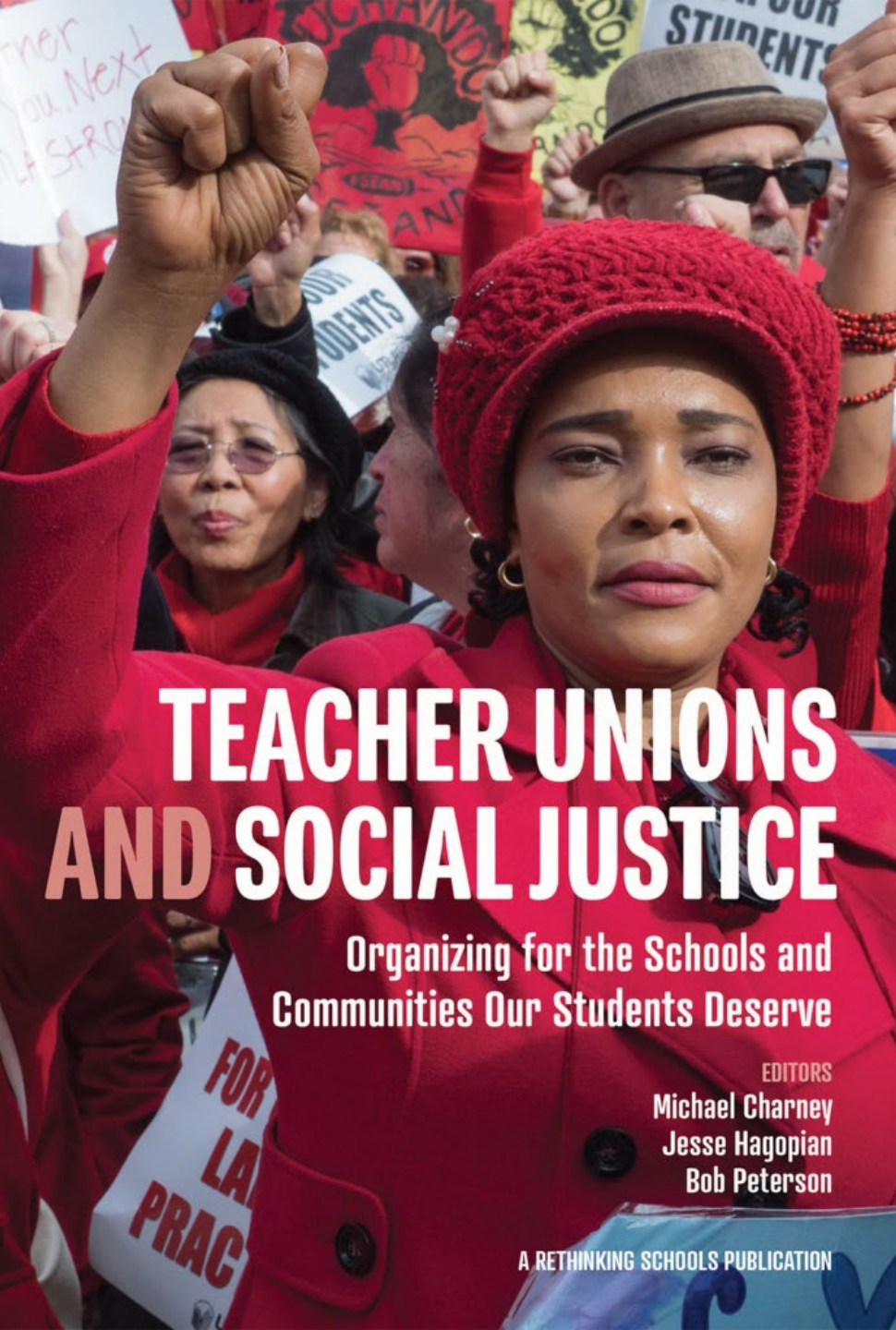




TEACHER UNIONS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Organizing for the Schools and
Communities Our Students Deserve

EDITORS
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A RETHINKING SCHOOLS PUBLICATION

Teacher Unions and Social Justice

SESSION 1 OF 4

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM?

Teacher Unions and Social Justice



- Rename Yourself in Zoom
 - Please include:
 - First and Last Name
 - Pronouns
 - State
- Example: Ceaser Chavez(he/him)-Arizona
- What are you looking forward to in 2026?

