

Teacher Unions and Social Justice



Session 1 Defining Social Justice Unionism

Online Resource Package

This is a four-part series focuses on strategies used by a growing number of affiliate staff supporting the creation of multiracial alliances with communities and the importance of centering social justice in their unions. Social Justice Unionizing seeks to expand how we think about issue identification, power building, bargaining, partnerships, and the wins we achieve. Content and resources from the book, “Teacher Unions and Social Justice,” will be highlighted through a variety of media and discussion formats. The series will provide an in-depth study of the full text, and full attendance is strongly encouraged, but not required.

January 19, February 3, March 3, March 31 - 2:30 to 4:00 ET

Lead Contacts:

Ellen Holmes
NEA Center for Organizing
eholmes@nea.org



rethinking schools

A Call to Education Activists

By the National Coalition of Education Activists

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The following statement was issued by 29 teacher union activists following a three-day institute in August 1994 sponsored by the National Coalition of Education Activists. Because it makes an important contribution to a much-needed discussion about the role of teacher unions, we are reprinting it in its entirety.

Public education is at a crossroads and so, too, are our unions. Our society's children face deepening poverty and social dislocation. Our schools face a growing crisis of confidence as they confront greater challenges and higher expectations with declining resources. Our unions face powerful political opponents, the punishing consequences of economic hard times, and a crisis of identity borne, in part, of uncertainty about our capacity to rise to the demands of the day.

As the organized core of the teaching profession, education unions remain central to resolving these crises. While there is some promising movement in new directions, the prospects for the future are far from certain.

Much is at stake. The rights of education workers and the interests of public education are under attack and must be defended and strengthened. But relying on strategies which in the past secured better lives for our members is no longer enough.

Economic hard times pose a sustained threat to hopes for improvement in the social welfare. Savage inequalities in the public education available to children of different racial and class backgrounds reflect growing social and economic polarization and squander the potential of our youth. Gaps between schools and the communities they serve are widening. The price of continued decay in public education and social well-being will be paid in reduced prospects for a democratic future.

With the stakes so high for ourselves and for our country, we have good reason to respond urgently to calls for reform. Yet too often that response has been reactive and timid. While some bold innovations have shown that union initiative can make a crucial difference, those initiatives have been the exception rather than the rule. Too often, unions have resisted reform efforts or have uncritically followed the lead of others, rather than raising the voices of educators and school communities. Too rarely does reform constructively affect our classrooms or our schools, with teachers and educators leading the way. Too many have been quick to blame children and their communities for school failure, and slow to identify educational policies and classroom practices that, in the long run, serve those who want to see public schools die out or be sold off to the highest bidder.

Prevailing definitions of educational success and failure remain overly preoccupied with standardized test scores or focused on narrow conceptions of economic competitiveness. Instead, reform should be driven by standards of equity and social justice, including high expectations and educational excellence for all. The ideals that led us to organize our unions and fight for economic justice — indeed, that led many of us to enter teaching in the first place — are no less compelling than in the past: a desire to help children; hope for the future; service to community; and a conviction that public education is a cornerstone of society's commitment to opportunity, equity, and democratic participation. But these ideals cannot be served by business-as-usual in our schools or in our unions. Both demand new vision.

Without a broader conception of the interests of teachers and of teaching, our unions will find themselves on ever-more 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 founder. 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.

Key Components of Social Justice Unionism

Social justice unionism retains the best of traditional unionism, borrows from what has been called “professional unionism,” and is informed by a broader concept of our members’ self-interests and by a deeper social vision. Social justice unionism should:

1. Defend the rights of its members while fighting for the rights and needs of the broader community and students.

The interests of education workers are best served by defending public education while simultaneously working to transform it. Unions of education workers need to accept some responsibility for the problems in public schools. We need to use our resources, membership, and power at the bargaining table and in the legislative arena to help resolve these problems.

For example, education unions should fight to extend collective bargaining laws to the 16 states that currently lack them, so that unions can better protect teachers and teaching. Yet they also need to be willing to reconsider contract language that proves to be an obstacle to school reform.

