

Heads up! Chins down! Resisting the New Bipartisan Neoliberal Project in Education

April 10, 2021



[Editors' note: This posting is adapted from invited remarks at the American Educational Research Association, April 11, 2021 joint session of the Special Interest Groups on Freire and Marxism.]

Teachers' work and education are being transformed beneath our collective nose. We have missed an opportunity to combat the project in its earliest stages but we cannot delay in understanding and pushing back the new iteration of neoliberalism's global project in education. In my remarks I sketch what's at stake in the new neoliberal project in education and what we can do, now, to resist.

Much has changed since Mary Compton and I edited our collection fifteen years ago about the global assault on education. While some forms of the global project to transform education remain the same, we face a qualitative change, one that occurs simultaneously amidst "growth, change, rebellion" in formation of a new international working class,[1] reflected in exciting developments in teachers' labor activism, strikes, walkouts, and creation of reform caucuses in unions, some of which have succeeded in winning and sustaining their leadership positions.

As critical friends of teachers organizing as workers, we support actions to protect the dignity of their labor, insisting this is both a human right and a social justice demand. I think it's important to start any discussion of what we hope or think teachers might do by acknowledging we ask a great deal when we expect them to be labor activists, a task most higher education faculty decline though our work and workplaces are being undermined and altered by the same forces transforming K-12 schools. [2] Pre-K teaching, done mostly by women, is intense labor; union activity comes on top of that; and union reform activity is a third job. Family responsibilities, which women shoulder disproportionately, complicate and vie for time and energy the job and labor activism also demand. When teachers are involved in social justice movements apart from union work, as they often are, defending racial justice, reproductive freedom, immigrant rights, opposing destruction of the environment, they assume even more responsibility.

Neoliberalism's project thus far and the harm it has done is well-documented by critical scholars, its policies to convert the commons to private property, seen so clearly in education being "marketized"

through charter schools, “choice,” and outsourcing of services, from teachers’ professional development to food services and curriculum development. However, this research on education is seldom placed in the broader global picture of capitalism’s alteration of work, a context that explains, in part, what drives the policies. This broader scope illuminates the profound transformation of work and the economy, the altered political and economic terrain with which education is being synchronized and teachers’ work within it.

Observations about changes to teaching align with Ursula Huws’ analysis (2014) of how work globally has been altered, especially labor of cultural and knowledge workers and those in public service: heightened intensification of labor; diminution of autonomy and creativity; standardization of work processes; and pressure to “perform according to the ever more stringent standards laid down from above, defined in terms of protocols, performance targets, and quality standards” (Huws, 2014, p. 40).[3] The skills and attitudes Huws identifies employers want from workers read like a classified ad for teachers: being “digitally literate;” “self-motivated;” “good team players;” and having a “commitment to lifelong learning.” Transnational corporations also want workers familiar with or able to master specific software packages and communicate with distant customers in a global market – as teachers have done in the shift to remote learning in the pandemic. Teachers – and university faculty – are expected to have these skills and attitudes to transmit to students, without questioning the aims, which powerful elites have established, of protecting and expanding profit and solidifying existing power relations, in the guise of improving educational outcomes for all students, especially those historically most exploited – by capitalism itself.

I explore elsewhere how ideological assumptions about capitalism, labor, race, class, and gender configure the amount and nature of scholarship on teachers unions[4] and based on that analysis, I suggest restoring the traditional Marxist understanding of capitalism *as a social system*,[5] which is often lost in the focus on its organization of economic relations. Analyzing capitalism as a social system invites applying a range of theories about how diverse forms of social oppression developed within capitalism, simultaneously recognizing the unique location of workers organized as a class and the special salience(s) of social oppression. The frame allows us to sidestep, while working to re-theorize, binaries often used to frame social and labor conflicts in education, for example race/class; gender/class; race/gender, binaries that miss the complexities of “deeply embedded hierarchies of power that have always existed, in some form, within the education system” in U.S. capitalism and capitalist society itself (Dyke & Muckian-Bates 2020, p. 2),[6] including occupational status, race, class, gender, sexuality, immigrant status, and geography. Moreover, examining education’s role in capitalism understood as a social system supports educational research about how schooling reflects and reinforces oppression in ways that are essential for teachers to recognize and resist in their pedagogical roles, pushing teachers to use their power as workers to influence what is taught, including insights from critical pedagogy.