Teacher Unions and Social Justice

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Honoring This Space

We begin by acknowledging that through a history of colonization and brutality, we are currently on the traditional lands stewarded by generations of indigenous people.

We honor these indigenous people, all elders, past, present, and emerging. We are called to learn and share these learnings about this tribal history, culture, and contributions that have been suppressed in the telling of the story of what we now call the United States of America.

Our Invitation to YOU

- **Be present in this space**
- **Listen with curiosity**
- **Take care of yourself**
- **Be willing to engage in this work with yourself and others**
- **Leave with a new perspective**





Meet Your Facilitators

Michelle Couture

(she/her/hers)

NYSUT Labor Relations Specialist for UUP



Dr. Taraja Shephard Allen

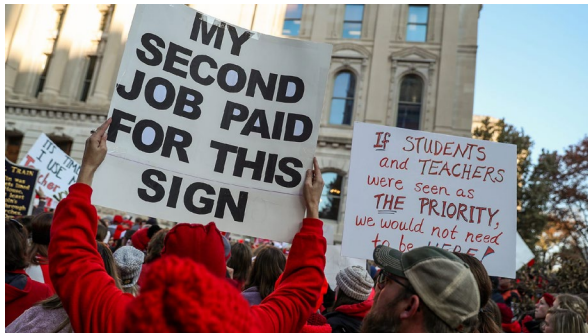
(she/her/hers)

OEA Membership Consultant



Drop in the Chat

What do you think Social Justice Unionism looks like?



Session 1 Objectives:

- What is Social Justice Unionism?
- What would it take to move our locals, state unions, and communities towards it?
- What can I do to support this idea as NEA affiliate staff ?



Imagine if...

Imagine If Educators- (from Page 21)

- Had so much respect in the community that when a parent has a problem with a school, the parent not only talks to the principal and teacher, but also the building union rep...
- Worked in ongoing alliance with community, parent, and labor groups to promote the schools and communities our students deserve...



Imagine If Educators - (from Page 21)

- Started programs for high school youth to serve as union interns and learn about the labor movement.
- Sponsored afternoon social justice curriculum-sharing sessions at the union's offices.
- Had a diverse leadership and membership that was more reflective of the student body.



Thoughts and Reflections

Introduce yourself

- What imagine "If" statement resonated with you the most?
- What would it take to achieve this “If” in your area?



Two Tensions in
the fight
for Solidarity:

**Industrialism vs
Democracy**



“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 educators, **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... Today, teachers of America, we stand at the parting of the ways. Democracy is not on trial, but America is."

Margaret Haley, "Why Teachers Should Organize," TUSJ p. 67-69

Margaret Haley: Matriarch of Teacher Unionism



Key Insights About the Two Ideals and Tensions

Industrial Ideal: Efficiency, hierarchy, and collective bargaining power.

Educator Ideal: Democracy, professional autonomy, and grassroots voice.

Risk: If educator ideals are not infused into union structures, industrialism will dominate schools, eroding democratic participation and professional judgment.

Core Principle: Democracy is the source of industrial power—not its competitor.

Our Suggested Theory of Change

Our union's industrial strength must serve the democratic vision of educator voice and professional integrity—because when democracy drives power, we protect schools from becoming factories and transform members from customers into co-creators of change.

Staff Role Within This Theory of Change

From Fixer to Organizer: Move beyond solving problems for members; build capacity so members lead their own advocacy and organizing.

Guardian of Professionalism: Ensure bargaining and policy reflect educational integrity, not just efficiency metrics; translate classroom realities into union priorities.

Bridge Builder: Create transparent feedback loops so members feel ownership of union decisions; balance unity with diversity of voices during negotiations.

Three Frames of Teacher Unionism

Teacher unions generally operate within **three primary frames of unionism:**
Industrial, Professional, and Social Justice.

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 Union: Protecting Fundamental Rights and Working Conditions

Focus:

- ❑ Traditional “bread-and-butter” union work
- ❑ Clear distinction between **labor (educators)** and **management (districts, school boards)**

Key Areas:

- ❑ Salaries and wages
- ❑ Health care and benefits
- ❑ Working conditions (class size, workload, prep time)
- ❑ Due process and job protection
- ❑ Contract enforcement through collective bargaining

Core Purpose:

- ❑ To build collective power that ensures fairness, stability, and economic security for members.