2. Recognize that the parents and neighbors of our students are key allies, and build strategic alliances with parents, labor unions, and community groups.

Instead of promoting policies that may alienate the communities where our students live, we should forge alliances and resolve differences whenever possible.

Because parents play a central role in the education of their children and are our strongest political allies, education unions should work to insure that parents are full partners in our schools. Unions should advocate for significant parent and community involvement on local school governing bodies, and should urge staff to promote parental involvement in school activities. Where racial and cultural differences exist between our members and the communities they serve, the union should work pro-actively to close the gap. For example, unions should urge schools to communicate to the parents in their native language, to secure childcare and transportation for meetings and conferences, and to schedule meetings at times and places accessible to parents. Unions should lobby for legislation which would allow parents paid time off from their jobs for conferences and school activities.

3. Education unions should also work to unite all staff members at a school. They should build ongoing alliances with a wide range of groups, from other public service unions to the broader labor movement, churches, community and social organizations, advocacy groups, and business and political groups that support public schools. Such alliances are necessary to defeat budget cutbacks, fight for adequate and equitable funding of public education paid for by progressive tax reforms, and advocate for comprehensive school reform. Our unions must also participate in alliances taking up other issues affecting our students, such as job programs, housing, health care, recreation, safety, and anti-violence and anti-racism initiatives.
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.

Only by changing the culture of our unions will they become a force for changing the culture of our schools. Many local education unions need to move from a “service” model — where inactive members are passive recipients of services provided by the paid staff — to a model where a mobilized membership takes active responsibility for union affairs. Members often feel that their union is as distant from them as the school administration. Communication is too often one way, with union newspapers and newsletters rarely seeking opinions or input. Some local and state apparatuses are dominated by cliques of

individuals, making entry into union activities difficult for new members or rank-and-file activists. While democratic structures formally exist in virtually all education employee unions, such structures on their own do not ensure democratic practices or membership involvement. Bureaucratic styles and parliamentary obstacles can too easily thwart a concerned member. Unions need to constantly encourage membership involvement and mobilization.

4. Put teachers and others who work in classrooms at the center of school reform agendas, ensuring that they take ownership of reform initiatives.

Those who work in schools and classrooms on a daily basis are in the best position to implement and evaluate school reform initiatives. Unfortunately, unions have not ensured that the voices of these educators are adequately heard. Unions need to allocate sufficient resources to promote reform initiatives and build grass-roots support for them.

Just as we demand that school administrators empower staff to make educational policy decisions, union leaders must equip their members to make decisions at local school levels. This means being open to changes in contract language that inhibits reform, and committing resources to train members for active, decision-making roles at the school level. While the union has a responsibility to protect the rights of all its members, only by moving more decision-making power to the school site will there be enough initiative and expertise to make school reform successful. Such a transfer of the locus of power, if done properly with adequate training, could also bring historically disenfranchised union members back into our organizations.

5. Encourage those who work with children to use methods of instruction and curricula that will promote racial and gender equity, combat racism and prejudice, encourage critical thinking about our society's problems, and nurture an active, reflective citizenry that is committed to real democracy and social and economic justice.

Too often, schools fail to challenge students intellectually, dull their creativity, and bore them to a point of alienation from learning. Moreover, the difference in achievement levels between children of color and their white counterparts is totally unacceptable. Education unions should work with communities of color to address this grave problem.

Unions need to give higher priority to classroom and school-based practices that promote better education and equity for all students. These include: changes in curricula that affirm a child's home language and culture while teaching English and respect for all cultures; practices that promote gender equity; teacher training in the reduction of prejudice, including homophobia; alternatives to tracking and ability grouping; and school restructuring. In addition to the inherent merits such practices have, parents and communities who see unions promoting reforms that better serve their children's needs are more likely to support schools and teachers.