Examining capitalism as a social system situates teachers as workers and their organizations in liberal capitalism, that is, bourgeois democracy, a location that helps explain unions’ contradictory role. Unions take the form of institutions and social movements workers form to protect their wages and working conditions, intermediaries between capital and labor. Union officials and the apparatus are caught between the demands of employers and workers. As institutions embedded in capitalist economic and political relations, unions experience conservatizing pressures to insulate themselves and their resources. At the same time, unions occasionally have to call on members to provide the power needed to resist the employer’s pressure, including using labor’s most powerful weapon – the strike. The counter-pressure to conservatizing influences in unions’ contradictory role under capitalism comes from movements for social justice, the power of workers at the workplace, and internal struggles to make unions into “living democratic participatory organizations and cultures.” [7] Understanding unions’ placement in capitalism makes union democracy, often omitted in

scholarship and discussions of teachers' labor activism, including social justice unionism, not only an ideal. It's a practical necessity.[8]

THE PANDEMIC, EDTECH, AND THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF TEACHERS' LABOR ACTIVISM

The enormously complex, on-going struggles about schools and teaching during the pandemic are too huge a topic for me to explore in these remarks. The point I want to stress is that increasing attacks about teachers harming children by demanding safe reopenings is a recapitulation of the extravagantly funded, extraordinarily well-orchestrated assault on teachers and their unions launched fifteen years ago. It occurs now for the same reason the attack was organized before: Of all the potential opponents to the new iteration of capitalism's project to transform education, teachers and their unions are the most formidable. [9] Most research about increased racial and economic educational inequality from the pandemic emerges from "global edtech solutionism," as Williamson and Hogan (2020) explain in their analysis for the Education International (EI) (cited below). The seemingly progressive solutions of the global edtech movement deepen and extend the reach of data mining and privatization in private/public partnerships supported by both Democrats and Republicans and corporate elites in international finance organizations.[10]

We should understand the attacks teachers are experiencing are pushback to victories in teachers' labor activism in the past decade, in "blue cities" and "red state" walkouts, as well as gains in educating teachers and parents about the purposes of and harm done by standardized testing under NCLB. However, another more chilling development has occurred. Capitalism has used COVID and remote learning to reassert and expand the process begun with imposition of standardized testing and curricula two decades ago, intensifying the processes Huws describes in global alterations in work and Raewyn Connell captures in education as "On-line templates and information systems, heavier and more detailed reporting requirements, standardized testing on a huge scale, quantitative targets and incentives," and a shift to "control from a distance." [11]

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

What has been missed in most analyses of teachers' responses to the pandemic, including those sympathetic to teachers and well-informed about neoliberal reformers' campaign to fan public outrage against unions, [12] is how AFT and NEA, as well as the state affiliates, which most often follow the lead of the national unions, failed to mobilize members after schools were closed in early Spring 2020, when it was clear the pandemic would not disappear. At that point it fell to NEA and AFT to lead national campaigns for the "widespread and significant" federal money and support for needed for equitable reopenings. [13] AFT and NEA should have mobilized members to highlight that teachers in public schools, especially those with the highest concentrations of low-income BIPOC children, needed what affluent private schools (and mostly white, wealthy suburban school districts) provided their teachers and students: practical high-quality professional development in shifting to online instruction; serious investment to make school buildings safe environments; mechanisms for parents, students, and teachers to identify resources they needed to succeed, like counselors, social workers, and nurses - and defund those that subvert academic and social success of low-income students of color, like police in schools and surveillance hardware. [14]

In the absence of national campaigns organized by the NEA and AFT, locals were left on their own to wage defensive struggles over safety and equity during the pandemic. While small groups of activists attempted to fuse demands about safe reopenings to a broader program that addressed how the pandemic was exacerbating pre-existing racial and economic inequalities in schools,[15] national and state teachers unions devoted resources to electoral politics. AFT's policy of supporting local walkouts, won in the July 2020 national convention primarily due to efforts of union locals headed by reformers, was at best a mixed blessing because it accepted that struggles over reopening were

local, absolving the national unions from their responsibility and isolating locals in defensive struggles against extremely well-organized opponents with national resources and a shared narrative.

