Neoliberalism, Teacher Unionism, and the Future of Public Education

written by Lois Weiner | April 3, 2010

WITH OVERWHELMING SUPPORT from both Democrats and Republicans, the Bush administration rewrote the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001, drastically changing public education. One of the key initiatives of the Johnson-era "war on poverty," ESEA has been the main source of federal aid to schools serving children in poverty. Employing the rhetoric of "equity," the legislative package called "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), has made federal aid dependent on schools' accepting new regulations on a host of school policies, from teacher qualifications, to instructional content and methods permissible for reading instruction, to the privatization of school services, like tutoring. However, the mandates that have received the most attention require testing in grades 3-8 and the reporting of disaggregated test scores for minority groups who have traditionally been "left behind" by schools, as well as by students identified as requiring special education. Schools that fail to deliver high test scores for all groups are publicly identified as failing and are subject to a host of punitive measures. Although there is much else in the package that affects all public schools that accept ESEA funds, testing and score reporting are NCLB's elements that are most hotly debated, in part because they affect ALL schools, everywhere, and not just those that are assumed to be "failing," (e.g. city schools with high concentrations of poor, minority children).

The rhetorical premise of NCLB is that the federal government will finally hold public schools throughout the nation accountable for their failure to educate poor and working class Hispanic and African American students. In this article I explain how NCLB's purported aim of increasing educational opportunity masks its key purpose: to create a privatized system of public education that has a narrow, vocationalized curriculum enforced through use of standardized tests. I analyze the origins of support for some of NCLB's key premises and explain why the most prominent liberal criticism of NCLB, the underfunding of its provisions, is dangerously misleading, for both strategic and ideological reasons. Finally, I suggest how we might develop a progressive program and movement for school improvement in the U.S., one connected to a revitalized teacher union and labor movement.

Reasons For NCLB's Bipartisan Backing

ONE ASPECT OF NCLB mostly ignored by its opponents is that it both perpetuates and significantly deepens policies begun under Bush senior and continued by the Democrats and Clinton. Yet, the origins of NCLB in educational reforms begun a decade earlier have been well documented. Writing in the *Educational Researcher* in November 1996, Gary Natriello noted that the bipartisan National Education Summit diverted attention away from many pressing problems in the US economy and its schools in a policy statement presenting high academic standards as a panacea. Describing the marketization of education in North Carolina in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* in 2002, researchers identified intensified race and class stratification that resulted from policies implemented in the Clinton administration. Clinton pressed hard for Bush's National Goals 2000 and its emphasis on national standards enforced through standardized testing, and looked to his corporate allies for direction in setting education policy.

NCLB sharply divided the weakened traditional labor-liberal coalition that generally works together to win increases in school funding. The Council of Chief State School Officers, the Council of Great City Schools, and one teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which represents teachers in most cities, supported the rationale that holding schools to "high standards" enforced through yearly standardized tests, with severe penalties for poor performance would force schools to shape up. The National Education Association (NEA) led the opposition to NCLB, arguing that its punitive sanctions, the absence of significant new funding, and the testing mandates were dangerous and destructive to public schools. The NEA is much larger than the AFT, and though it frequently cooperates with organized labor, it is not affiliated with the AFL-CIO. In its opposition to NCLB the NEA was joined by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which represents some 14,000 superintendents and local administrators, major civil rights organizations including the NAACP, as well as most progressive advocacy groups.

NCLB's rhetoric and its provisions that require reporting disaggregated test scores are enormously seductive to parents and low-income communities whose children attend poorly funded, poorly functioning schools. Schools in predominately Hispanic and African American neighborhoods are often incapable of providing children with more than the rudiments of literacy and numeracy — if that. Often these schools cannot recruit and retain sufficient numbers of teachers to staff classrooms. City and rural schools that enroll large concentrations of recent immigrants are frequently so underfunded and overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of students they must educate that bathrooms and closets are pressed into use as classrooms. Even in better-funded school districts in which African American and Hispanic youth are a demographic minority, they are frequently tracked into classes that offer a diet of low-level materials and poor instruction, robbed of the opportunity to take college preparatory work. African American boys are placed into special education in numbers vastly disproportionate to their presence in the school population. Once students are labeled as having "special needs" they are rarely given the help they need to move into regular programs, although this is the presumed rationale for identifying their problem and grouping them together. For many years schools and school districts' test scores, graduation rates, and other statistical indicators commonly used to measure achievement, have been made public. However, in many states, New York for example, reports of test scores did not breakdown the achievement for different groups of children. A school would report the demographics of its student body and the overall passing rate on standardized tests, but it did not previously have to sort out, disaggregate, the data so that correlations between achievement and demographics could be made. For this reason, inequality of achievement was often masked. Given school practices and conditions that allow millions of minority children to be undereducated, NCLB's requirement for disaggregated test reports and its "get tough" stance to punish schools that fail to help minority youth pass standardized tests are attractive to many parents, most especially those who feel powerlessness to make institutions that are publicly funded serve their children adequately.