6. Forcefully advocate for a radical restructuring of American education.

Daily life for teachers must be changed from one of isolation and over-extension with few standards and little accountability, to one of collaboration, reflection, high standards, and mutual accountability. For this to happen, schools must be radically restructured. Some of the components of this restructuring include: lower class sizes so students can establish more productive relationships with teachers; smaller schools; a substantial increase in collaborative planning and staff development time; peer mentoring and evaluation; new, more equitable forms of standards and performance assessment; faculty selection processes in which the staff and principal of a school have more power; sharply reduced bureaucracy at all levels; and the reintegration of administrators into classroom teaching on a regular basis. Unions should use their power at the bargaining table and in the legislative arena to fight for these measures.

7. Aggressively educate and mobilize its membership to fight for social justice in all areas of society.

Growing racial and class divisions are threatening not just our schools, but the very foundations of our

society. Education unions, from the local to the national level, must address these divisions. Ultimately, such problems will only be adequately addressed by a massive social movement similar to the civil rights movement and the movement against the War in Vietnam. In the short term, however, much can be done — from creating classrooms that encourage students to critically reflect and act on social problems, to building coalitions that address specific social problems.

Education unions need to move beyond a crisis orientation and become part of ongoing, long-term coalitions. We must stress constant, grass-roots education and organizing and not just sporadic media blitzes. We must lobby behind the scenes but not forego militant public actions when necessary. We need to build bridges to political leaders and parties, but not rely too heavily on them. We need to work with others to build a political movement that is independent of the Democratic and Republican parties and that focuses on the fight for social and economic justice.

A Call to Action

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.

Classroom and Building Level

For classroom teachers, social justice unionism might mean changing their methods of teaching so that they draw on students' experiences; developing alternatives to tracking, ability grouping, and antiquated forms of assessment; and embracing anti-racist, anti-bias approaches. Teachers and other workers most concerned about educational reform should demand that their unions facilitate that reform.

At the building level, social justice unions would move beyond the role of "information pushers" whose main presence is newsletters stuffed into mailboxes, to an expanded role that helps develop the capacities of members to participate in school restructuring and all union activities. School-based union committees or chapters might promote staff development activities, encourage site-based governance that would allow staff and parent decision making at the school, and push for the creation of structures and the freeing up of time for collegial dialogue and support. Such union committees could help mobilize members to advocate for progressive perspectives within the union, and, when working in concert with parents, advocate for the school as a whole before the administration and school board.

Local, Community and State Level

Internally, members need to demand changes in union structures and policies, so that democratic discussion is encouraged, training programs are available on labor/management relationships, pedagogical matters, and reform issues, and so that newer teachers feel that the union is an important part of their school lives.

Externally, a social justice union should be a public advocate for the needs not only of school staffs, but of public education, school restructuring, and most importantly, of their students and their communities. Such advocacy ranges from political action and coalition building to membership education.

Given the increasingly difficult straits facing public education, building alliances on the local and state levels is particularly important. Unions should build ongoing relations with organizations and communities to fight for equitable and adequate funding for schools, progressive school reform, programs to increase the number of teachers of color, and social initiatives such as universal health care, progressive tax reform, housing, jobs programs, and so forth.

National Level

On the national level, the likely merger of the NEA and the AFT presents an historic opportunity. Such a merged union would have the potential to become one of the most powerful advocates for children and social justice in our nation.

It is crucial that members fight for a merged union that is more democratic, more concerned about equity, and more capable of building and leading a national social movement around key social issues.

In the immediate term, local, state, and national offices of the AFT and NEA should initiate widespread discussion of the need for social justice unionism. The national offices can seed social justice unionism projects at the local level by allocating staff time and resources, and can encourage such perspectives by orienting conferences and training sessions toward that theme. More- over, world economic trends make clear that unions in the U.S. must work cooperatively with unions and other social justice organizations on an international basis.

Ultimately, the likelihood of this vision becoming a reality rests on the actions of the members of both the NEA and AFT. These members understand that their commitment to children will best be served not only by being high-quality teachers and support staff, but also by being social justice advocates in a society that so desperately needs equality and justice. We encourage all like-minded people to join us in this effort.

