

A Victory Within Reach: Realizing Teacher Unionism's Progressive Potential in New York City, New York State, and the U.S.

written by Lois Weiner | October 5, 2024



From his grave, Albert Shanker, or more accurately, the machine he built, controls the largest teachers union in the world, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which represents about 200,000 New York City teachers, and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), with over 600,000 members, the largest state teachers union affiliate in the country. Parlaying this control of New York, the machine dominates the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which punches far above its weight in the labor movement, from what its membership numbers would suggest. In the city, as in the state, the UFT exercises its power consistent with business unionism of the most corrupt variant: rejecting struggles on social justice issues like Black Lives Matter; making backroom deals with politicians in both parties, and funding their campaigns, even when they vote for legislation that undercuts public education and the public good; limiting the union's vision and ask to the narrowest economic concerns; and quashing any legislation that might detract from the power of the union apparatus, like eliminating mayoral control. The AFT sets the political bar for the National Education Association (NEA), and with it dominates the international confederation of teachers unions, the Education International.

In the six decades since Shanker created the Unity caucus in NYC and the Progressive Caucus nationally, the machine has had no internal splits. No reform caucus has been able to dislodge its rule in a division, even for a single election cycle. Last Spring this changed. Victory came from a completely unexpected quarter—retirees—giving UFT reformers a chance to wrest UFT leadership from Unity. Building on outrage and fear about the UFT's assistance to NYC's mayor in sabotaging health care, a caucus of retirees, the Retiree Advocate (RA), defeated the UFT apparatus, winning leadership of the Retiree chapter. The prospect of an electoral coalition of retirees and active members creates a stunning possibility—overturning Unity and the UFT/NYSUT/AFT triumvirate's suffocating influence on city, state, and national politics. To give readers a sense of the enormity of this victory and the scale of organizing needed now, consider that the UFT has 70,000 retirees who can vote. About 27,000 did so, about 2/3 of them for the RA. The number of *voting* retirees was about the same number of people that the third largest U.S. teachers union, the Chicago Teachers Union, counted as active members at that same time.

The challenge as well as the implications and possibilities of this opening cannot be underestimated: In every realm in which they operate the UFT/NYSUT/AFT are a powerfully conservative anchor, a force that can be counted on to advance one principle above all: sustaining their power by allying with politicians—and even our class enemies—despite the harmful effects on education, teachers unions, and working people.

THE TERRAIN OF A BATTLE WITH EXTRAORDINARY STAKES

The UFT/NYSUT/AFT machine, anchored by the Unity caucus, whose control was cemented by a “strike that changed New York,” the 1968 UFT strike over community control, is highly unusual, likely unique, in labor politics for some reasons particular to teacher unions, but also due to its uninterrupted domination of the union; its centralized control; and its ideological control over every aspect of union life. In contrast to other unions, those with a liberal or conservative bent, or ones that are gangster-ridden, Unity demands ideological fealty. A caucus member (all officers, full-time staff who are union members, and delegates to conventions must belong to Unity) who voices opposition to the leadership’s political positions, whether about education, war, social justice, or electoral politics is removed from office.[1]

The victory of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) to leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union upended business unionism in Chicago and inspired reformers identified with “social justice teacher unionism” to win leadership of many city locals, but the reform current has not weakened the Unity/Progressive caucus machine though the AFT’s rhetoric has changed in the past five years and it contributes to social justice campaigns—as long as they play ball. Reformers have not developed a national reform caucus in the AFT, and their presidents sit on the AFT Executive Council, following its protocols for secrecy and the Progressive caucus prohibition against speaking out against the leadership’s positions. AFT continues to function like an imperial dynasty, with the current ruler anointing the next, as well as underlings who hold office in the UFT and NYSUT. Randi Weingarten currently occupies the throne, though informed insiders say she will soon step down for personal reasons and has selected her successor, from NYSUT. The AFT president’s power is unchecked by the convention or Executive Council. Weingarten can and does get what she wants, from union endorsements in presidential elections, to policy stances in Washington, Albany, and New York City. The victory of an electoral coalition in New York deposing Unity could do what AFT locals that self-identify as supporting a different kind of teacher unionism have not, democratize the national union, allowing real contestation of ideas, and in so doing likely altering national politics.

