

Teachers unions need critical friends

April 30, 2014

Union Power's sweep of the election for union officers in United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) signals a seismic shift in power relations in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). UTLA's Union Power now joins reformers from CORE (Caucus of rank and file educators) in the Chicago Teachers Union in demanding a break from the "business union" model that has dominated teachers unions for decades. Three state-wide reform caucuses have formed in National Education Association (NEA) affiliates, Massachusetts, Colorado, North Carolina. As I explain in my forthcoming article (Summer, New Politics), these and other developments reflect how teachers are overcoming deep fears and feelings of isolation to build a different kind of union. It's happening off the radar of the mass media and most of the liberal press, which is entranced by the rhetoric of neoliberal educational policies that are aimed to destroy teaching as a profession, democratic control of schools, and turn education into another profit center for corporations. An important exception is The Jacobin's informed coverage of education and its collaboration with teacher unionists working to transform their unions.

Union officials in both the AFT and NEA realize public education and the union are in deep trouble. At the same time, they seem incapable of the objective scrutiny needed to reverse course. Josh Eidelson's Salon.com interview with AFT's president, Randi Weingarten, exemplifies this phenomenon. Almost every opinion Weingarten expresses changes a disastrous union policy without a hint that there's been a shift. Because there's been no debate in the union and no self-criticism, the new policies are *adaptations* rather than needed *reversals*. Chris Christie? He's a villain now but just months ago Weingarten was chortling with him on "Morning Joe" about their collaboration on merit pay and the contract AFT pushed on Newark teachers, a contract that has weakened the union in fighting the destructive school closings in the works now, which she opposes. Common Core, the new national curriculum funded mostly by Bill Gates, is in trouble now, due to agitation from both the Right and Left - but without help from either NEA or AFT, which still support it in principle though disagree with implementation. Michelle Rhee, whom Weingarten now criticizes harshly? Rhee was a reigning celebrity, pushed by neoliberal Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), at the Democratic National Convention that nominated Obama for his first term. NEA and AFT jumped on the Obama bandwagon though he was always explicit about his involvement with DFER and affection for Rhee, merit pay, and charters.

AFT and NEA have pushed one disastrous accommodation after another, arguing with activists who feel the pain of these policies that the union needs a seat at the table. In contrast, Union Power and CORE understand that the meal being served is not one we can or should eat. It's poison and it's harming kids, killing public education. Privately and in social media union officers express anger at the "divisiveness" of criticism. However divisions are already present, demonstrated by the emergence of successful challenges of union reformers in the second and third largest teacher union locals in the US. We need a contest of ideas, not personalities, debate and decisions made by members about policies that are altering their livelihoods and children's lives. That process should be aided by friends who offer support, encouragement and critique.

I invite reader comments, sent to me at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.

Saturday May 3 I'll be speaking at PhillyTAG's Education for Liberation conference. It will have super workshops on social justice teaching and education activism. Join us!