

Winds of change in US teacher unions

February 18, 2010

Though you wouldn't know it from the mass media, which focuses its attention on the way teacher unions impede "educational innovation," (e.g., standardized testing's stranglehold; privatization; cuts in funding), we are witnessing a growing swell of reform in teacher unions. Transformation of both national teacher unions is absolutely essential to turn back the neoliberal program that the Obama administration is pushing.

The first significant reform victory in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) occurred when an opposition caucus defeated the old guard of the Professional Staff Congress, the higher education union representing faculty and professionals in the City University of New York.

Not too long after, a coalition of reform groups in the union representing 45,000 public school teachers and health and human services professionals in the Los Angeles area won the leadership of the second-largest teachers union in the US, United Teachers of Los Angeles.

Now the action has shifted — to Chicago and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Labor Notes describes the emergence of CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators), which is mounting a challenge in the May election. Given the disarray in the union bureaucracy and community resistance to school closings, a struggle that CORE has supported, CORE seems to have a real chance to take the helm of the third largest teacher union.

Will these winds of change come to New York City next? It's no exaggeration to say that reform of the New York local would have both national and international implications. New York City's teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers, is the largest teacher union in the world. Bureaucratic control of the union was, for years, exercised by "ruthless neocon" Albert Shanker, who leveraged his power of the mammoth NYC local to control the entire NY state teacher union organization, and with it, the national union, the American Federation of Teachers.

I'm heartened to learn about a candidates forum for the upcoming UFT election, hosted by Teachers Unite and NYCoRE (NY Collective of Radical Educators), Friday, February 26 at 5:00pm, at NYU. It's sad but true that often the last place you'll find a radical teacher is in a union meeting. Here's hoping this UFT election brings progressive change.