The AFT president is not directly elected by members (neither is the NYSUT president). The election occurs at biennial conventions, in a balloting procedure that allows the AFT to count heads in each delegation. All other policy issues, including constitutional amendments, are decided by delegates in voice votes that do not reflect their representative strength. Therefore, whoever controls the most delegate votes, controls the convention outcomes. The one local that always, always, sends a full contingent is the UFT, with about 800 voting delegates. This gives the UFT, that is to say Unity, control of NYSUT and AFT conventions and hence the organizational apparatus of both.[2]

The battle for leadership of the UFT is waged in New York City public schools. While description of this context goes well beyond my article, some mention is needed because this system itself will not be altered automatically by a successful challenge to Unity, and what awaits a new leadership should inform how we organize for the election and how we will wield the power for which we are fighting. The school system is chronically under-funded and has an organizational structure of fiefdoms/divisions that do not communicate or collaborate. Neoliberal reforms, especially the gutting of contractual rights about evaluation, have worsened a workplace that was harsh in the 1970s and 80s. An intensely racially-segregated system serves primarily low-income students of color, who are frequently denied services to which they are legally entitled, making teachers’ work harder and alliances with parents all the more essential. Classes are huge, even in comparison to other urban districts. Teacher turnover is high, especially in schools serving students who are the most vulnerable and have the greatest need for quality instruction. Administrators often exercise arbitrary power, leaving educators who show independence of thought, especially union activists, vulnerable.[3] Chapter chairs (the name for shop stewards) are elected by members and often do heroic work but they are not supported—and are in fact undercut—by union staff, who often will not

challenge power relations in the schools.

Given these conditions, the fact that in-service members find the time and energy to try to reform the UFT is truly remarkable. Working well with kids in schools that undercut professional ideals is exhausting, more than a full-time job. Doing union work comes on top of that labor. Union reform and building alliances outside the classroom are an added layer that many educators with families can't sustain for very long. Though an electoral victory can provide a base to support activism and in time improve conditions, winning office won't eliminate hardship for working educators. We need to give some forethought to what resources we can tap and how to sustain them after we win. The way we win is related to and as important as the victory, which is one reason developing a new cadre of activists is vital in building for the election.

THE RETIREE REFORMERS' VICTORY: RETHINKING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Its winner-take-all election system combined with slate voting[4] are a huge barrier for reformers opposing Unity. Members' demoralization and alienation from the union results in fewer than half of the delegates who are eligible to attend the Delegate Assembly (DA) showing up. Since Unity caucus members (including 100 full-time staff who have voting rights) must attend and vote, and procedural rules suppress debate, reformers struggle to win any vote that the leadership opposes. However, the retirees' stunning upset brings 300 non-Unity delegates to the DA, a change that can alter outcomes in favor of reforms Unity has successfully quashed.

In part, the retiree victory occurred in the classic mode in which reformers have won in many other unions—building the caucus on a program that has broad support, one that speaks not only to members' dissatisfactions but to solutions, getting our supporters to vote, and campaigning strategically to increase turnout of members who will vote for us. I think the RA's victory had another element, one seen in the Red State walkouts: tapping social networks among members no longer rooted in a single place, finding connections among members dispersed geographically, as are UFT retirees. The RA's program is also reminiscent of the dynamic of the state-wide walkouts, which were spurred by demands for more school funding and higher salaries but created space for activists to raise social justice demands, especially in cities.[5]

Focusing squarely on protecting retiree health care, the RA also demanded protection of pensions and social security for retirees and health care and working conditions for active members. Its program conveyed a vision of new, progressive politics for the UFT, supporting the NYS Health Act that protects and expands health benefits for all, as well as a national single payer health plan, which the AFT refuses to endorse. Although the program did not include many ideas that RA activists sympathetic to social justice unionism would want, a major limitation being the absence of any mention of racism in the city schools, overall the program was good enough to accept because its commitment to union democracy created an organizing space that allows us to put forward our ideas, to make a new UFT leadership responsible to its members and to vie for our ideas as part of the leadership, pulling the union in the direction of social justice principles.

In my opinion, because of its public commitment to democratizing the UFT, expressed often by the RA President, the retiree movement will not be so easily contained, although some in the RA leadership want to exercise tight(er) control.[6] The far greater danger is that Unity will do everything it can to undercut and divide the movement, which is politically heterogeneous. We should not assume the RA will be able to win another election for chapter delegates and officers. The vulnerability of the retiree victory in its chapter election makes joining the coalition and building a progressive politics within it all the more urgent.