Note too that NCLB's passage follows on the failure of the civil rights movement's reforms to equalize educational opportunity. A full analysis of what occurred and why for the past thirty years of school reform would take me far beyond analysis of NCLB, but it is important to understand that NCLB's stated goal to "leave no child behind" would have far less popular resonance if schools presently served poor children of color reasonably well. NCLB's hijacking of the rhetoric of progressive educational reform would not be possible had progressive intentions to improve schooling been actualized, and so a brief explanation of what went wrong is needed. Essentially, a radical vision of improved schooling for *all* children was lost in a Faustian bargain negotiated by legislators and bureaucrats, one embodied in the legislation creating ESEA. Relatively small infusions of public funds were given to schools and targeted at specific students, those presumed to need extra help, based on their family income, or in the case of bilingual education, their native language. The funding's efficacy was measured by standardized tests, given at the beginning and

end of each school year to students enrolled in classes that had materials and teachers paid for by ESEA monies. These "compensatory" programs ushered in the first widespread use of standardized test scores to measure teaching and learning, initiating their acceptance as valid measures of whether public funds on education were being well-spent. The "compensatory" model assumed that poor, minority children were not achieving because they – and their families — were deficient. It ignored, indeed contradicted, evidence of racism's destructive and systemic influences on how children are taught and what they are expected to know, as well as the bureaucratic organization of schooling. Historically, public education in this country has coped with demands to equalize educational outcomes by blaming lack of achievement on students' individual problems, labeling their deficiencies, and then grouping them in separate programs that "meet their needs." Our present policies for classifying students as having various sorts of educational disabilities differ primarily in nomenclature from those developed at the turn of the nineteenth century, when working class students disinterested in school would be labeled "anemic" or "phlegmatic" and shunted into separate classes or schools.

NCLB definitively breaks this pattern by presuming that if children are not succeeding in school, responsibility rests with the school — and not the children. But in so doing it destroys the structure and organization of a publicly-funded and presumably publicly-controlled system of education begun more than a century ago. NCLB closely resembles the blueprint developed in ultra-right wing think tanks to replace locally controlled school systems funded by the states with a collection of privatized services governed only by the market. What NCLB adds to the original "free market" framework is the demand for standardized curricula and testing, (which I explain at length later), and the Christian Right's press for "faith-based" interventions in public services. NCLB's "free market" underpinning pretends that schools can compensate for the array of savage economic and social problems that undercut children's school success, problems created and abetted by government policies. In this mad reasoning, public funding for low-cost housing is reduced or eliminated because the "market" is best at regulating housing costs and availability. When the market's failure to provide adequate housing is evident in soaring rates of homelessness, schools are told that children's homelessness and its attendant social and logistical problems are no excuse for homeless children's failing scores on standardized tests. If there is sufficient political furor because of the obvious inability of schools to cope with this new crisis, the government creates a discrete, token allocation for educational services for homeless children. Often the money can't be used well, or perhaps at all, because the amount provided is so small relative to the enormity of the problems the school must overcome to provide meaningful assistance. Just tracking the whereabouts of children who move from one shelter to another, let alone providing them with appropriate services, is beyond the capacity of most urban school systems, which must interact with a number of similarly bureaucratic, under-resourced, and dysfunctional agencies.

NCLB draws on and encourages the powerful political mythology touted consistently in the media that schooling is the most effective way to overcome social inequality. This notion persists despite the overwhelming evidence that our educational system reproduces existing social relations a great deal more efficiently than it disrupts them. Again, a full discussion of this subject takes me too far from my focus on NCLB, but I suggest that a program to advance educational opportunity has to be understood as part of a larger project of attacking inequality with other social policies, including an end to de facto school segregation. To argue that schools have a limited capacity to ameliorate economic and social inequality is not to diminish the moral or political importance of the struggle to improve education. Any progressive movement deserving of the name will demand that public schools provide all students with an education that will allow them to be well-rounded, productive citizens, which includes the ability to compete for whatever well-paying jobs exist. Improving schools that serve poor and working class youth can make a difference in the lives of some children, and for that reason alone, progressive school reform deserves our attention.

