

The Teachers' Trifecta

July 2, 2014

Across the United States, we are in the midst of a great struggle over the nation's education system. On one side is a bipartisan effort to privatize schools and undermine the promise of public education. Opposing that effort are large numbers of parents and teachers.



However, working class parents of color see the current battle over public education quite differently than do those from the white middle class. For this reason, when I talk to teachers about what is driving the changes that they see destroying their careers and schools, I always start by sharing the story of my own education. In 1954, I was in the first grade in the David W. Harlan elementary school in Wilmington, Delaware. I could buy a hot lunch prepared by cafeteria workers who were employed by the Wilmington Public Schools (WPS). I took music lessons—violin—for free, using a violin the city schools lent to me. We had a school library, chorus, and band. We had art classes three times a week. However, schools on Wilmington's east side got the leftover musical instruments, and much less money for books, supplies, and maintaining school facilities like the playground. Harlan was all-white, intentionally segregated. Real estate developers and brokers in its attendance zone had homeowners sign racial covenants that prohibited the sale of homes to blacks. This information was subsequently used by the NAACP in its successful suit to desegregate the WPS.¹

To be credible to the parents and community members who should be our strongest allies—the poor and working parents of color who are targeted by neoliberal propaganda—we must acknowledge the complicity of the education establishment, labor, and teachers unions in allowing this gross inequality to persist. Labor did not create residential and school segregation, but accepting it was an unarticulated assumption in its post-World War II pact with capital. Those practices and assumptions must no longer be accepted by parents, teachers, and our unions.

The rich and powerful, who control the media and educational policy of both political parties, use lofty-sounding slogans about “putting students first” and “making schools work” that obscure their aims. The linchpin of educational policy of both Democrats and Republicans is that schooling is, to quote Arne Duncan, “the one true path out of poverty.”² This assumption obviates the state's role in ending poverty through economic policy by creating well-paying jobs that support a sustainable economy and by requiring a minimum wage that does not leave people in poverty. Schooling is not and cannot be the “one true path out of poverty” for the vast majority of children because our economy consigns millions to unemployment or work that pays poverty wages. Yet we are told students must be made “college and career ready” to have well-paying jobs, or as the U.S. Department of Education phrased its goal in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “The goal for America's educational system is clear.... Every student should have meaningful opportunities to choose from upon graduation from high school.”³ The Common Core, the new national curriculum funded in good part by Bill Gates, is explicitly defended by its proponents, including teachers unions, to make individuals and the country economically competitive.⁴

Schools in the United States have been affected by inequality outside their walls while also functioning in ways that both challenge and reproduce it.⁵ We have a remarkable body of high-

quality empirical scholarship describing “schools as places where social reproduction occurs but also where human agency matters and makes a difference in students’ lives.”⁶ Social movements effectively challenged the inequality of outcomes in education but, in the end, were unable to disrupt social processes in schools as fully as was needed. In good part this occurred because schooling was made to carry a weight that it cannot by itself bear and because education is enmeshed in social, political, and economic conditions that support or undercut what can occur in classrooms.

Probably the most important liberal defender of public education today is Diane Ravitch. In battling her former co-thinkers with the personal resources and connections she acquired in supporting neoconservative policies, Ravitch has contributed mightily to public awareness of the threat to democracy and to children in the current drive to create a privatized school system funded by public money but without collective, public oversight. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools*,⁷ her newest book, is an authoritative compendium of why these reforms are so dangerous. Ravitch has almost singlehandedly developed and publicized a liberal rebuttal to neoliberal “reforms,” in effect substituting not only for the teacher union establishment but for labor as well.