Professional Unionism: Honoring Teaching as Skilled Expert Work

Focus:

- ❑ Teaching as a profession—not just a job
- ❑ Educator voice in shaping teaching and learning

Key Areas:

- ❑ High-quality professional learning
- ❑ Peer Assistance and Review (PAR)
- ❑ Mentoring and induction
- ❑ Teacher leadership and shared decision-making
- ❑ Involvement in curriculum, assessment, and instructional policy

Core Purpose:

- ❑ To strengthen the quality, integrity, and professional standing of the teaching profession while improving student learning.

Social Justice Unionism: Linking Educator Power to Student and Community Needs

Focus:

- ❑ The connection between **educator working conditions** and **student learning conditions**
- ❑ Solidarity with families, students, and community partners

Key Areas:

- ❑ Educational equity and access
- ❑ Racial, social, and economic justice
- ❑ Community schools and wraparound supports
- ❑ Fair and inclusive school policies
- ❑ Addressing systemic barriers such as poverty and racism

Core Purpose:

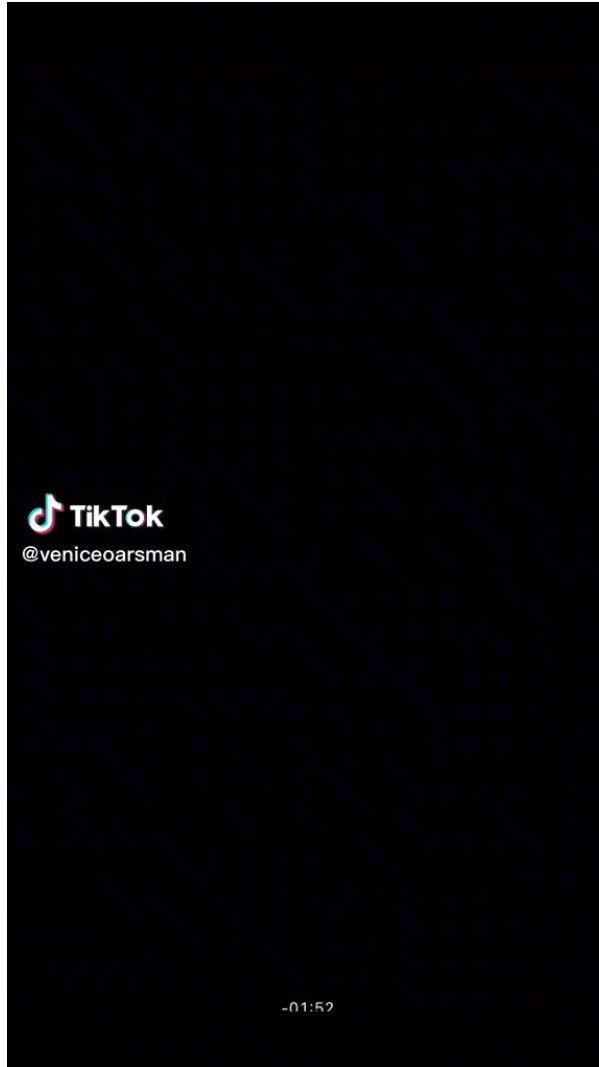
- ❑ To advance equity and justice for all students by positioning the union as part of a broader social movement.

7 Components of Social Justice Unionism

- Defend the rights of its members while fighting for the rights and needs of the broader community and students.
- Recognize that the parents and neighbors of our students are key allies, and build strategic alliances with parents, labor unions, and community groups.
- 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.

7 Components of Social Justice Unionism

- Put teachers and others who work in classrooms at the center of school reform agendas, ensuring that they take ownership of reform initiatives.
- 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
- Forcefully advocate for a radical restructuring of American education.
- Aggressively educate and mobilize its membership to fight for social justice in all areas of society.



Why does Social Justice Unionism matter to members?