Moreover, struggling to improve schools for all children has a critical political significance because it demands that American society make good on its democratic ideals, its pledge of equality. While being clear that improved schooling is a moral and political imperative, we need to state its limitations as a policy vehicle for making the society more equitable. As the authors of *Choosing Equality* (Temple Univ. Press, 1986) note, education can challenge the tyranny of the labor market — but not eliminate it. Especially as neoliberal policies tighten their grip on governments and capitalism's assault on the living conditions of working people intensifies, schooling becomes as an ever weaker lever for improving the economic well-being of individuals even while it remains a critical arena for political struggle.

The heart of any agenda for progressive social change, which includes improving education, must address what historian David Hogan terms "the silent compulsion of economic relations," the nexus of racial segregation in schools and housing, combined with dependence on local property taxes for school funding. Segregation in housing has become the pretext for abandoning the challenge of racially integrating schools, and school segregation has seriously weakened the forces challenging funding inequities. Some African American activists and researchers advocate dropping the demand for integrating schools, arguing that the society has turned its back on its commitments to educate African American children, who would be better served in segregated schools staffed by African American teachers. Although the despair that underlies desertion of the goal of integration is understandable, the hopelessness fuels an erroneous romanticization of segregated schooling and ignores the reality that racially segregated schools and school systems are more isolated politically for being racially segregated and, thus, more vulnerable in funding battles in state legislatures. The urgency of making segregated schools better is undeniable, but so is the necessity of mounting a political and legal challenge both to the de facto segregation of schools *and* the use of local property taxes for schooling. Activists who lived through the bussing battles of the 1970s, even those who have read about them, do not want to take up an issue that can incite vicious racism, but as racism underlies much of the opposition to funding schools serving poor, minority students adequately, it must be confronted. Unfortunately, even Ralph Nader's school reform plank (votenader.org), skirts this issue. While it observes that nationally school segregation has increased since the landmark decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, the program does not call for desegregation but rather only for control of education to be left in the hands of the states with new investment in education. The federal government is identified as having a "critical supporting role" to ensure that all children, irrespective of family income or race are "provided with rich learning environments and equal educational opportunities." The platform rejects NCLB's focus on high frequency, high-stakes, standardized testing as detrimental to children's intellectual and psychological well-being, noting that it "is unfair to poorer children from devastating backgrounds." There is much that is important in the statement on school reform on the Nader/Camejo website, for instance its rejection of vouchers and corporate influences on curricula. Still, the absence of explicit attention to connections between racial segregation in schools and housing, and state dependence on local property taxes for school funding is disappointing. Without making the case that segregation, school funding, and school quality are inextricably connected to one another, the argument against NCLB advanced by progressives with few or no roots in minority communities is far less persuasive.

While NCLB's passage partly results from the Right's heightened political presence generally, its allure is also attributable to public confusion about defending a system of public education that seems to be unreformable. The tune played by both Democrats and Republicans that Americans must scale back their expectations about governmental responsibility for concerns now portrayed as individual and personal, like housing and health care, signals that American society cannot fulfill its promise of providing equal educational opportunity. And as Nader points out, NCLB's passage is also a dismaying indication of the degree of popular disorientation about the role of education in a democracy and the contradiction of having this essential civic function privatized.

NCLB and Capitalism's Global Agenda for Education

THE DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN PARTIES' CONSENSUS about NCLB's main provisions is explained in part by the generally submissive stance of the Democratic Party to Republican initiatives. However, bipartisan endorsement of a legislative package that contains such disparate, and for liberals, politically repugnant regulations, deserves a closer look. After all, NCLB contains much that contradicts basic premises of liberal capitalism in the past fifty years, including the evaporation of separation of church and state (NCLB allows religious organizations to provide after-school services and requires that classes in sex education consist of exhortations for abstinence). And yet, the Democratic Party embraced NCLB wholeheartedly, with Bush singling out Ted Kennedy for praise for Kennedy's assistance with its passage.

According to the Constitution, education is a responsibility of the states, and in theory states could refuse to comply with NCLB by refusing ESEA funds. Despite a few threats to do so, no state has yet turned its back on ESEA funds because schools in revenue-poor districts, which also have students who are the most expensive to educate, would be financially devastated. The state government would be obliged to craft a rescue. As is obvious from the protracted legal battles in many states to equalize school funding, there is little political will on the state level to give low-wealth/high-need school districts the funding they need and deserve.