Proponents of union democracy and social justice teacher unionism should not wait out this election

in anticipation of becoming stronger, more unified in shared principles, more democratic in functioning in time for the next election. The RA's victory forces those who want a more militant, democratic union, in particular activists in the Movement for Rank and File Educators (MORE), a caucus inspired by CORE, to re-think the trajectory exemplified in CORE's victory and its subsequent transformation of the CTU. CORE had and used the advantage of time we in the UFT do not have, time to build a unified caucus based on shared principles that fuse social justice with protection of economic protections for members, time to organize on its program to contend for leadership in a union election. Context counts. The comparative size of the school systems and their unions, along with decades of Unity's rule, which has isolated reformers from possible allies in NYSUT, combined with the machine's almost untrammelled exercise of power, its punishment of opposition and reward of those who take its orders, converge to make reformers' task qualitatively different in New York than elsewhere, certainly in this country and possibly the world.

CORE's victory and CTU's transformation were inspirational, teaching lessons for all of labor. At the same time, CORE's history is not a blueprint. In addition to learning from its success and how it achieved its victories, we should examine decisions CORE made when it assumed leadership that have, arguably, undercut its commitment to union democracy—for instance not amending the union constitution to allow proportional representation, as well as allowing the leadership to select members of the bargaining team from a pool of elected representatives from each unit, rather than having members in each unit elect the bargaining team directly, as some other reformers have done.

Joining a coalition while we are still setting our own house in order may seem counter-intuitive, reversing what has become the conventional wisdom: building the caucus then contending for power (a chronology I've advocated in my work about teacher union reform). To some, joining the coalition without having the caucus we want in place seems a violation of principle. However, our theory of practice has to be informed by conditions, and we do not control the conditions under which we struggle. The RA victory and its inclusion in the formation of a coalition presents us with a challenge and time-limited opportunity: to organize on the principles we think we share, using what we learn from seasoned reformers as well as energized activists we bring to the project, to build a better caucus, the one we will need after the election. In helping to form the coalition, campaigning for it, and being part of a new leadership after the coalition's victory, those of us committed to a vision of a democratic union based on social justice ideals have to function as a minority. Our task is to hold the new leadership, including those individuals who represent MORE directly, responsible to an informed, mobilized membership. In doing this we make MORE the caucus we need and strengthen the union as a whole.

The "ask" we're making of in-service members is considerable. There are still scars from the last election and coalition, and activists will face another bruising engagement over a coalition's program and division of offices. Still, we should measure this "ask" against the price of abstention, forfeiting the opportunity to bring our ideals to bear in a historic struggle. This may be the only or the best chance in-service members see in their professional career to topple the UFT machine. Though it will occur in a coalition we do not control, with members whose ideas we do not share and may, in fact, detest, including passionate disagreements about foreign policy, we have the power to bring our own definition of the coalition demands, having our own principles drive the way we recruit activists and then get out the vote in the election. A victory over Unity even on a program that is barely "good enough" opens the door to realizing social justice in our schools and in the society, with a vision of a transformed union that is unimaginable for members who have for so long worked within the confines of a repressive union. MORE can use this election to excite the imagination and hopes of in-service members by pointing out that victory is not a long-range goal but an immediate possibility.

THOUGHTS ON PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGY:

ORGANIZING IN AND FOR AN ELECTORAL COALITION AND VICTORY BEYOND

Leaders of RA's victory who are committed to union democracy, from whom I have learned a great deal, including experienced and respected chapter chairs, have much to teach in-service members in this coalition. One strategic necessity for this election and beyond, suggested by the Red State walkouts and the RA's success, is that organizing in the chapters is essential but also insufficient. Education workers have job-specific challenges as constituents and are in networks that are not defined solely by geography. For example, special education teachers in every borough and at all grade levels have interests in common about provision of services, or rather, their absence. Special ed teachers, who comprise a significant constituency in the UFT, (more than one in seven students in the city schools qualify for special education), bring to our struggle relationships with parents because of their job requirements. After the Spring election these relationships will be crucial in union-led campaigns for which we will need parent and community input and support. Teachers in bilingual programs are also a key group, insufficiently organized and tapped in reform work. The largest "minority" in the NYC schools is Hispanic students, and the trust of Hispanic parents is vital for success as we build a different kind of union. Paraprofessionals, who are more vulnerable to administrators' victimization than classroom teachers, and who often must work two jobs or more to support themselves and families, deserve more and more sensitive assistance in their organizing. Black teachers, under-represented in in-service reform work as well as retiree ranks (due to discriminatory hiring until the 1990s), are an untapped resource, bringing insights and contacts with community that are irreplaceable.

