wrote, "opened our eyes to an empowering alternative reality of what is possible if we collectively organize and come together in solidarity."¹¹

In fact, describing the teacher strikes as red state revolts tends to limit recognition of the national, bipartisan character of the attacks on public education rather than accurately explain what is happening. In West Virginia, for example, the state Legislature was controlled by the Democratic Party for 82 years, and only in 2014 turned Republican. It's impossible to understand the decades of attacks

In a startling sign that teacher uprisings may move to purple and blue states too, Colorado teachers recently left schools and stormed the state Capitol to protest their subpar wages—ranked 46th in the nation, reports the *New York Times*, and “rock bottom” when compared to other professions in the state. “Colorado has a Democratic governor,” notes the *Times*, “and a Legislature split between Democrats and Republicans.”¹⁸

While the initial round of recent teacher revolts mostly hit Republican-controlled state legislatures, similar dynamics have been at work in blue states. As Jeff Bryant, editor of the *Education Opportunity Network*, reported in April 2018:

and test-based teacher evaluation all had bipartisan support. The expansion of privatized charters, erosion of teacher pay and job protections, fertility for school budgets “the new normal” and “an opportunity for innovation.”¹⁷ It was Arne Duncan, Obama’s secretary of education, who declared bipartisan. The attack on teachers and public education has been national and also thoroughly bipartisan. One reason the urge to fight back has crossed state lines at a rapid pace is that Democrats, as well as Republicans. The story is still unfolding.”¹⁶

that the ‘red state rebellion’ is happening in deeply blue states as well, challenging take place in a deeply ‘blue’ state. . . . [It] was an unambiguous public declaration teacher protest movement to a new level. . . . The Los Angeles strike was the first to by United Teachers Los Angeles (UCLA) in January 2019 took the ‘Red for Ed’ In a recent study, researcher Leigh Dingerson underscored how “The six-day strike

Beyond the Red States: How Far Will the Revolt Spread?

But so far, the public’s not buying it. An April 2018 Associated Press-NORC poll found that 78 percent of the U.S. population thinks teacher pay is too low and a majority supports the use of strikes to win better pay, with only 25 percent opposing. Even more encouraging is that among those polled who had heard of the teacher strikes, 80 percent say they approve of the tactic.¹⁵ If this support continues to hold and teachers continue to win significant gains from striking, it’s likely the walkouts will continue.

state universities designed to further the Kochs’ privatization agenda. This is why the Walton Family Foundation, put out a list of talking points to advise legislators on how to discredit teacher strikes. The talking points emphasize that “strikes hurt kids and low-income families,” while ignoring the effects of chronic underfunding of schools, and they encourage legislators to contact the network if they “need assistance with messaging for your state’s specific situation.”¹⁴

on public education and working-class living standards that produced the teacher revolt without including the role of the Democratic Party.

As Garelli, who worked as a teacher for more than a decade in Chicago before moving to Arizona, put it: "It's not only a red state thing. This is a nationwide crisis. That's because it comes down to the funding."¹⁹ State-by-state funding comparisons regularly quoted in the media to pinpoint the causes of teachers' anger often obscure more than they illuminate. For example, while many red states are at the bottom in terms of teacher pay, when that pay is adjusted for cost of living, the results reveal an erosion of living standards that penetrates deep into Democratic-controlled territory. New York and California, typically ranked among the top in teacher pay, come out 17th and 19th when adjusted for cost of living—below Kentucky. Washington, with a Democratic governor and Legislature, ranks near the bottom, below West Virginia and Oklahoma. Democratic-controlled Hawaii is dead last.²⁰

The state-by-state comparisons of education funding also can hide deep inequities within states. According to the Education Law Center (ELC), several Democratic-controlled states rank among the bottom in terms of the fairness of funding distribution. Illinois, for example, is ranked 50th because its regressive funding distribution means high-poverty school districts get only 73 cents for every dollar that low-poverty districts receive.