Why then were liberals and moderates in both parties so willing to support a legislative package with these (and other) equally regressive provisions? The glue that held together the bipartisan endorsement of NCLB is the shared ideological support for neoliberalism's program for the global capitalist economy, a global transformation in education's character and role.[1] NCLB enacts the program for education that neoliberal economists and governments pursue internationally. In both industrialized nations and the developing world, neoliberal reforms are promoted as rationalizing and equalizing delivery of social services. Towards this end, the World Bank demands curricular and structural change in education when it provides loans. The "wish list" is seen in the draft report of "World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People," (WDR 2004), which describes education's purpose solely in preparing workers for jobs in a global economy: Reformed educational systems will allow transnational capitalism to move jobs whenever and wherever it wishes, that is, to the country with the working conditions and salaries that are worst for workers and best for profits. (Like all the documents from the World Bank that I analyze, it is on the World Bank website: draft and final version.)

The draft was later modified in negotiations with governments and non-governmental organizations, but the original version is a declaration of war on every aspect of the social contract, especially provision of pubic education and the existence of independent teachers unions. Public education remains the largest realm of public expenditures that is highly unionized and not yet privatized, and the draft report identifies *unions*, especially teachers unions, as one of the greatest *threats* to global prosperity. The draft argues that unions have "captured governments," holding poor people hostage to demands for more pay. The report combines a savage attack on teachers and teacher unions, including a suggestion that teachers should be fired wholesale when they strike or otherwise resist demands for reduced pay, with a call to privatize services, greatly reduce public funding, devolve control of schools to neighborhoods, and increase user fees. The World Bank has implemented many elements of the draft report by making loans and aid contingent on "restructuring," that is, destroying publicly-funded, publicly controlled educational systems. The results, including reduced literacy rates, have been devastating, as University of Buenos Aires Professor Adriana Puiggros describes in her report contrasting the reality of implementation in Argentina with the World Bank's rhetoric of equality.

A key element of the program is limiting access to higher education through the imposition of higher tuition and reduced government support to institutions and individual students. Limiting access to higher education means that lower education is charged only with preparing students for work, for jobs requiring basic skills, jobs that multinationals aim to move from one country to another. Schools that train most workers for jobs requiring limited literacy and numeracy, which WDR 2004 explains is all we can realistically expect for poor people in poor countries, do not require teachers who are themselves well-educated or skilled as teachers. In fact, teachers who have a significant amount of education are a liability because they are costly to employ; teacher salaries are the largest expense of any school system. Minimally educated workers require only teachers who are themselves minimally educated, and so teacher education is eliminated or deskilled in the neoliberal program.

Most of NCLB's elements for reorganizing education in the U.S. are straight out of the draft report for WDR 2004. Charter schools (and the Bush administration's not-yet-realized plan for vouchers to be used in private schools) fragment oversight and control; testing requirements and increasingly punitive measures for low test scores pressure schools to limit what is taught so that the tests become the curriculum; privatization of school services, like tutoring and professional development for teachers tied to raising test scores, undercuts union influence and membership.

NCLB's attack on teacher education deserves more than the cursory attention I can provide in this article, but an element generally accepted by liberals as an improvement needs to scrutinized in light of neoliberalism's program internationally. NCLB's definition of a "highly qualified" teacher actually deskills teaching because it assumes that all one needs to teach well is content knowledge in selected disciplines in the liberal arts. There is no question that teachers are more successful when they have deep knowledge of the subjects they teach, but school conditions as well as students' desire and preparedness to engage in intellectually-demanding study, factors closely related to social, economic, and political supports outside the school, also influence the sort of preparation teachers require.[2] Defining a "highly qualified teacher" as one who has knowledge of the content to be taught parallels the neoliberal stance that teaching can be defined as the transmission of content and that schools have no social or political responsibilities beyond providing an education that is *de facto* vocational training. Toward this end, NCLB eliminates psychology and sociology as acceptable majors for middle school teachers, a measure that has the effect of making these majors less attractive to all prospective elementary teachers, who will want to acquire teaching certifications that enable them to teach both lower and upper grades. In kindergarten through fifth grade, teachers generally work in "self-contained" classrooms, meaning they must teach ALL subjects, including art (if it is still offered), math, social studies, science, reading, and writing, so a major in just one discipline cannot possibly prepare them to teach every subject. Seen in this light, ALL of the disciplines that now make an elementary teacher "highly qualified" are also problematic. In several states teachers can become "highly qualified" by presenting a B.A. and a passing score for an online exam of teaching which Chester Finn developed with a 35 million dollar grant from the Bush administration.

The hysterically anti-union politics of the draft report also explain the remark by Rod Paige, Secretary of the Department of Education, that the NEA is a "terrorist organization." Although his remark was dismissed as a bizarre joke, it echoes the tone of the draft report. The President of the AFT local in Houston with whom Paige had collaborated before coming to Washington was almost alone in defending Paige publicly, commenting to the *Washington Post* that Paige was really quite a wonderful fellow, his joke was harmless, and that the NEA wasn't even a real union, let alone a terrorist organization. (I was curious as to whether she had been quoted accurately, and so I contacted her by email for a clarification. Sadly, she was.)