We should fight for the coalition program to be an umbrella under which we can organize on our own principles, carrying out the coalition's stated goals in the way we think will build the union we need. The coalition program is a (general) vision to which we bring clarity by organizing on our ideals. Defining what is "good enough" in this program has to be the work of in-service members but I do have suggestions as to what should be demanded. The coalition should present itself in positive terms as an alternative to Unity, intent on bringing this change: It aims to democratize the union; we want the UFT to fight for better conditions for all students and teachers in all schools; we demand the UFT protect and enhance the dignity of educators' labor, which means better pay, pensions, health care, and working conditions, including class size and improved support services. That framework allows us to define "better conditions" in ways that boost organizing for social justice in the schools, supporting work with parents, students, and communities to fight systemic racism, ableism, and other forms of social oppression expressed in school culture, policy, and organization.

I suggest the other, related principle in forming this coalition is that any and all who agree with this program can join us, including those have been longtime supporters of Unity. Unity members need to announce in public that they have joined in the coalition because Unity cannot provide leadership for the union we need, the one our program announces. What about the few respected Unity staff who want to join—or lead—the coalition? Like all members of the coalition, they need to state that they agree the coalition provides leadership the union has not received under Unity, but in addition, people who hold staff positions should be asked to resign all of their paid work for Unity, all of their perks, and return to the classroom, to join in-service members as equals and to run for office from the position of working educators. This is a pre-condition of including them in the coalition, expected *before we allow them to run for office on the coalition slate*. Stipulating they resign as staff operationalizes a fundamental aspect of union democracy and rank-and file-control which we bring to a transformed UFT: In a democratic union, officers and members are equals, peers, and staff work for members.

In-service UFT members have a chance in the next months to alter the course of education in the New York schools and labor politics in the city. They'll have a shot at changing New York state politics as well, by democratizing NYSUT. Together with retirees, they can force debate in the AFT

that is honest and real about what union members think, want, feel, need. As I see the moment, we are obliged to use all of our energy, intelligence, and passion to defeat Unity in the Spring 2025 election.

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Notes

[1] These are broad claims deserving documentation not in this article. Evidentiary support is in the articles I've published in *New Politics*, most of which are available online. Some early articles that have not been digitized are reprinted in Part 2 of my book, *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice*. My critical obituary of Shanker suggests reasons for the machine's ideological character. One irony I don't explore in this obituary is how the cold warrior/pro-capitalist Shanker replicated characteristics of the ideological iron hand of the US Communist Party in the 1930s. Those characteristics are described in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History*. In recommending it, I note Julius Jacobson, one of the founding editors of *New Politics*, was an unacknowledged co-author. Ideas he shared with Howe and Coser shaped the volume.

[2] The UFT leverages its power in NYSUT because of Shanker's deal with the staff in the New York State affiliate of NEA, which he accomplished bypassing the NEA (and merger talks on the national level) to create NYSUT. The President of NYSUT is from upstate. The Executive Vice President is from the UFT. The real political power in NYSUT is not held by the President but by UFT/Unity, exercised in the Board of Directors. This arrangement was upended only once, when a sitting NYSUT President, Karen E. Magee, who opposed standardized testing and the punitive teacher evaluation policies based on them, was forced out of office after a single term. Her position on testing was included in news reports about revolts among teachers and their unions against policies the UFT/AFT defended nationally — and internationally. According to NYSUT, Magee "opted not to seek a second term," and was replaced for her second term and another by Andrew Pallotta, a Unity operative. He served while NYSUT and the AFT were deciding how to respond to the uncontrollable outrage from members. They did so by modifying their position on teacher evaluations but not standardized testing per se.

[3] I write more about teaching in the NYC schools in *Urban Teaching: The Essentials*, updated with a MORE activist, Daniel Jerome.

[4] There is no proportional representation in the UFT elections. Although the ballot allows members to check 800 individual names, voting for officers is overwhelmingly by slate. Even if 49 percent of the votes go to a reform caucus, all positions on the ballot go to the winner. Another element that solidifies Unity's control is that all delegates on the Unity slate must pledge to vote for Unity's positions at all times or be ejected from the caucus.

[5] For an informed analysis of the walkouts based on empirical evidence, see Erin Dyke and Brendan Muckian-Bates, *Rank-and-File Rebels: Theories of Power and Change in the 2018 Education Strikes*.

[6] Its first meeting, held in late August with Zoom, was organized to train the newly-elected

delegates. Close to 200 of the 300 delegates participated. To reinforce the importance of DA attendance, one caucus officer noted last year's DA defeated a motion to increase the ridiculously low dental benefits paid by the union Welfare Fund, which hoards millions of dollars in reserve. The motion failed by a few votes. Retirees, who like active members receive these abysmal reimbursements, asked in the chat "Can we reverse that with our votes this year?" The answer is, of course, yes. In the Zoom one could almost see mental lightbulbs lit as delegates considered what other changes might be possible with the reformed chapter's votes at the DA.