

Public Education and Teachers Unions at a Crossroads

February 27, 2017

Public education is truly at a crossroads in the US, as are both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).



The GOP intends to eliminate the free, public system of mass public education characterized by the ideal of “common school.” Trump and his supporters aim to destroy our public schools as publicly-controlled institutions, just as they are gearing up to eliminate about every victory of working people in the past century.

Understanding this moment requires that we organize and make demands on the elected leaders while not underestimating the challenges we face within the union. As we see all over the world, those who are economically oppressed often turn against those who are equally or more oppressed. Rage obscures the more distant political and economic forces that create and maintain economic dislocation. Though teachers have more formal education than many other workers, teachers are not immune to the social epidemics that infect our society. About 20% of AFT members voted for Trump. Close to one-third of NEA members did the same. While recognizing this reality, we should also understand that social attitudes can be challenged and changed in the course of struggles. The right kind of union organizing can alter members’ consciousness by showing them the practical value of ideas like solidarity that seem abstract or unrealistic. The solution to members’ conservative social attitudes and even anti-union ideas is political education through vibrant union democracy and mobilization about issues members feel affect their lives as workers and their ideals as teachers, who want to help kids.

In contrast to this kind of empowering organizing, which is rooted in a belief in union democracy, AFT and NEA assume the irreversibility of members’ current beliefs. They paint themselves into a corner of adopting what seem “pragmatic” policies based on members’ lack of involvement. As a result, they ask and settle for far less than what the union could win if its members were mobilized.

While this position was previously unwise and harmful, under the Trump administration, it is an unmitigated disaster. While NEA seems for the moment to be withstanding pressures to “join the conversation” with Betsy DeVos, AFT’s President Weingarten initiated discussion with DeVos shortly

after she became Secretary of Education. Although during the nomination fight, she lambasted DeVos as “the most ideological, anti-public-school nominee for secretary of education since the U.S. Department of Education was created,” Weingarten moved quickly to befriend DeVos, inviting her to visit schools, while activists tried to keep her out.

Weingarten’s strategy is an affront to the tens of thousands of teachers who organized against DeVos being nominated. They did so because they know that the GOP will inflict great harm on the profession, public education, and students and that teachers are the front line of the defense against these policies being enacted. Weingarten insists that the way forward is for the union to refuse to “debate” opponents but rather to “have a conversation about a path forward.” This conversation occurred a few weeks ago with voucher advocates and Teach for America, which has used its members to staff charter schools that replace shuttered neighborhood schools that employ experienced teachers of color from the community.

The February 2017 TFA event was moderated by Cecilia Munoz, whom Weingarten identifies on her blog's description of the event as “the White House domestic policy advisor.” However when Munoz participated in the TFA conclave, she was not a White House advisor. Weingarten’s political sleight of hand in misidentifying Munoz suggests that nothing significant has changed since the November election. However, it has. Trump’s advisors are people like Stephen Phillips, described, gently, as “Far Right” and far more ominously, Steve Bannon a “racist, anti-Semitic and white nationalist,” whose followers use a Nazi salute. While Weingarten’s mistaken idea that “reform” Democrats who adopted the privatization policies of the American Enterprise Institute could be allies was very, very wrong, her decision to become cozy with Trump’s Secretary of Education is delusional. What is there to discuss with representatives of a President who has announced he wants to undermine our courts, banish Muslims, deport immigrants, destroy an independent press? Does she think teachers can have academic freedom – or that we will have independent trade unions – in the authoritarian society Trump and his supporters will initiate if permitted to do so?

The conversation our union needs to have is not with Betsy DeVos. It’s about why the union failed to stop these policies when they started, measures like “pay for performance” that link teachers’ evaluations to students’ standardized test scores; privatization of schools and services, allowing them to become profit centers for transnational corporations like Pearson and Goldman Sachs.

Weingarten has sent a message to parents and community activists that she will use her position as AFT President to curry favor with politicians who are loathed by millions of activists and voters. As usual, AFT members were not asked about this strategy. Did the AFT Executive Council approve Weingarten’s new approach? Who knows? As we saw in the AFT’s premature, undemocratic endorsement of Clinton, the body that should be holding Weingarten’s feet to the fire, our Executive Council, is a rubber stamp. To be allowed to join the Executive Council, which provides access to insider information and perhaps gives some liberal leaders the illusion of influence, one must join the union caucus Weingarten controls. Nationally the caucus/machine is called the Progressive Caucus. In New York City and New York State the machine is named the Unity Caucus. As I explain elsewhere, Weingarten’s machine leverages its stranglehold on the huge New York City local to dominate the New York state union (NYSUT) and with this combination, controls national conventions, the union apparatus, and dominates the Education International, the international confederation of teachers unions.

But here’s the good news: An authentic grass roots reform effort composed of leaders of NYS locals threatens Unity’s control of NYSUT. The caucus, Stronger Together, (STC) is pledged to union democracy. I urge a vote for STCaucus. Its leadership is principled and its organization based on local officers. The caucus program contains important planks about school finance and solidarity, and a strong statement about student well-being. Still, I think STCaucus is mistaken asserting there

was a time when NYSUT functioned as it should. NYSUT was never democratic because Unity's power depended on suffocation of democracy in the New York City local. Another concern I have with the program is the absence of explicit attention to historic inequalities in public education based on race as well as social class. To be strong enough today to protect public education we need to develop mutually respectful alliances with communities of color that have been long under-served by public education and want and deserve improvements now. Their legitimate needs and desires are exploited by "reformers" who advance an agenda of charter schools, testing and "accountability" that inhibits schools from doing what they must to address unequal educational opportunity. Opposition to systemic racism and defense of immigrant rights are issues the union cannot and should not try to avoid.

However, for me these are concerns to be discussed among colleagues and comrades, in a dynamic movement that is worthy of support. I hope readers who teach in New York public schools ask their locals to endorse STC in the NYSUT elections that occur shortly. Thousands of New York City teachers who voted against Unity will not be represented at the RA because the NYC local does not permit proportional representation.

Though the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the AFT/NYSUT affiliate that represents faculty and professional staff at City University of New York, has a leadership that self-identifies as progressive, the PSC has thus far supported Unity. I urge PSC members to tell their union that STCaucus deserves the PSC's support and want its delegates to stand up for union democracy by voting for the STCaucus slate and its resolutions.

Sticking with Unity means going down with the Titanic. Public education, from K-12 through higher education, needs unions that refuse to normalize bigotry and negotiate terms of surrender with elites that aim to destroy gains of a century, including creation of our system of mass public education as a public good.

I will be joining NYSUT members at the STCaucus Winter Forum on Long Island on March 12 in a workshop that will continue discussion of issues I raise in this blog. Remember you can follow me on Twitter, Facebook, and New Politics.