The Bush administration is quite open about the explicit linkage between a deskilled teaching

force and a narrow curriculum, a fact that is, tellingly, not publicized by Democratic supporters of the legislation, even or especially those who want only to fund it better. Grover Whitehurst, an undersecretary in the Department of Education agency responsible for education research, (which is now called the Institute of Education Sciences, despite its blind fealty to the doctrines of market capitalism and Christian fundamentalism) explained in a meeting with educational researchers that public investment in research about teacher education is unnecessary because the government is required to provide only a basic education that will prepare students for entry-level jobs. Therefore government funds are better spent creating materials for teaching basic skills that teachers with little or no expertise in teaching can use. This is precisely the strategy promoted in WDR 2004, which lauds programs that briefly train fifteen year old peasant girls, who then teach literacy skills in rural villages.

One way to limit access is charging fees and tuitions to attend school, in both lower and higher education. We see the former strategy in underdeveloped countries, where families must often pay for schooling that was once available for free. In fact, a World Bank policy *prohibited* provision of free education as a requirement for loans, until a movement by liberals in the U.S. Congress, informed and inspired by global justice activists, challenged this measure. Access to learning is also limited by limiting what is learned. Larry Kuehn, research director of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, has traced this process and begins the trail in Washington in 1987, in the Reagan administration, when the U.S. promoted development of "education indicators" to guide curricula and testing at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an organization of the 29 most industrialized countries and some rapidly industrializing nations, like Korea and Mexico. In these early discussions, the OECD planned how to develop uniform curricula with "culture-free" materials, appropriate for the new "information economy." Kuehn's work illuminates not only the anti-intellectual and anti-humanistic assumptions of these curricula, but also how existing expectations about what students should learn had to be "downscaled."

"The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a federal agency that monitors academic achievement, works with the OECD. In the U.S. the NAEP has traditionally assessed students' achievements in three sorts of reading: "reading for literary experience," "reading to be informed," and "reading to perform a task." However, the OECD determined that only one ability, "reading to perform a task," as measured by reading a computer manual would be used in international assessments of student learning. The ability to read for literary experience was rejected as being too difficult to assess because of cross-cultural differences. The decision to limit the reading assessment to "reading to perform a task" and the example of reading a computer manual illustrate transnational capitalism's push to redefine education as vocational training."

Teachers Unions

AS PUIGGROS NOTES in her description of education's restructuring in Argentina throughout Latin America, resistance has been led by teachers unions. In organizing this struggle, teacher union activists have paid a hefty price: firings, beatings, even assassination. While both the AFT and NEA have offered statements of support to these heroic unionists, the public pronouncements and letter-writing campaigns are undercut and contradicted by political allegiances and ideological beliefs that reinforce much of the neoliberal program. The two unions differ in important ways that I analyze below, but the starting point for understanding their response to the neoliberal assault is that they see the world in a U.S.-centric view. Or more specifically, their vision of the world is refracted through the eyes of U.S. capitalism, which dominates the World Bank. The NEA's faulty vision

results from ideological backwardness, a failure it can indulge because unlike the unionists in the countries receiving the World Bank "largesse," teachers in the U.S. have been relatively protected from the program the U.S. enforces on the rest of the world. In contrast, the AFT leadership has a perfectly clear view of U.S. capitalism's goals in the the neoliberal project and is eager to be junior partner in their pursuit.

Although Albert Shanker, AFT's longtime chief, died in 1997, his organizational stranglehold on the union, his political compact with social conservatives, and his leadership of the segment of the AFL-CIO that has collaborated with the U.S. government in subverting popular movements throughout the globe, were continued by his co-thinker and replacement, Sandra Feldman, who recently resigned the AFT presidency due to poor health. (Readers can find a fuller discussion of Shanker's politics in the obituary of him Paul Buhle wrote in New Politics, or the one I wrote in *Contemporary Education*, Summer 1998.) The similarities between Shanker's vision for school reform, which because of his iron-clad control of the union were *de facto* those of the organization, and the neoliberal program manifested in NCLB are apparent in his article, published posthumously, in the *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy* (Fall 1997).