This is why the photographs of broken chairs and tattered textbooks Oklahoma teachers posted on social media during their strike eerily echoed the videos of Baltimore schools posted a few months earlier during a winter storm: Without money for heat, pipes in several Baltimore schools froze and burst, flooding classrooms and forcing students to wear winter coats. Though Maryland is ranked 12th by ELC in overall levels of school funding, it ranked 38th for funding distribution, with high-poverty districts in the state receiving 9 percent less funding than their wealthier neighbors.²¹

All this is not to ignore the fact that the attacks on teachers and schools have been particularly severe in many of the states where teachers walked out on strike. But it's worth underscoring that these states are just the weakest links in a national chain of austerity. Whether it's low teacher pay, a reduction in pensions or health benefits, large class sizes, aging textbooks, few supplies, crumbling buildings, or cuts to programs and services, no state has been immune.

Through headlines like "Rotten Apples" and "Why We Must Fire Bad Teachers," the corporate media has blamed educators for the failures of our schools while ignoring the cuts that make teachers' jobs increasingly difficult. Converting public schools to charters and using standardized test scores to close schools and fire teachers have been touted as "solutions" for our "broken" education system, ones that conveniently do not require increased or more equitable funding.

The fact that teacher protests and walkouts have changed the national focus on education from charters and testing to salaries and school funding is a remarkable shift. This shift has been strikingly visible in the 2020 presidential campaign, where Democratic primary candidates have emphasized plans to increase teach-

er pay and school funding and offered strong support for teacher unions. Rather than being on the defensive, fighting against school closures and increased tests, teachers have gone on the offensive, demanding that more money be pumped into the school system. In doing so, striking educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, and elsewhere have been teaching us all. As high school student Ravi Patel pointed out at a rally during the Oklahoma strike, "Our teachers are setting an example of bravery by standing up to ignorance and inaction. Our teachers are setting an example of engagement in activism . . . our teachers are setting a better example than our legislators have for the past decade."²²

The emergence of teachers as collective voices for their communities has been as impressive as their activism and bravery. As Cagle put it, "We made the argument early on to students that it was about them. Yes, I'd like a raise, but I'm mad because you're getting a crappy education, and you should be [mad] too."²³ The strikers in West Virginia and Arizona turned down raises that included only teachers and excluded support staff and other public workers. Many demanded increases in state spending beyond schools, for public services that had been starved of resources for years. While it will take broader, sustained efforts to win all the demands raised during the strikes, the walkouts were lessons in social mobilization, led largely by women and drawing inspiration and energy from #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and the March for Our Lives.

One unanswered question is how this dynamic of grassroots uprisings from below will play out in states with collective bargaining rights and union-negotiated local contracts. That landscape is shifting too, with unions battered by more than a decade of corporate reform, austerity budgets, accelerated privatization, and imminent legal attacks from the Supreme Court. As activist reformers and caucuses lead walkouts and protests in major cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, there is also the potential for a radical shift in the leadership and direction of the national teacher unions, one that could change the face and contours of the U.S. labor movement.

But the key question for teachers everywhere is whether they are organized enough to channel the energy sparked by West Virginia into fighting for greatly expanded support for public education and a broader political turn away from austerity and privatization. These rebellions have raised the expectations of teachers about what is possible. They channeled the years of pent-up anger into the largest strike wave in decades. Let's hope it continues to spread until every school has the resources needed to make high-quality education possible. ■

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The West Virginia Educators Revolt

BY ERIC BLANC



CRAIG HUDSON | AP

The West Virginia strike of 2018 was one of the most important labor victories in the United States since at least the early 1970s. Though the 1997 UPS strike and the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike also captured the country's attention, there was something different about West Virginia. This strike was statewide, it was illegal, it went wildcat, and it sparked a sustained wave of teacher work stoppages across the country. To the surprise of pundits across the political spectrum, the first strike wave in decades erupted in Republican-dominated states where labor unions are weak, public sector strikes illegal, and collective bargaining almost nonexistent.

West Virginia upsurge shares many similarities with the rank-and-file militancy of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But there are some critical differences. Whereas labor struggles four decades ago came in the wake of a postwar economic boom and the inspiring successes of the Civil Rights Movement, this labor upheaval erupted in a period of virtually uninterrupted working-class defeats and economic austerity. No less importantly, West Virginia's strike—by shuttering schools from Feb. 22 through March 7, 2018—*won*. The bottom-up militancy and strike action of West Virginia's teachers and school employees wrested a whole series of important concessions, including stopping steep hikes to healthcare premiums, defeating pro-charter and anti-union bills, and winning a 5 percent raise for all public employees.