Just as problematic and related to their failure to mobilize pro-actively for the kind of federal funding schools needed was NEA and AFT partnering with tech billionaires and the foundations they fund in “Education Reimagined,”[16] supporting the intensification of privatization with education technology. An EI report that focuses on Pearson illuminates the breathtaking scope of change being planned and enacted in teachers’ work.[17] Pearson “aims to lead the ‘next generation’ of teaching and learning by developing digital learning platforms, including Artificial Intelligence in education (AIEd). It is piloting new AI technologies that it hopes will enable virtual tutors to provide personalised learning to students, much like Siri or Alexa.” In other words, teachers have been training their replacement with AI with the online assignments in software and platforms they have used during COVID. And while Pearson wants this technology to be integrated into a single platform, Google Classroom, it has a host of competitors who similarly intend to profit from transforming teachers’ work. What seems paradoxical but is actually explained by unions’ contradictory role in capitalism is that this and other superb research on edtech has been published by the EI, the international confederation of teachers unions, which is dominated by the AFT and NEA.

We have increasing documentation by the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) about dangers in “personalized learning,” digital platforms,[18] and proprietary software, like Summit Learning. [19] Note that support for much of NEPC’s valuable research on educational technology comes from the Great Lakes Center on Education Research and Practice, a research foundation funded by the NEA and several of its state affiliates.[20] We also see new, chilling forms of surveillance identified by education activists that intensify the school-to-prison pipeline. Yet the cutting-edge work organizing against the surveillance [21] comes from the Alliance for Educational Justice, which is funded by the Democracy Alliance, mostly a coterie of wealthy liberals, many of them ed tech entrepreneurs, as well as Mary Kay Henry, President of the Service Employees International Union, and the Center for American Progress, the Clinton/Biden center of the Democratic Party, with which both AFT and NEA have close political ties. [22] Unbeknownst to most union members and activists, the pandemic recovery CARES act, which AFT and NEA supported and praised fulsomely, pushes money away from “bricks and mortar” schools for remote learning software, controlled by the tech elite. [23] As teachers in their schools and local unions, correctly and courageously, fought for remote learning to protect their students and communities from COVID, they missed the need to demand controls over software and platforms. [24] As one leading activist explained, teachers were too “overwhelmed” in fighting for physical safety to absorb what adopting remote learning signified for schools, students, and teachers’ work post-pandemic.

THE NEW ITERATION OF THE BIPARTISAN PROJECT FOR TEACHING, TEACHERS, AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

Both Donald Trump’s 2016 election as President, which ushered in a period of profound social and political turmoil that provided the context for teachers’ subsequent labor activism, along with Biden’s 2020 victory configure what teachers and students will face as they begin a “regular” school year. Trump’s rhetoric advanced ideas associated with the international growth of “authoritarian right-wing populism” (Önis and Kutlay, 2020, p. 14) in the name of protecting the interests of the working class .[25] Trump’s and the GOP’s interruption of many policies associated with the bipartisan consensus about education’s centrality in alleviating inequality, accompanied by advocacy of racial superiority, theocracy, subversion of women’s rights, anti-immigrant sentiment, might appear to undercut what the architects of the global neoliberal project in education promoted as education’s role in promoting social inclusion, emphasized in the World Bank’s 2018 World Development Report on education. [26] Yet as Önis & Kutlay (2020) explain, authoritarian leaders’

use religion, nationalism, and economic concerns “as a tool for managing capitalism in the face of pervasive inequalities in a new way” (p. 14), actually intensifying economic stratification and control of elites. Hence, though Trump and the GOP were willing to jettison aspects of bourgeois democracy, they shared the goal of international finance organizations in education: maintaining capitalist social, political, and economic relations under the cover of ameliorating poverty and inequality.

Though Trump and the GOP interrupted key aspects of the bipartisan agreement about education reform by introducing neo-conservative policies, like funding for religious schools, they also pushed policies aligned with the previous bipartisan project, for example privatization through expansion of charter schools, including online charters. We see a thread connecting the original neoliberal project and the new iteration in the unanimous approval by the GOP, Democrats, and even Sanders of Trump’s nominee for the Department of Education, Scott Stump, assistant secretary for career, technical, and adult education. Stump’s background in “workforce development and education” in community colleges using online learning[27] continued and prefigured how Democrats (and Republicans who will vote with them) will argue for linking education to the economy, insisting workers’ access to good jobs requires more and different schooling, primarily online learning, with business titans determining what students and workers need to know. The new bipartisan project will likely drop Trump’s and the GOP’s baggage of neo-conservatism and proto-fascism but will aim to replace the entire infrastructure and ethos of schooling with an alternative vision and creation of Silicon Valley technology companies supported by Wall Street.