If we ignore the article's curmudgeonly asides and focus on its main argument, Shanker's agreement with the major portion of the neoliberal educational program is apparent. First, Shanker contends that U.S. schools are far worse than those in OECD nations because we offer *too much* access to higher education, or as he formulates the problem, we have an insufficient amount of academic "tracking." We don't start early enough to put students into programs that prepare them for their vocational destinies, so he advocates putting all students into vocational tracks sometime between grades 5 and 9. In their earlier grades, they should have a curriculum based on E.D. Hirsch's project for "cultural literacy." Although he maintains that in these tracks students must all be held to "high standards," his use of Hirsch's curriculum signifies that instead of engaging first-hand with primary sources, reading, appreciating, and perhaps creating literature, students will memorize facts about the "great" (white men) of history, the arts, and science. He bemoans the absence of a system of high-stakes tests with really harsh penalties for failure, the absence of mandatory national curriculum standards, and the presence of far too much tolerance for student misconduct. Shanker assails the laxity of the pre-NCLB curriculum standards, which were additionally problematic for being left to the states to execute.

Shanker adds that some standards can be too "vague — for example, ‘Learn to appreciate literature.'" Note how Shanker's breezy dismissal of the standard about appreciating literature echoes the OECD's rejection of international assessment in "reading for literary experience." Although Shanker used his weekly column in the *New York Times*, paid for by the membership, to ridicule the national standards developed by professional organizations of teachers of the arts, rejecting them as grandiose and unrealistic, his own children attended school in a suburban district with excellent arts programs — and no E.D. Hirsch curricula. Union members had not formally endorsed many of the positions Shanker adopted, for instance rejection of the standards in the arts, and recent surveys of teachers, in cities, suburbs, and rural schools find even less support now than there was at the time Shanker advocated many of his positions about standards and testing. Yet because of the AFT's bureaucratic deformation, of which the indictments for graft in the Miami and Washington, D.C. locals are shamefully graphic illustrations, the opposition to the AFT's vocal, unwavering support for testing and "high standards" scarcely registers at the national level. Most of the biggest locals are so bureaucratic that rank and file challenges to the leadership must be about fundamental practices of democracy, in order for classroom teachers' voices on issues of educational policy to be heard.

The NEA generally can be counted on to adopt liberal positions on the important political issues of the day, although its positions do not necessarily represent those of its members because its

organizational structure is also bureaucratic — but in a different way from the AFT. The AFT is a federation of locals so the state organizations have small staffs and little power. The AFT constitution contains no term limits for its president who has little direct control of local functions. Shanker masterfully exploited the post of AFT President to promote himself and to trumpet his political views on a wide-range of opinions. He did so by using his domination of the massive New York City local to leverage control of the state and national organizations, ensuring that his political views received a formal stamp of approval from the union's executive council while never being debated at the local level. Shanker ruled the national staff with an ideological iron fist, employing only people who agreed with him — or were fired.

In contrast, power in the NEA resides with the state organizations. Presidents of the national organization are usually career teachers who have been active in the state affiliates. They are limited to two terms, a fact that encourages staff control of operations and policy. In the AFT, dues remain in the locals so that they hire their own organizers directly. In the NEA, dues go to the state affiliate, which hires organizers, who are then assigned to work for locals as need arises. Thus NEA's organizational structure puts the staff in the political saddle, and the politics of its staff resemble the progressive ideas of staffers in other public employee unions in the U.S., like AFSCME and SEIU. While the NEA is better positioned than the AFT to lead a struggle in this country for progressive school reform, it is hampered by its own bureaucratic structure and its roots as a professional organization controlled by school administrators: It moved to become a collective bargaining agent only after the AFT's stunning successes in organizing city teachers into unions in the 1960s and 70s forced it to do so.

As with other left-leaning public employee unions, the NEA is willing to be openly critical of the use of U.S. military and political force to safeguard capitalism in a way that the AFT is not. Perhaps in part because of its roots as a professional organization, the NEA lacks the ideological sophistication of other progressive unions in the U.S. and of its counterparts in Europe that are connected to social democratic parties. The NEA is clearly trying to make ideological sense of the global attack against teacher unionism and public education, searching unsuccessfully for a vocabulary — and lever — for resistance. The chief ideological impediment to developing a resistance is acceptance of TINA, the notion that "There is no alternative," (TINA) to the program of international capital today: neoliberalism. The NEA''s failure to name the problem has kept it from actively linking with progressive unions elsewhere in the world, a development that would encourage formation of the broad, popular movement needed to derail NCLB in this country and the neoliberal agenda for education throughout the world.