Still, while she has repudiated the policies she helped craft and promote under the George H. W. Bush administration, she has not yet distanced herself from assumptions that led to her support for the initial iteration of the current reforms. The central political flaw in her analysis is seen when she argues about education’s purposes, past and present. Public education was established in the 19th century, she explains,

to educate future citizens and to sustain our democracy. The essential purpose of the public schools, the reason they receive public funding, is to teach young people the rights and responsibilities of citizens.... A secondary purpose was to strengthen our economy and our culture by raising the intelligence of our people and preparing them to lead independent lives as managers, workers, producers, consumers, and creators of ideas, products, and services. (p. 237)

She adds a third purpose, “to endow every individual with the intellectual and ethical power to pursue his or her own interests and to develop the judgment and character to survive life’s vicissitudes.” (p. 237)

Ravitch explains that education’s purpose was—and is—to strengthen the economy and prepare people for work. Yet the book does not acknowledge that schools have educated most working class students for working class jobs, and most children of professionals for similar careers and the social status of their parents. She challenges the claim that education is the “one true path” out of poverty by making poverty exclusively to blame for inequality in education. Previously Ravitch contended that her own education was ideal and it is to her credit that in *Reign of Error* she steps back from that assertion and argues that residential and school segregation do harm. Her shift in thinking shows a new willingness to address racial segregation, an unpopular but necessary step in equalizing school outcomes.⁸ However, the overarching argument that U.S. public education was doing as well as could be expected given the effects of poverty is a serious flaw in her analysis and opens her—and the movement—to the charge that we want to defend an unequal status quo.



The 2011 Wisconsin teacher protests and strikes against Gov. Scott Walker's anti-union legislation contributed to an upsurge of teacher activism around the country, most importantly the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012.

Ravitch does not address the contradiction between schooling's non-economic purposes, its role in educating the next generation of citizens and nurturing each individual's potential, and its use as a sorting mechanism to allocate a diminishing number of well-paying jobs. Unfortunately, neoliberal reforms resonate with poor, minority parents precisely because they want the same opportunity for their children to compete for good jobs as children of middle class parents have. Calls for schools that make children happy and develop creativity will not assuage parents' fears that their children will not be strong competitors in an increasingly punishing labor market. Arne Duncan's contemptuous dismissal of opponents of high-stakes testing and the new Common Core curriculum as "suburban moms" who can't face their children's limitations demonstrates that our opponents will fully exploit the utterly hypocritical and inaccurate claim that they protect poor, minority children against white liberals who want to maintain the status quo, to advantage their own children.

Ravitch marshals evidence that bipartisan reforms aim to destroy the template for mass public education in the United States that was created in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately the artificial national border she draws in telling the story of U.S. educational reform obscures the global dimension of the project and the relationship of the changes being made to U.S. schools to demands of capitalism globally and its transformation of schooling throughout the world. In effect she proposes a return to the post-World War II social democratic compact, inflected by commitment to the civil rights movement's campaign for school integration. One insurmountable problem with this strategy is that capitalism rejects the compact. But even if we could win back the compact, it was a Faustian deal. Teachers unions, like the rest of labor, were bureaucratized and greatly weakened by the quid pro quo that gave them collective bargaining but took away the capacity to intervene directly on issues that go to the heart of teachers' work, especially school organization and curriculum. This is not a past to which we should want to return, even if we could.

Her electoral strategy also reflects a desire to return to the (idealized) past. Ravitch recognizes that big money and corporations control the Democratic Party, and her solution is to push Democrats to be the defenders of public education she says they once were. She therefore encourages opponents of corporate school reform to embrace Democrats willing to criticize (however vaguely) privatization, testing, and charter schools and defend (however meekly) teachers unions. However, she (and those who agree with this political strategy) do not explain how we will hold candidates responsible to the activists who have worked on their behalf and avoid betrayals. Yet this issue is more pressing with each election cycle and each desertion of Democrats whom progressives have

supported. Al Franken, liberal sweetheart, has endorsed Teach for America and charter schools, as has Howard Dean. Ras Baraka, campaigning for mayor of Newark, easily won support of activists, including Ravitch, based on his harsh criticisms of Newark's school closings and creation of charter schools. Yet Baraka has allied himself with the mayor of Jersey City, who was elected on a program to bring to the Jersey City schools precisely the reforms that Baraka criticizes in Newark, reforms that Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) and New Jersey's newest Democratic senator and Newark's former mayor, Cory Booker, embrace wholeheartedly.