For more information, copies of this draft, or information about upcoming activities to promote this vision of education unionism, contact NCEA, Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572; 914-876-4580.

The union institute was attended by the following union activists from the AFT and NEA, including national staff, state and local officers, and rank-and-file members (Organizations are listed for identification purposes only):

Barry Abel, Local Assistance and Development, NEA

Nina Bascia, Faculty of Education, University of Toronto

Sara Belcher-Barnes, United Federation of Teachers Building Representative, P.S. 130, District 15, New York City

Roscoe Caron, Executive Board, Eugene Education Association

Michael Charney, Executive Board, Cleveland Teachers' Union

Maggie Crain, Director of Publications, Seattle Education Association

Tom Edminster, Building Representative and Executive Board member, United Educators of San Francisco (AFT/NEA)

Jackie Ellenz, Portland Association of Teachers

Margaret Garrison, Representative, Olympic UniServ Council, Washington

Donna Gold, National Center for Innovation, NEA

Darla Hartley, Field Assistant, Olympic UniServ Council, Washington

Lynda Hayashi, Parent Outreach Coordinator, Spokane Education Association

Joel Jordan, United Teachers-Los Angeles

Stan Karp, Executive Board, Paterson Education Association, Patterson, N.J.

Grainger Ledbetter, President, Arkansas Education Association

Larry Lewin, Human and Civil Rights Committee, Eugene Education Association

Heather Lewis, Director, Center for Collaborative Education, New York City

Barbara McGrew, Center for Membership and Affiliates, NEA

Cora McHenry, Executive Director, Arkansas Education Association

Tom Mooney, President, Cincinnati Federation of Teachers

Bob Peterson, Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, Rethinking Schools

Diana Porter, Chair, Educational Policies Committee, Cincinnati Federation of Teachers

Dina Portnoy, Philadelphia Schools Collaborative

Ann Randall, Representative, Olympic UniServ Council, Washington

Mark Simon, NEA Board of Directors

Kent Spring, Secretary, Portland Association of Teachers

Rita Tenorio, Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, Rethinking Schools

Ben Visnick, President, Oakland Education Association

Howard Yank, Co-chair, Human and Civil Rights Committee, Eugene Education Association

Resources:

Kerchner, C. and Julia Koppich. "A Union of Professionals: Labor Relations and Educational Reform" (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

"Rethinking Our Unions Institute of the National Coalition of Education Activists, Social Justice Unionism: A Working Draft" (Washington DC: NCEA, 1994). For a copy send \$1 to NCEA, PO Box 679, Rhinebeck, NY 12572.

Two Tensions for Teacher Unions

“Two tensions have been specifically pivotal for teacher unionists. Although advocates of social justice in education sometimes seem to expect teachers to foreswear any self-interest or dedication to the children they teach, unionism sees teachers as agents and beneficiaries of social justices. 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).”

A second tension involves teachers simultaneously making demands upon the state while serving it... 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.” (pg.43)

“Teacher unions have at times challenge the inequalities of American life, and foster broader demands for the public good. At other moments, they have allied themselves with the state to place teachers’ immediate interests and privileges about more expansive ideas. 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.” (pg. 51)

Are these the two tensions that keep our unions agitated, “Is it self-interest or broader political/social concerns?”

Is this the Theory of Change we need? - “ In order to protect both material and self-interest and the joy of their work, public school educators must, in the long run, protect the public interest.”

How does your role as a staff person change within these tensions and theory of change?

Be ready to present and discuss your answers as a whole group.

Key components in the three models of teacher unionism

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Orientation

Emphasizes separation of labor and management. The role of the union is to limit what teachers can be asked to do and to increase the pay/benefits they get for doing it.

Emphasizes and defends teacher professionalism and promotes teacher leadership at school and district levels through union/district mentoring programs, etc.

Emphasizes alliances with parents and community to organize for social justice in schools, the community, and the curriculum. Challenges white supremacy and other forms of oppression.