Charleston teacher and rank-and-file strike leader Emily Comer described the scene at the state Capitol in an interview a few hours after the strike won: "We're overwhelmed with emotion. I have broken down sobbing more times than I can count today. There's probably video footage of me bawling while I'm surrounded by co-workers singing 'Country Roads.' There's almost a sense of disbelief, because for about a solid week there, we were really in unfamiliar territory. We didn't know what was going to happen."

How Educators Won

West Virginia has clarified the continued relevance of strategic insights that were long ago abandoned by much of the labor movement. How did they win? Four big factors stand out.

First, though it is against the law for public employees in West Virginia to strike, they struck anyway. To be sure, educators were initially very reluctant to consider engaging in an illegal work stoppage. On social media and in break rooms, teachers expressed their worries about getting fired, suspended, or fined. A Jan. 13, 2018, debate on the West Virginia Public Employees United Facebook page gives a sense of the dynamic. One West Virginian skeptic argued: "I doubt you'll get enough public employees to participate in a protest, let alone a strike. Many public employees in this state have limited to no collective bargaining rights and there'll be repercussions, like job loss, for walking out. I'm afraid that you'll see a situation where it would be very easy to state that the person abandoned their job." To this, another replied: "that fear runs deep for most teachers: It's really going to hurt our chances of ever getting anywhere."

There were various mechanisms through which union activists helped their co-workers overcome this fear. One was to point to past examples of successful illegal work stoppages, such as the 1990 teachers' strike in West Virginia. By starting threads about the lessons of 1990, Jay O'Neal—the Charleston educator who co-founded the Facebook group together with Comer—from early on sought to help public employees consider the feasibility of striking. As he put it in a Jan. 6 post to the group, "I think if we could educate more teachers about what the [1990] strike actually did for teachers here, we might get a lot of people on board." A skeptic

These efforts paid off. Unlike in the 1990 West Virginia teachers' strike—when schools stayed open through the labor of support staff and scabs—this time all employees went out together. Linda Vannus, a cafeteria cook in Ravenswood, recalled the ensuing transformation at her school: "We're usually ignored, but during the

Many of us felt left out because everybody kept calling this a teachers' movement, a teachers' strike. I understood why personnel often got discouraged by this—but it was counterproductive. So I ended up giving pep talks to them, to explain why we all needed to be in this struggle together.

Those in power attempted to restrict this struggle as much as possible. And support staff marginalization within the schools and the movement did not disappear overnight. It frequently took sustained efforts by militant support staff in West Virginia to prevent their co-workers from standing aside from the general struggle. Mary Wykle—a bus driver in Wyoming County who played a key role in mobilizing other service personnel—explained:

low given their high educational levels and their specific professional responsibilities. rank-and-file teachers—to justify the protests by arguing that teacher pay was too personnel was necessary to undercut the tendency of the media—as well as many teachers. Stressing the contributions and dignity of the tens of thousands of service leaders in West Virginia consciously framed their movement as broader than just school employees. Seeing the need to build the widest possible unity, rank-and-file I spoke with in West Virginia felt that this was the single deepest divide among

At most schools across the country, support staff receive the least respect, the fewest benefits, and the lowest wages. Many people

The second major factor explaining West Virginia's success was that its demands and participants were never limited to just teachers. It was a walkout of and for all school employees, including bus drivers, custodians, secretaries, cooks, and paraprofessionals.

replied that "WV teachers aren't allowed to strike," to which O'Neal responded "True, but they did anyway in 1990 and it made a big difference." Breaking the law was not a decision easily undertaken. But once on strike, educators embraced their defiance. Highlighting the long tradition of taking illegal action to win a righteous cause, many strikers made homemade signs saying "Rosa Parks was not wrong." And on Feb. 25, a teacher posted the following to West Virginia's United page: "The way I look at it, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. took a stand, I'd be in great company [if the state tries to throw us in jail]." The state initially threatened to file injunctions to end the strike, but it was forced to back down.

Breaking the law was not a decision easily undertaken. But once on strike, educators embraced their defiance.

strike it was different—we were united. I felt like when teachers looked at me, they saw me more like an equal.”

