

Visions of Justice:

Unions and the community in historical perspective

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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-

swear any self-interest out of dedication to the children they teach, unionism sees 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).

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.

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.

Unionism, Professionalism, and Gender Equity

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

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 "PhD's, accountants, and even lawyers—men like Jules Kolodny, Dave Wittes, 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,

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 organizers once again 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

The Teachers Union

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 universally 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,

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."⁷ 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 school 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 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 prin-

cipled 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

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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

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

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 represent 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-management 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 movement. 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 professionalism, 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 *BusinessWeek*, "when the teacher 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 activity 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 accomplishments 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 ended 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-

less, in the context of the school conflict, invocations of professional autonomy increasingly dominated Debsian notions of working-class solidarity. Teachers, future AFT president Sandra Feldman claimed on the eve of the 1968 conflict, “in general support civil rights and equal educational opportunity, but their commitment to a fight for improved schools was . . . largely, and understandably, self-interest . . . 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 UFT picket line, “but they shouldn’t get it by pulling down others who have just come up. It’s wrong and reactionary for them to pit their strength against a group that struggled for years to make teaching a profession.”²⁵ “It has always been the intent of the UFT,” Al Shanker claimed in the face of Black demands, “that community participation does not mean that those decisions under professional control should be surrendered.” Union teachers, he declared, “will not continue to teach in any school or district where professional decisions are made by laymen.”²⁶

In addition to the heightened passions of the moment, the very conditions of urban school teaching contributed to teachers’ willingness to distance themselves from the communities in which they worked. By the late 1960s, a majority of New York’s students were Black or Latino; meanwhile, most teachers were white. An increasingly wide physical, cultural, and political gulf separated teachers, who could abandon cities for suburban retreats, from their students, who lived in decaying urban neighborhoods. The majority of teachers, New York teacher activist and future urban school reformer Deborah Meier has observed, brought prejudices against poor minority children to their work, and “rather than undermining these prejudices,” the teaching experience “arouses them.”²⁷ Amid the troubling and visible tragedy of widespread minority student failure, adherence to seemingly uniform, race-blind standards of instruction asserted teachers’ professionalism while absolving them of responsibility for their ineffectiveness.

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

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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 1968 conflict 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 renegotiations. 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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ENDNOTES

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² Schierenbeck, Jack. Feb. 19. 1996. “Class Struggles: The AFT Story, Part 1.” *New York Teacher*. uft.org/your-union/about-uft/our-history/class-struggles-uft-story/class-struggles-uft-story-part-1

³ Carter, Patricia. 2002. “Everybody’s Paid but the Teacher”: *The Teaching Profession and the Women’s Movement*. Teachers College Press: p. 41–45; Santangelo, Lauren. 2019. *Suffrage and the City: New York Women Battle for the Ballot*. Oxford University Press: p. 71–73.

⁴ Cogen, Charles. May 1960. “The President’s Column.” *United Teacher*: p. 2; Cogen, Charles. June 1963. “The Teacher’s Public Image.” *United Teacher*: p. 3.