

Fighting for teachers unions that speak back to power, defend students and social justice

October 30, 2020

Seven years ago, the United Federation of Teachers won a collective bargaining victory that made its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, a significant force on the American educational scene. Today, the policies of this same United Federation of Teachers have precipitated a crisis in the AFT of such proportions that the maintenance of the organization is threatened. The current UFT strike over the issue of community control and last year's UFT strike, largely over the issue of the "disruptive child," have led to a confrontation between the union and the entire black community which both sides now see as a struggle for survival.

How have such issues as these become the key to the survival of a trade union? To understand this, one must be aware of several unique aspects of teacher unions.

The American Federation of Teachers is unquestionably the dominant voice of the teachers of white America. Its chief competitor, the National Education Association (NEA), has become more militant (mainly in response to the entrance of the AFT), but each collective bargaining effort that the NEA increasingly reduced to a moral and suburban issue, and even that has been being badly countered. Its numbers still exceed those of the AFT but the difference is qualitative in being the cities, the NEA has lost the arena of social struggle and power in modern society. Today the AFT, and not the NEA, is the key to the schools.

But at the same time that the AFT has been winning urban teachers, the cities themselves have been changing. In particular, the black urban population has grown enormously and the black movement has emerged as an aggressive force determined to win a measure of the power so long denied it. In this way, the growth of the AFT has won it new power but it has also placed the union at the vortex of the crisis of the American society. Every decision of the union has effects far beyond its membership or the "industry" in which its members are employed.

Given this situation, the union must choose between two alternative strategies. It can enter into genuine and close cooperation with the insurgent forces of the ghetto around a wide range of issues, forging an alliance against the establishment whose interest in educational improvement or the welfare of the ghetto is minimal. Or it can form an un-

The UFT Strike: A Blow Against Teacher Unionism
Steve Zeluck

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Steve Zeluck, in *New Politics*,
Winter 1968

The fears, hardships, and dangers students, teachers, parents, and community have experienced in decisions made about school reopenings in the pandemic, in the shadow of continuing anti-racism protests, have illuminated the prescience of Steve Zeluck's analysis about the need for "self-mobilization of teachers, students and community to bring about serious, constructive changes in the educational system."

Writing in 1968 in *New Politics* about the brutal strikes of the United Federation of Teachers, representing New York City teachers, over community control and the "disruptive child," Zeluck criticized the UFT's actions as "a blow against teacher unionism," pitting teachers against the Black movement "determined to win a measure of the power so long denied it." Zeluck observed the UFT (and AFT, the national union it controls) had two choices: Aligning with the Black community, demanding justice, entering into "genuine and close cooperation with the insurgent forces of the ghetto around a wide range of issues, forging an alliance against the establishment whose interest in educational improvement or the welfare of the ghetto is minimal" - or forming "an unacknowledged bloc with the status quo and the educational bureaucracy against the ghetto community (and ultimately against the students)."

Zeluck's article contains too much to summarize, too much from which we can learn at this moment, as school reopenings have become a point of political conflict on a national level, as parent, student, and teachers' rights to have healthy, safe, equitable schools have been subordinated to the bipartisan consensus to put the economy and profit over human need. However, his conclusions are even truer today than they were in 1968: Teachers unions need to "not only face the facts of the monstrous conditions in the schools" but take the "lead in exposing them and placing responsibility for them where it belongs, with the real decision makers and wielders of power—those who determine the allocation of resources in our society." Unions need to consult "with the community in drawing up contract demands and in planning joint campaigns and united actions," and to "stop temporizing with the AFL-CIO and demand that the Federation launch a real campaign against racism within and without its ranks."

Here's a special pitch because we are in the last weeks of our annual fund appeal: Zeluck's analysis is more pressing than ever for teachers unions throughout this country. His article deserves to be more easily available to readers. Towards that end the all-volunteer *New Politics* editorial board is working towards adding the journal's earliest issues to our website. Those issues contain a priceless trove of material about labor and politics in the 1960s and 1970s, about the inseparability of democracy and socialism in the past and present. To augment our online archive, as well as to publish our print issue and maintain our website, we need your financial support. You can make a tax-deductible contribution by clicking [here](#). Subscriptions also provide us with continuing support. Do both, knowing you will find analysis here you won't elsewhere.