Biden can’t resurrect the bipartisan project as it was, nor does the capitalist elite want an identical replication because the pandemic has created huge opportunities for profit and control. MIT’s project on technology, work, and education, [28] funded by many of the biggest players on Wall Street and Silicon Valley, including JP Morgan Chase, and Google, along with liberal foundations, like the Ford Foundation, and labor officials, displays the not-so-new bipartisan plan to more closely link (privatized) public education to the economy: using educational technology “to link skills training to business demand.” The wrinkle in this plan is, of course, staggering unemployment heightened in the pandemic. This economic reality will not, cannot be changed with education of any sort. And it remains to be seen how the Democrats’ intend to fund spending for the infrastructure and schools, primarily the extent to which it will rely on the model we saw in the CARES act, of privatization with public/private partnerships and imposition of edtech.

AFT and NEA are trying find ways to avoid fighting this new bipartisan project, though they seem to have learned they cannot wholeheartedly embrace it, as they did when they supported NCLB, standardized testing and allowing teachers’ pay and performance to be evaluated by student test scores, ostensibly to end inequality in education. Teachers are organizing against the Biden administration’s acceptance of standardized testing during the pandemic, and we can anticipate AFT and NEA support of the new project will alienate and anger a new stratum of classroom teachers, already exhausted and disheartened by the attacks on teachers and pressure to reopen schools, as they experience a deeper erosion to their professional autonomy and working conditions. This situation creates an opportunity for teacher activists fighting for social justice, already pushing their unions to end segregation and equalize educational outcomes, to fuse these struggles with desires of teachers not heretofore “political” who see deterioration in teaching conditions that have occurred in the pandemic. The challenge is to connect activism in support of social justice to the degradation of teachers’ work by explaining the shared origin of the problem in capitalism’s plan for education to serve business and profit in ways the ruling class dictates.

OUR ROLE AS CRITICAL RESEARCHERS

I see researchers having two critical (in both senses of the word) functions. First, we should help

educate U.S. teachers about this new iteration of the neoliberal project globally, helping them to create a different narrative, one grounded in anti-capitalist ideas, like putting students before profits. Second we should push the national unions to adopt strategies consistent with an anti-capitalist stance, like breaking from collaborations with edtech moguls and the non-profit, “non-partisan” think tanks they fund. We need to urge reform locals to make the new neoliberal project part of their political education and use it to drive organizing.

The British Columbia Teachers Federation has provided a valuable model because as we in the U.S. focused on combating Trump, the BCTF has dealt with the Liberal Party’s embrace of the project we face under Biden, articulated most clearly by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).[29] The BCTF strategy tapped members’ insights and dissatisfactions about their work (conditions that subvert students’ authentic learning), connecting these to critical research about the OECD’s aims. Their work suggests how we might connect theory about changes in capitalism’s transformation of work to teachers’ practice, shaping a narrative for unions and teacher activists to drive organizing.

We need to support ideas being advanced by reformers about “organizing for the common good” to make teachers unions adopt their historic – and often neglected – responsibility to advance the social movements on which labor has always depended. At the same time, critical scholars have a role in helping activists sharpen their analysis of why the contradictory role of unions in capitalism means even the best-intentioned reformers, thoroughly committed to support social movements, face conservatizing pressures when they assume leadership of unions. A popular approach to reviving unions [30] adopted by the two largest unions led by advocates of social justice unionism has, I think, disoriented the movement because its template for organizing is problematic when applied to teachers’ work and their unions. One of the most powerful motivations we can tap comes from teachers’ occupational identity, their desire to maintain teaching as a career, their work and education respected and valued. Here I should note Huws has a thorough analysis of how workers’ occupational identity can be problematic and/or progressive for organizing, which is germane to this discussion but takes me beyond my focus. Any generic model for organizing that ignores the texture and conditions of teaching, as well as differences in school systems and geography, obscures specifics of work and related issues that fuel activism, especially in regard to power relations, perhaps evaluations most pointedly, as well as matters of curriculum and instruction.

Another related concern I have about this model being used in education unions is its reliance on research that consists of “data analytics,” for example evidence of members’ involvement in union campaigns. While this approach can support powerful interventions that resonate with mobilizing members on campaigns that are grounded in ideals of social justice, it can obscure the dialectical relationship between close scrutiny of teachers’ work by teachers themselves and critical research about capitalism’s global project, the tectonic shifts in work that are reflected in and reinforced by teachers’ labor. What we learn in this process should drive organizing at the workplace, in the school system, and in education nationally. We need to ask questions that may be uncomfortable for unions with social justice leadership that are rightly proud of their accomplishments about why and how they missed the relationship between changes to teaching and the new global neoliberal project. This frank discussion among friends can help illuminate the strengths and drawbacks of any model adopted for organizing, especially as we recommend it to other unions.