Without the efforts of service personnel, victory would have remained elusive. This dynamic became clear on Wednesday, Feb. 28, the pivotal “cooling off day” after West Virginia’s governor and union leaders ordered workers to return to work the next day. As teachers across the state debated if and how to defy this edict, support staff took the initiative to make it clear to superintendents—and teachers—that they were staying out. By all accounts, the initiatives of drivers like Wykle to prepare for hard picket lines were central to the ultimate decision of superintendents across the state that evening to keep schools shut. “The service personnel were our saving grace,” notes teacher Nicole McCormick. “In Mercer County, some schools would have gone back on Thursday, but they couldn’t open without their bus drivers and cooks.”

Third, the West Virginia strike consciously incorporated parents and students into the struggle. Teachers and service personnel took every opportunity to discuss with parents, explaining that educator working conditions were students’ learning conditions. They waved signs in front of school, passed out informational flyers, and organized morning “walk-ins,” during which they rallied together with parents and students.

Because of this, educators could rely on the relationships of trust with parents and students generated by the very nature of education work. West Virginia’s AFT union president Christine Campbell put it as follows: “Educators are embedded in our communities; people trust us to educate their kids. So when parents see the teachers of their children struggling to make ends meet, working at a second job on the weekend, this is a much more direct relationship with the community than in the private sector.”

As the walkouts approached, educators began collecting food donations to give to those large numbers of children who were dependent on school lunches and free breakfasts. And once the strikes began, unions collected and distributed food to these same students, often hand-delivering care packages to their homes. A large number of teachers recounted experiences similar to that of Tanya Asleson in Ravenswood: “I went to the house of a parent who was really poor: his kids always desperately need food at school. The strike was a real hardship for his family—but instead of telling me to go back to work, he said, ‘Ma’am, you stay strong now. You haven’t won yet. Don’t go back tomorrow.’ It was so moving.”

Fighting for students, and framing their struggles as a defense of essential services for the public, went a long way toward undercutting claims that striking teachers were hurting children. Educators made a case that they weren’t walking from the students, but for them. As one West Virginia teacher explained in a March 1 letter to her students: “I love you, and that’s why I’m doing this.”

Teachers and service personnel took every opportunity to discuss with parents, explaining that educator working conditions were students’ learning conditions.

Finally, the strike succeeded because it relied on rank-and-file educators. Though West Virginia's three statewide educator unions eventually lent their support to the work stoppage, the initiative for the action came from below, as did the drive to continue the strike when union leaders attempted to prematurely stop it before a deal was reached with the state.

The movement was generally improvised from below, with all the strengths and limitations that this entailed. Without strong union organizations driving the strike forward, educators were obliged to step up in dozens of ways to make these walkouts a success. Many of these were unglamorous tasks like making signs, collecting food for students, reading up on legislation, speaking with confused parents, texting co-workers to remind them to participate in the strike vote, or driving a group of peers to the Capitol. Other actions required a bigger leap. For numerous strikers, this was the first time they had made a speech at a rally, convinced co-workers to participate in a political action, spoken to the press, chaired a mass meeting, or confronted a politician.

Many of those who were already union members only became active in the lead-up to the strike. Asleson's experience was illustrative: "I went from not wanting to be a [union] building rep, to being aggravated and involved, to now becoming president of the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] in our county. The strike forced me to find leadership skills within myself. We've all really grown in the last couple of months; it makes us proud."

These processes of empowerment went hand in hand with a rapid politicization of tens of thousands of workers, students, and parents. For weeks on end, politics became the 24-7 topic of conversation in lunchrooms, staff meetings, and even normally apolitical spaces like sporting events or church. The Facebook group witnessed a seemingly endless discussion over whether a work stoppage was possible, what to demand, and how to win. Over the course of the strike, the West Virginia Legislature website repeatedly crashed due to network overload.

This groundswell of collective action resulted in an unprecedented union membership surge. Thousands of members joined the unions in the course of the strike movement. Yet much of the upsurge also took place outside of union structures. Consider the following observation by Katie Endicott, a rank and file teacher leader from Mingo County, a southern coal-mining region that played a pivotal role in inspiring the rest of West Virginia to strike: "We learned that you don't have to have a union title, a position. You just have to have courage and a backbone to stand up for yourself, for your state, and your kids. And that's what we did."

