Christie's coast to victory was not inevitable

written by Lois Weiner | November 6, 2013

It was clear from the start that teachers had an uphill battle explaining why NJ Governor Christie's educational policies, his vicious bashing of teachers, were harmful to kids and the state. One of the most serious obstacles is that media are captive to neoliberal propagandists. Conveying a different message requires concentrated, savvy use of social media. But Chrisite enjoyed his "coast" to victory mainly because of the "pragmatism" of the two state-wide teachers unions, New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) and American Federation of Teachers New Jersey (AFTNJ), which have consistently chosen to compromise with Christie's anti-union, pro-privatization, anti-public education policies rather than coming out fighting. As a result, they lost countless opportunities to educate parents and community about what's at stake for them in the policies he (and the unions' "friends" in the Democratic Party) have pushed successfully, like gutting tenure for teachers, increasing the number of charter schools, fighting the Abbott decision that insures equal funding for schools serving high proportions of poor children. The unions have to change their message too, embedding teachers' rights in a broad program to restore quality public education for all kids. NJEA and AFTNJ are mired in rhetoric and positions that make them an easy target for the far-right foundations and non-profits that claim to put "students first" – by selling schools and children.

Still, even with the unions' abysmal lack of vision, they might have held his feet to the fire during the campaign. They could have organized speak-outs at Christie's rallies and speeches, making him answer questions about his policies. A bully with no patience for defending his policies, Christie would likely have exploded, as he did when a NJ teacher, Melissa Tomlinson, asked him why he describes schools as factories for failure. The incident went viral, and as often happens, the social media attention spilled into mass media. The episode exposed the "ludicrous" image Christie has so carefully cultivated as a statesman and moderate.

Time now to face reality. No Democratic Party hopeful is going to save public education or teachers' jobs. The unions need to shift gears, fast. That means teachers need to "occupy" them, run for office, become active in their schools; reach out to parents and community to hear what they want and develop mutually respectful alliances. As we've seen in Chicago, we can turn the tide we have to jettison the failed policies and mindset that have given our opponents their coast to victory.

I invite reader responses, either to New Politics as a blog or to me directly 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.