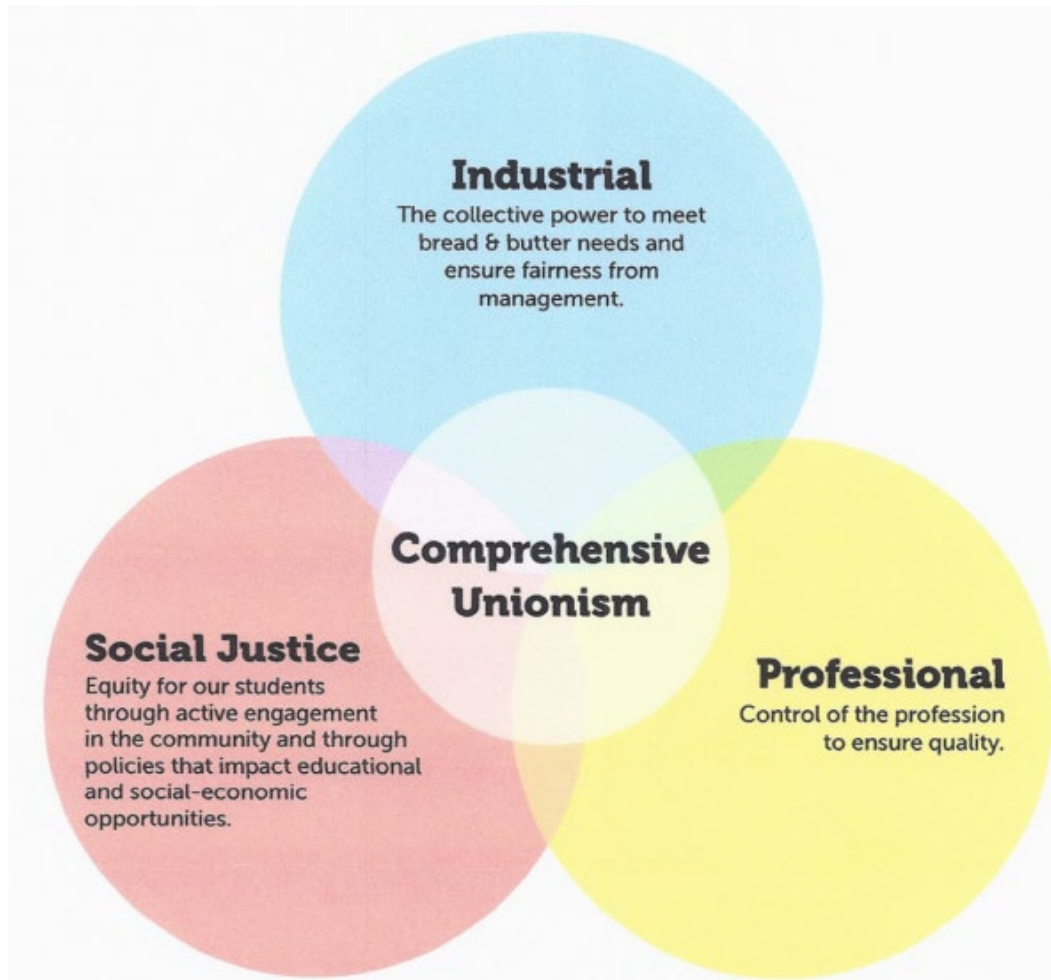
Comprehensive Unionism: Strength Through Integration

A comprehensive union **does not choose one frame over another**—it weaves all three together:

- ❑ **Industrial** → protects rights and working conditions
- ❑ **Professional** → strengthens practice and educator voice
- ❑ **Social Justice** → aligns union power with community needs
- ❑ **Result:**

A union that is:

- ❑ Strong at the bargaining table
- ❑ Credible in educational leadership
- ❑ Trusted in the community





Group Reflection: Three Models of Teacher Unionism

- Where do you see your members and locals fitting into these models?
- What shifts in your work are necessary to move members towards a more social justice focused union model?
- How could use this tool in your work?



Comprehensive Framework: NYSUT

Coming Up Next: What are the leaders and structures we need?