NEA and AFT are by far the biggest member organizations in the Educational International (EI), the international confederation of teacher unions, which works with other international organizations of unions, like the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD. The EI seems to "agree to disagree," that is, not take a position or action on issues on which its most powerful members, the AFT and NEA, dissent — either with one another or with the other delegates — especially those from developing countries who are feeling the brunt of the neoliberal policies formulated and pressed by the U.S. The EI's evasion of critical issues of war and peace, like the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the war in Iraq, is possible primarily because it is comprised of national union leaders. Then General Secretary Fred van Leeuwen remarked at its Third World Congress in 2001:

"One of the strengths of the Education International is that we are a genuine membership based organization. Some 80% of our members are involved in policy development and decision making processes. An impressive figure. But this percentage is made up of no more than approximately 2,000 individuals…who speak for EI's 24 million members. Most classroom teachers in the North have never heard of EI, and that is a bit worrisome. We run the risk of becoming a club of union

leaders and their international secretaries. Don't misinterpret my words. Those 2,000 EI activists are our life and blood. But we must, I believe, find ways to open our gates to your members and enable them, where possible, to take part in our work. Teachers are world citizens by nature; they are among the most active members of organizations like Amnesty, Greenpeace and other NGOs. Why not find ways to get them involved in their own organization?"

The AFT flexes its muscle by influencing the EI's functioning informally, through private discussions with the general secretary of the organization, rather than in open debate at its international conferences and congresses. The NEA has traditionally been reluctant to express any opinion related to American foreign policy. Fortunately, the AFT has lost many of its contacts with other member organizations and it continues to be regarded by the social democratic teacher unions in Europe with suspicion, and rightly so because of its well-documented involvement with U.S. military and political repression of democratic, anti-capitalist struggles. (Kim Scipes' May 2002 posting on the AFL-CIO involvement in Venezuela, on the Z-net message board posting offers background on the AFT's involvement on the wrong side of popular struggles against dictatorships.)

EI minutes and official statements (posted at its website), reveal an organization that is struggling to make sense of the attack on public education and unions. It has been slow to mobilize beyond the stage of working with other international labor organizations in issuing public appeals and organizing letter-writing campaigns when teacher unionists are brutalized. Its efforts in this regard are admirable, for instance the campaign to free Taye Woldesmiate, President of the Ethiopian Teacher Association, who has spent 6 years in prison, and its publicity about Colombian teachers being killed and exiled for union activity. However, the advocacy on behalf of individual unionists is undercut by the unwillingness to name the real enemy, the U.S.-backed economic and political neoliberal agenda. To the extent the EI focuses on isolated outrages rather than identifying these abuses as manifestations of capitalism's current disregard for human needs that interfere with its appetite for unlimited profits, the EI campaigns allow the AFT to cover its trail of complicity with the U.S. government's subversion of popular movements by printing a blurb in its newspaper about individual militants who need support. Without advocacy about individual abuses being linked to efforts to build a broad, militant international social movement that challenges capitalism's demands for privatization, defunding, and fragmentation of educational services, the NEA too can more easily continue to deny the implications of U.S. control over policies at the World Bank.

In the last year especially, the EI has begun to mobilize in promising ways. It joined in the Global Campaign for Education, a broad alliance of NGOs, child rights activists and teachers' organizations active in more than 150 countries, to forcefully challenge the draft report's analysis and conclusions. Unlike the tepid, polite statement issued by TUAC defending the importance of teachers unions and labor unions in general, the Global Campaign for Education tapped the vitality and language of the global justice movement. The EI has brought teacher unionism into a coalition with the defenders of the oppressed rather than the oppressors, a stance that is continued with its participation in "Global Action Week 2005," a continuation of the work of the Global Campaign for Education. EI now has an advocacy team which collaborates with the Public Services International in producing the "Tradeducation News," with updates about global resistance to the inclusion of education as a commodity to be traded in the world treaties being pressed by the U.S.

In comparing the draft and final version of *WDR 2004* the successes of the international coalition EI helped to forge are clear. The vitriolic attack on teacher unions was diminished to a mild criticism for them not be too self-interested. The glowing examples of teachers being fired for striking were removed. The original focus on the unions as enemies of poor people was replaced with arguments that sound like they are taken from (conservative) political science textbooks about the "long-route" and "short-route" to governmental accountability. And in July 2004, a senior vice-president of the World Bank was invited to address the EI Congress in Porto Alegre, Brazil. He extolled the role of

teachers in economic development , noting the vital nature of partnership with teachers unions and with the EI. He commented that when the top officials from Education International met with World Bank President Wolfensohn in December [about the draft report that attacked teachers and teacher unions], they had "an open, frank dialogue about how best to support teachers."