Much of the communication and coordination took place over social media. As one veteran of West Virginia's 1990 union-sanctioned strike posted in late January, "This time around we have social media (this group right here) working for us!" Facebook made it much easier to communicate and mobilize large groups of people without, as in the past, having to undertake the arduous task of building up a well-resourced organizational infrastructure. It also changed the relationship and power dynamic between rank-and-file educators and their union leaderships;

without having to rely on official union channels, individual teachers from far-flung counties were easily able to share with each other their concerns, information, and ideas.

Social media proved to be especially important, since educators had to build a statewide movement to win their demands, unlike in blue states where there is mandatory collective bargaining within local school districts. "The United [Facebook] group became like one big faculty room where we could connect with other teachers and workers throughout the state," recalls Ashlea Bassham, a teacher in rural Logan County.

West Virginia's rank-and-file organizers, however, remained oriented on working within and pushing their unions forward. A Jan. 6, 2018, debate in the West Virginia Public Employees United group is illustrative of how the group moderators encouraged educators to participate in, and transform, their unions. One teacher expressed her frustration, widely shared across the state, that the unions were so continually ineffective. In response to this call upon members to stop paying dues, O'Neal responded:

It's really become a cycle—people don't see the union doing much, so they don't join, which further weakens the union's clout, which makes more people think they aren't doing much, etc. One thing to remember though—unions are very democratic institutions—WE ARE THE UNION. . . . If we want to see real change in our unions, WE'VE got to make it happen.

The pressure generated by the Facebook group and its various escalating actions—combined with the galvanizing Feb. 2 walkouts initiated by unionized rank-and-file educators in southern West Virginia—was eventually sufficient to push statewide labor leaders to call a strike vote and to use their organizational as well as financial resources to ensure its success. In mid-February, educators at school sites across the state overwhelmingly voted to walk out. Union structures increasingly began to serve as a framework for educators and grassroots activists to coordinate the impending action with statewide officials and staff—and push back, when necessary, against the latter's hesitations. In the words of Katie Endicott, "We love our unions; we couldn't have accomplished what we did without them. But we did have to overstep them along the way at certain times."

By taking responsibility for the authorization votes and the strike itself, West Virginia's unions had finally placed themselves at the head of the upsurge. Rank-and-file organizers like O'Neal, Comer, and Endicott saw this as a positive development, as they never had any intentions of attempting to substitute for the unions. At the same time, the school-site strike votes had also made it clear that the movement's legitimacy and authority fundamentally rested on the rank and file's democratic decisions. This set an important precedent when educators went wild-cat on Wednesday, Feb. 28 by refusing to heed the call of union leaders to return to work before a deal with the Legislature had been signed into law.

Conclusion

West Virginia demonstrated the strategic centrality of strikes—and the need to challenge the law, unite with support staff, involve the community, and rely on the rank and file. But it would be a mistake to romanticize the strike, or treat it as a universal model. Different approaches are needed for contexts where unions are stronger and labor rights more robust.

The ease of mobilization and communication provided by social media has significant downsides. In the Internet Age, mass protests can scale up very quickly—sometimes too quickly for powerful organizations to develop. Yet without the political relationships and infrastructure

forged through in-person organizing, strikes that rely on Facebook are relatively structurally fragile, ill-equipped to confront harsh, elite opposition, and prone to dissolution after the upsurge peaks.

In the wake of the West Virginia strike, educators thus were not as well organized, or as politically powerful, as their counterparts in United Teachers Los Angeles, which had prepared for its January 2019 strike through four years of deep or-

ganizing. Although education unions in West Virginia are larger than before and various locals have been reinvigorated by new leaders, top union officials have generally pivoted back to their old lobbying efforts, and many teachers have returned to passivity. In response, many of those rank-and-file activists who initiated the 2018 strikes have now begun the arduous process of collectively organizing from below through the new West Virginia United caucus to transform their statewide unions.

To build lasting workplace power, there is no substitute for a militant and democratic trade union movement. Nevertheless, since labor unions remain so weak and legal restrictions so draconian in numerous states, it is likely that the years ahead will witness more volcanic, social media-inflamed work stoppages like that in West Virginia. For educators and working people in all regions of this country, learning from its lessons can help effectively prepare for the battles to come. ■

A labor activist and former high school teacher, Eric Blanc is the author of Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics (Verso 2019). Blanc is currently a doctoral student in sociology at New York University.

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