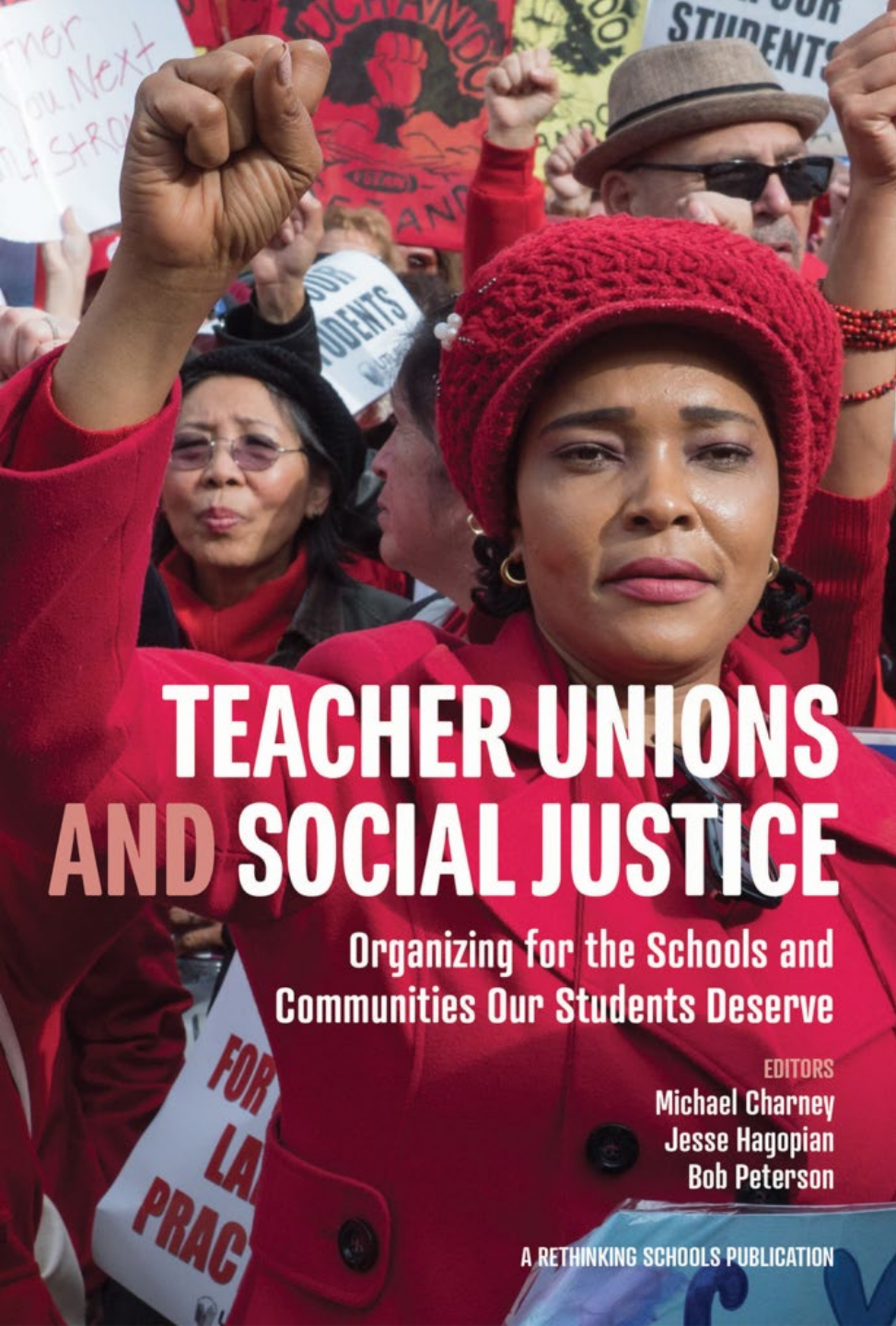
“The terms “social justice” and “social justice unionism” can be watered down or co-opted. Some activists and leaders believe that passing resolutions in solidarity with different struggles (a positive thing) makes a union a “social justice union.” Others label programs “social justice,” but because of top down leadership and a lack of membership involvement, such programs are less effective than they might be. A new leader or leadership team can’t just declare that by virtue of their politics they are now a social justice union. It’s hard work. Real transformation of a union encompasses change in many areas: internal decision making processes, vision, campaigns, addressing race and gender issues, relationships with parents and communities, and much more.” (pg. 175)

Given this – what is the role of union staff in leadership identification, development, and engagement?

Teacher Unions and Social Justice:

Upcoming Sessions 2 -4

- **Thursday, January 22, 2026 @ 2:30PM Eastern**
- **Wednesday, January 28, 2026 @ 2:30PM Eastern**
- **Thursday, January 29, 2026 @ 2:30PM Eastern**



Get Your Copy of the Book: Teacher Unions and Social Justice

- Send an Email: Shephardallent@ohea.org
- Include:
 - Name
 - State Affiliate
 - Address
 - How do you plan to use this resource in your work?

Teachers Unions and Social Justice



Teacher Unions and Social Justice

This learning event was designed to provide a foundational experience of the key concepts and methods needed to move members towards organizing around social justice issues and bargaining for the common good. The purpose of the four-session series is to both model a way to begin this work and build an urgency within you to continue this work.

Please let us know how we did.