The fact that we have been put on the defensive by the pandemic and have not seen what has happened to teachers’ work should not obscure the hopeful, positive developments in the past year. A new stratum of teachers, those who bring a critical lens to their work and teaching, increasingly see the value of unions in both advancing social justice and protecting the dignity of their labor. The struggles waged about racism and reopening schools, in particular, have educated a new generation of teacher activists. When teachers return to fully opened schools, the “new normal,” I think they

will face a staggering deterioration in their work. Critical scholars have a significant responsibility in this new political landscape, not the least of which is connecting with the real existing movements to share what we know, in forms that are accessible to working teachers. They need our support, as we do theirs. In a word, we need solidarity.

[1] https://newpol.org/issue_post/workers-of-the-world-%e2%80%a8growth-change-and-rebellion/

[2] Ovetz, R. (2020). The Algorithmic University: On-Line Education, Learning Management Systems, and the Struggle over Academic Labor. *Critical Sociology*, 0896920520948931.

[3] Huws, U. (2014). *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. New York: Monthly Review Press. (The book is available open-access, pdf on Google Scholar.)

[4] Weiner, L., & Asselin, C. (2020). Learning from Lacunae in Research: Making Sense of Teachers' Labor Activism. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 10(3), 226-270. (Article is available open-access: <https://hipatiapress.com/hpjournals/index.php/remie/issue/view/393>)

[5] Wood, E. M. (1995). *Democracy against capitalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[6] Dyke, E. & Muckian-Bates, B. (Forthcoming). Rank-and-File Rebels: Theories of Power and Change in the 2018 Education Strikes. <https://press.colostate.edu/>: Colorado State University Open Press. (This will be open-access.)

[7] Kim Moody, Nelson Lichtenstein, and I debate the relationship between union democracy, democracy in society, and socialism in exchanges in *New Politics*, beginning with my article in the Winter 2021 issue:

https://newpol.org/issue_post/unions-democracy-and-%e2%80%a8the-third-camp/

[8] Asselin, C. (2019). Tensions, dilemmas, and radical possibility in democratizing teacher unions: Stories of two social justice caucuses in New York City and Philadelphia. Dissertation, available online: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3433/

[9] <https://archive.newpol.org/issue38/weiner38.htm>

[10] Saltman, K. J. (2009). Schooling in disaster capitalism: How the political right is using disaster to privatize public schooling. In *Critical pedagogy in uncertain times* (pp. 27-54). Palgrave Macmillan, New York. (Available in pdf, found in Google Scholar.)

[11] <http://www.raewynconnell.net/2021/01/teachers-worth.html>

[12]

<https://jacobinmag.com/2020/10/neoliberal-education-reform-scapegoat-teachers-covid-19-reopening-school>

[13] <https://nepc.info/publications/podcast-saldana-scott>

[14] Ironically, AFT President Weingarten is now calling for many of these improvements, noting Jewish private schools provided them:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-teachers-union-head-randi-weingarten-has-a-vision-to-get-kids-back-to-school/>

[15] <https://www.demandsafeschools.org/>

[16] <https://education-reimagined.org/about/>

[17] https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2019_ei_gr_essay_pearson2025_eng_24

[18] <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-learning>

[19] <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication-announcement/2020/06/summit-2020>

[20] <https://www.greatlakescenter.org/about/>

[21] https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=337742697337266&ref=watch_permalink

[22] See LittleSis.org for the details: https://littlesis.org/org/47100-Democracy_Alliance

[23] Two activists debate the merits of “bargaining for the common good” and community schools in light of federal mandates about use of educational technology in their exchange in New Politics: <https://newpol.org/symposium/community-schools-progressive-reform-or-privatization-trojan-horse/>

[24]

https://www.ei-ie.org/en/woe_homepage/woe_detail/16856/the-edtech-pandemic-shock-by-ben-williamson-anna-hogan

[25] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03932729.2020.1731168>

[26] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>

[27][27] <https://www2.ed.gov/news/staff/bios/stump.html>

[28] <https://workofthefuture.mit.edu/mission/#collaborators>

[29] <https://www.bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=55269>

[30] Moody, K. (Fall, 2020), Spectre. “Reversing the ‘model’: Thoughts on Jane McAlevey’s plan for union power.” <https://spectrejournal.com/volume-1-issue-2-fall-2020/> (Only available to subscribers.)