Although pressed by activists to criticize teacher union leaders, in particular her long-time friend, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), for endorsing the Common Core and commending legislation that links teacher evaluation to students' standardized test scores, Ravitch declines, arguing this creates divisions. But the divisions already exist because union reformers are challenging the local and national leadership in both of the teachers unions. The question is whether we will encourage activists to democratize their unions, to make them social movements, or whether we think the model of "service" or "business unionism" should remain the norm.

The "Trifecta": Mobilization, Social Justice, Democracy

A new generation of teachers is being politicized and radicalized very rapidly. While there is still much fear, nodes of resistance are emerging. In some cases organizations of parents and teachers opposed to testing are supporting creation of reform caucuses in unions. Teachers have been both energized and inspired by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), and terrified at the enormity of the task they face. Many are asking how they can apply lessons from those who formed the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) and then transformed the CTU.

In spring 2014, activists in Massachusetts, Colorado, and North Carolina formed state-wide caucuses in their National Education Association (NEA) affiliates. After losing a contract fight, Newark, New Jersey's AFT union reformers won a majority in their union's executive committee; they lost the union presidency by only a few votes. Seattle, an NEA affiliate, and Philadelphia's AFT local now have reform caucuses, as does Minneapolis. In school districts large and small, grassroots groups of teachers and parents that oppose testing or charter school co-locations are spawning change in the local teachers unions.

In the Los Angeles union, the second largest in the country, reformers elected to office years earlier failed to build a union presence at the school site and captured the union apparatus without developing a base of support. Activists learned from their mistakes and reorganized as Union Power; they nurtured a new culture and program of building a "member-driven union." While Union Power worked diligently to build the chapters, developing a program modeled on CTU's, out of 31,505 members only 7,158 returned ballots. The turnout was disappointing but was still a higher percentage of voters than in the 2011 citywide union elections. Alex Caputo-Pearl, who headed the slate, narrowly missed winning the 50 percent plus 1 he needed to be elected president but his opponent essentially ceded the run-off to him.

Union activists seem in agreement about three issues: 1) mobilizing union members during contract disputes, 2) working with parent allies, and 3) developing contract demands that embed economic issues in a program for quality schools that names social inequality, corporate domination of the government, and racism as impediments to schools students deserve. While these are essential elements themselves, they are insufficient. Too often overlooked is the centrality of organizing a union presence "on the shop floor," that is, at the school site, developing new leaders and activists as well as fighting for democratic norms and procedures.

Unfortunately, marginalized in discussion of union reform is strengthening union democracy. This was apparent in the left media's coverage of the near-strike of the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), an NEA affiliate. PAT's leadership used the contract to defend aspects of teachers' work that directly affect learning rather than focusing on salary. They reached out to parents and mobilized members, involving them in the contract fight. But key questions about the process were ignored. How were bargaining demands developed? Was the team elected directly by the membership? The contract campaign is the opportunity to involve more members as leaders, deepening the membership's participation in decision-making.

Chicago had an elected bargaining team of dozens of people and spent months gathering, refining, and voting on contract demands. Did PAT? Another question we should ask is how discussion and ratification of a proposed settlement occurs. Is the discussion organized so that union officers "sell" the proposed settlement to members—or does the process encourage members to raise questions, concerns, and problems? Contract ratification directly influences how strong the union will be in the school site after the heat of the contract fight subsides. Members have to defend the contract, so it is essential that they understand the specifics of the final agreement. In Chicago, in the midst of a strike, CTU's negotiating team brought the proposed agreement to the union's representative assembly, which refused to endorse it before taking it back to members for a closer look. CTU's process has to be the standard to which we hold unions.

The history of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), including its lawsuit against individual dissidents who formed an independent union, the National Union of Healthcare Workers, illustrates why we need union democracy as well as social justice commitments.⁹ Not just member voice is needed but also power that emerges from the ranks in the shops and that challenges and informs the leadership's actions. A social justice program combined with member mobilization is a volatile but unsustainable mixture. The combination can fuel militant struggles but it cannot translate those victories into the deep alteration in power relations on the shop floor that teachers unions need today to counter the vastly unequal power of teachers and administration.

