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

written by Lois Weiner | October 30, 2020

**The UFT Strike: A Blow Against Teacher Unionism**

Steve Zeluck

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.