I learned about the meeting with Wolfensohn and EI officials at a panel I chaired at a meeting of educational researchers in April 2004, one in which Mary Hatwood Futrell, the immediate past president of the EI and a past president of NEA, spoke. She was joined by Larry Kuehn, whose research on globalization on behalf of the British Columbia Teachers Federation is the closest substitute we have for the advocacy research the U.S. teachers unions should be doing and Hugo Aboites, a Mexican sociologist who works with Mexican teacher union activists in an alliance opposing the government-controlled unions. As Kuehn described the WDR 2004 draft report assailing teacher unions as enemies of global prosperity, I took a liberty as chair and asked Kuehn to pause so that we could hear from both Mary Futrell and Hugo Aboites on the issue. Mary Futrell described the dismay of EI officials when they saw the report; how they called Wolfensohn, immediately; how Wolfensohn denied knowledge of the report and said its viewpoint had not been officially sanctioned. I asked Futrell how she understood Wolfensohn's explanation and she fell silent, unable to answer. I then asked Hugo Aboites the same question, and he said he did not know of this particular report, but he was familiar with the policies. Teacher unionists in Mexico are experiencing horrible attacks on their jobs, their unions, and their bodies when they resist, all under the watchful eye of the government — and the World Bank.

As Fred van Leeuwen noted, teachers in the North have so far avoided learning about neoliberalism's global assault on education. With NCLB, they and we are now being subjected, albeit in a protected version, to the neoliberal program wreaking devastation elsewhere. When teacher union activists who opposed U.S. suppression of popular resistance to capitalist dictatorships in the 1980s tried to make their case, the job was difficult because even then the unions were bureaucratic. But in addition they struggled against the distance most U.S. teachers feel from the world. Today our situation is changed. On Sept. 11 the illusion that physical distance protects us was shattered. With NCLB another self-deception has been challenged, the notion that teacher unions can deliver the "bottom line" of maintaining teachers' wages, benefits, and jobs without embracing a view of their purpose that makes them allies with social movements that challenge the status quo. Yet, still missing in the work of teacher unions, their leaders and their ranks, is an understanding that to defend public education in this country, teachers and their unions must help develop an international response to neoliberalism, one that puts justice and equity at the forefront of the union's program for education, one that develops alliances that span national borders.

The political work needed to awaken teachers and teacher unionists in this country to their global responsibility has begun with the formation of an anti-war caucus at the AFT convention in August 2004. Activity like this within the U.S. teacher unions supports teacher unionists outside the U.S., for instance in the EI, to press the case in official organizations to which U.S. unions belong that the enemy of public education is NOT globalization, but capitalist restructuring under a neoliberal program.

Effective struggle against the neoliberal policies that are embedded in NCLB requires battling the bipartisan consensus about TINA. Clearly that means creating an electoral vehicle that gives voice to real alternatives. Despite the flaws I have identified with Nader's stance on NCLB, the campaign's clear rejection of the Democratic and Republican Party agreement to reduce education to a system of job training, trashing education's political functions in a democracy, points in the right direction. This path leads to a difficult but undeniable conclusion: NCLB cannot be doctored up. It should not be better funded. It should be replaced with a legislative program that is characterized by "progressive federalism," a concept that was clearly defined in *Choosing Equality*, over 25 years ago.

Such a program would, at the very least, press the federal government to provide the economic and legal supports necessary to promote equality of educational opportunity, for instance by assuming full responsibility for school funding, vigorously pursuing legal interventions to integrate schools, across school districts if necessary, and protecting teachers' and students' civil rights.

We can see the elements of the sort of struggle that's needed to put such a program before the public: in the work of advocacy groups that fought NCLB; in teachers unions' mobilization of community groups and parents to resist World Bank policies in Latin America and elsewhere; in the work of the EI and PSI in their collaboration to develop global campaigns with advocacy and global justice organizations, which reject TINA. With "progressive federalism" we have a progressive program. What we need most immediately is for those who see the harm done by NCLB to recognize its political origins in the neoliberal project — and combat the project in its entirety. That requires resolve to reject the determination of both political parties to maintain a system of education that leaves children and democracy behind capitalism's race for greater profits at any cost.

Footnotes

1. In my identification of the neoliberal agenda, I use the definition of Roberto Unger employed by several educational researchers in Europe investigating global changes in education. Unger defines neoliberalism as an economic program (not just a collection of disparate policies) with these characteristics: fiscal balance, which is achieved primarily through limits to public spending rather than by increases in moneys received through taxation; heightened integration into the world trading system and its established rules; privatization of services, which includes adoption of Western laws of private property; acceptance of some social safety nets to ameliorate inequality resulting from other aspects of the program.

2. I pursue this topic in Chapter 5 of *Preparing teachers for urban schools: Lessons from thirty years of school reform*, (Teachers College Press, 1993).