Herman Benson, the unofficial dean of union democracy studies, has pushed left reformers to consider the relationship between union democracy and the other elements of their agendas, arguing that bureaucratization in unions is not neatly linked to union reformers' (left-wing) politics. Benson's challenge to understand how the struggle for democratic unions relates to our program for social justice is a matter of the utmost importance for teacher unionism today and yet it has been ignored.

I suggest that trade unionism's two essential principles, solidarity and democracy, challenge notions of individual competition and hierarchical relations embedded in capitalism and expressed in power relations at the workplace. These twin ideals, solidarity and democracy, are essential in creating societies that support the full flowering of human potential. Unions, due to their unique situation in the workplace, provide the filament that sustains democracy. When unions are not democratic, even if they fight for social justice, they perpetuate hierarchical relations that disempower working people, allowing bigotry and oppression to remain embedded in social relations. Undemocratic unions cannot educate workers to create a democratic society because the substance of union life reinforces workers' subordination to others that (purportedly) know best for them. And most often those others come from groups in the society that have more power and privilege.

However, democracy is very fragile, and vigilant enforcement of regulations that give members the right to decide policy and elect officers is a necessary but insufficient condition. Deep, thorough union democracy depends on the union having a presence in the workplace where members understand that *they* are the union. This process is in turn nurtured by the union defining its members' self-interest very broadly so that members bring their concerns into the union.

Nelson Lichtenstein notes that “Rights are universal and individual, which means employers and individual members of management enjoy them just as much as workers,”¹⁰ but what makes unions unique is that unions represent members’ individual interests through expression and struggle for their collective interests. The accuracy of Lichtenstein’s observation is seen in the way neoliberalism has exploited the rights discourse against teachers and teachers unions, in lawsuits arguing that tenure and seniority protections conflict with the rights of children to equal educational opportunity. At the same time, a rights discourse also fueled social movements that created opportunities for millions of students who previously were excluded from education, those with special needs and native speakers of languages other than English. Neither NEA nor AFT helped these movements for increased educational opportunity, using their political clout only after legislation was introduced. The laws creating special education and bilingual education programs were flawed in taking “disputes out of the hands out of those directly involved,” as Lichtenstein argues. Yet, millions of children once refused an education today receive services. Children in these groups are better off because they claimed their (human) rights—without support from the unions.

Teachers unions plant the seed of democracy in schools by giving teachers collective voice about the conditions of their labor. Even when collective bargaining restricts the union’s legal authority, a teachers union with a highly conscious, active membership that has assimilated the lesson that members are the union, not staff or elected officials, can exert pressure over many informal work arrangements. However, while the union’s presence provides opportunity for teacher voice, it does not automatically do the same for parents, students, or community. To the extent the teachers union does not consciously push to extend democracy in the school to include those affected by union agreements, it undermines its legitimacy and contradicts labor’s claim of speaking for working people. So while Benson is correct that as a rule when unions “raise the standards of those who are victorious, they tend to lift the standards of the class, even those not organized,” it is also the case that support for unions, including teachers unions, eroded precisely because of the attenuated impact of union victories on those who were not union members.¹¹

Bringing the “Trifecta” to Politics

Teacher union activists generally understand that the destruction of public education and the profession is a bipartisan project, even as they see individual candidates as more sympathetic to teachers’ perspective. The question I think we need to consider is not whether we need a new electoral vehicle that will project the vision of a transformed teacher union movement, but how to achieve it.

In embarking on this discussion, it’s important to acknowledge that electoral activity is not a substitute for the “trifecta” I have previously described. Nor can we ignore the success of neoliberalism’s “scorched earth” war against unions. When teacher union reformers succeed in becoming leaders of newly mobilized unions, as they have in Chicago, they are often isolated in a fairly bleak labor landscape. Education is often the sector of the economy with the highest union density but public employee unions have been greatly weakened and private sector unionism is marginal. This puts newly elected teacher union reformers in a very precarious situation. On the one hand, they see that they have few dependable allies in the Democratic Party, which is controlled by capital. On the other hand, they bargain with the people who are elected. It is very, very difficult for union leaders to argue that we need to create an independent political vehicle because in the process of creating that vehicle we may lose elections that seem to jeopardize the union’s ability to maintain the status quo, including members’ jobs and benefits.