View of Management

Assumes labor/management relations are hostile and adversarial.

Encourages management/labor cooperation to promote quality programs and achievement.

Partners with management when they promote anti-racist social justice policies, and organizes with parents and communities against management when they don't.

Bargaining

Win/lose bargaining with emphasis on bread-and-butter issues of salary, hours, and working conditions. Views the contract as way to institutionalize changes.

Interest-based bargaining that addresses teaching quality and programmatic initiatives, include MOUs outside of the contract. Views the contract as way to institutionalize changes.

Bargaining for the common good. Bargains bread-and-butter and professional issues, but balances those demands with the broader social justice issues in the schools and community. Views the contract as way to institutionalize changes, but rank-and-file and community organizing as key features in sustaining wins.

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

District Decision-Making

Management prerogatives respected at school and district levels. Union staff grieves management decisions.

Seeks to expand decision-making and instructional leadership at school and district levels. Joint labor/management committees address professional issues.

Democratic input by key stakeholders through democratically elected school boards, shared leadership at school level, and district councils and committees that include educators, administrators, parents, community, and students. Promotes creation of transformative community schools.

Internal Union Leadership

Often a “business model” that is staff- and/or leader-dominated with limited member decision-making. Promotes member passivity except for occasional mobilizations. Members view “the union” as a third party—the staff and elected leaders.

Promotes moving significant leadership to the school level and works to infuse the district operations with teacher leaders.

Broad membership engagement and involvement in decision-making. Vision and direction provided by elected leadership; diversity and debate encouraged. Members view the union as “first person plural”—We are the union.

Service to Members

Staff “solves” most individual problems through contract enforcement.

Emphasis on school-based problem-solving.

School-based leaders are trained to organize staff to solve most problems at the school level. Districtwide problems are solved through pressure and collective action.

Equity and Race

At worst, defends white privilege; most commonly ignores such matters.

Main proponents of professional unionism are silent on race issues.

Strong emphasis on race and equity-supporting movements in the community on issues that don’t directly affect teachers. Openly deals with racial issues internal to the union.

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Pedagogy and Curriculum

Union cedes control of curriculum and professional development to management.

Union promotes additional responsibility for teacher leaders and brings teacher voice to design, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

Union promotes more teaching and less testing, restorative practices over punitive discipline, and culturally relevant, anti-racist social justice curriculum that is participatory and connected to students’ lives.

Student Rights/School Safety

Focus is on teacher authority, classroom control. Teachers quick to refer students for discipline, without listening to students. Leads to zero-tolerance policies and enables school-to-prison pipeline.

Silent on the subject.

Promotes restorative practices and anti-bias training of staff, and fights for the “schools the students deserve,” which includes full social and health services, counseling, and respect for students’ personal rights.

Social Issues, Community, and Parents

Limited involvement with social and community issues; parent outreach is emphasized only during bargaining or other contractual dispute with management.

Mainly silent on broader community issues. Works with parents to improve individual parent support for their child’s learning.

Reaches out to community and parents to improve the quality of teaching and learning; supports social justice movements in the community even if not directly involved with schools and encourages members to participate in such movements.

INDUSTRIAL

PROFESSIONAL

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Relations with the Labor Movement

Supports labor struggle when in the self-interest of teachers. (Historically NEA rank and file not encouraged to view themselves as part of the labor movement.)

Silent on the subject.

Views teacher unions as on the front lines to revitalize the labor movement. Stands in solidarity with labor struggles—both union-based and community-based, like \$15 and a Union.

SOURCES

- Kerchner, Charles Taylor and Julia E. Koppich. 1993. *A Union of Professionals: Labor Relations and Educational Reform*. Teachers College Press.
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- Charney, Michael and Bob Peterson (eds.). 1999. *Transforming Teacher Unions: Fighting for Better Schools and Social Justice* (first edition). Rethinking Schools.
- The Three Frames of Progressive Unionism, from the NEA's Center for Organizing.