However, just as defending teachers and public education means doing battle with economic attacks while recognizing the dangers of doing so, advancing that struggle into the electoral sphere means facing dangers inherent in developing an independent electoral vehicle. The elite that controls the

state, exercising their control through both the Democratic and Republican parties, directs the global capitalistic project that aims to destroy us. We contradict and undercut our efforts to contest that project when we support either party. Candidates cannot serve two masters—on the one hand, the Democratic Party of Arne Duncan, DFER, and Rahm Emanuel, and on the other, the movement opposing them.

Electoral activity is an extension into the public realm of the “trifecta” of principles and politics we use in building the union: democracy, social justice, mobilization. Candidates for office (and office holders) should have the same relationship to a union and the social movement of which it is a key element as we want union officers to have with the membership. We elect candidates to carry out our program but we in turn are responsible to help them push electoral initiatives by mobilizing. Elected officials are supported by and responsible to the people who elect them. On a local level teachers unions may be able to initiate the “trifecta” through an ad hoc political coalition but such a formation is unstable. In the longer run, locally and nationally, we need a new political party.

Many problems complicate the proposition of forming a new electoral vehicle, I acknowledge. Clearly though, the Democratic Party is owned by forces that aim to destroy everything that teachers unions must defend. We cannot give money and votes to a party that aids and abets our destruction. And if not now, when? When we are weaker as a result of unrelenting political attacks and the continued absence of political voice?

What will this new electoral movement and vehicle look like? We know it must be democratic with mechanisms that make leaders and candidates responsible to the activists and constituencies who have put them into office. Here again we can look to what occurred in Chicago: CORE activists did not delay their challenge to the old CTU leadership while developing a blueprint of what a transformed Chicago teachers union would look like. They brought principles and a vision, developed in struggle. They honed their strategy further in carrying out that vision as union officers and staff. The same process can occur in developing a new electoral vehicle, in Chicago and elsewhere. Union Power’s victory in Los Angeles opens the door to teachers unions having an independent electoral vehicle in two of the three largest U.S. cities.

A vibrant new movement is emerging though it is under the radar of the mass media. Teachers and parents who were previously not political and not engaged are seeing that children and the profession of teaching are being harmed by policies over which ordinary people have no voice or influence. New national and international networks are emerging among teacher union activists. Much hinges on radical activists in the United States understanding that we cannot repeat the mistakes teacher unionism made in its birth in the 1960s. Fifty years ago teachers unions could trade off power in the workplace, voice about how schools are organized, what we teach and how, for improvements in members’ wages and benefits. However, those days are gone. To protect teaching as a profession and public education we need to win the “trifecta” of democracy, mobilization, and social justice, in union life and politics.

Footnotes

1. See Jeffrey Raffel, *The Politics of School Desegregation: The Metropolitan Remedy in Delaware* (Temple University Press, 1980).
2. U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Education Awards Promise Neighborhoods Planning Grants. Press Release, Sept. 21, 2010.
3. U.S. Department of Education, *A Blueprint for Reform. The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, May 27, 2011.
4. Mercedes Schneider, “A Brief Audit of Bill Gates’ Common Core Spending,” Aug. 8, 2013,

Huffington Post.

5. Ann Bastian et al., *Choosing Equality. The Case for Democratic Schooling* (Temple University Press, 1986).

6. Amy Stuart Wells et al., *Review of Research in Education*, ed. Robert E. Floden (American Educational Research Association, 2004), 49.

7. Connie Schaffer, "Unmasking the Reformers; Essay Review of Ravitch's 'Reign of Error.'" *Education Review/ Reseñas Educativas*, vol. 17, no. 3, April 12, 2013.

8. Jeffrey A. Raffel, "The Changing Challenges of School Segregation and Desegregation," *Education Review*, vol. 16, no. 5, Oct. 22, 2013.

9. Herman Benson, "Sober Thoughts After Inspiring Years of Union Organizing," *Union Democracy Review*, April/May 2013, 3, 5.

10. Nelson Lichtenstein, *A Contest of Ideas. Capital, Politics, and Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 150.

11. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism. The Political Economy of American Empire* (Verso, 2012).