Teacher Unionism Reborn

written by Lois Weiner | January 23, 2012

IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS, we have witnessed a demonization of teachers unions that is close to achieving its goal: destruction of the most stable and potentially powerful defender of mass public education. Teacher unionism's continued existence is imperiled — if what we define as "existence" is organizations having the legal capacity to bargain over any meaningful economic benefits and defend teachers' rights to exercise professional judgment about what to teach and how to do it.

As I explain elsewhere,[1] financial and political elites began this project forty years ago when they imposed school reform on Latin America, Africa, and Asia as a quid pro quo for economic aid. Though specifics of this global social engineering differ from one country to another, reforms have the same footprint: School funding is cut and school systems are broken up to promote privatization under the banner of "choice"; teachers and curriculum are controlled by tying pay to standardized test scores and eliminating tenure; standardized testing measures what is taught to most students, reducing content to basic math, reading, and writing. Teachers unions have been singled out for attack because throughout the world they are the most significant barriers to this project's implementation.

Rhetoric about equalizing school outcomes for groups long denied access to adequate, let alone quality education, masks the real aim of the last twenty years of reform, creating a docile workforce that receives no more than the 8th grade education needed to compete with workers elsewhere for jobs that can be moved easily from one city, state, or country. World Bank materials lay out the assumptions seldom articulated in this country: Money educating workers beyond the level most will need wastes scarce public funding; and minimally educated workers require minimally educated teachers, whose performance can be monitored through use of standardized testing. The newest World Bank report, "Making Schools Work" takes the reasoning (and policy) even further, insisting that "contract teachers" who work for one-quarter of what civil service employees receive, have no benefits, no job protection, and no rights produce good enough outcomes.[2]

The attack has been fueled by right-wing foundations and advanced by Democrats and Republicans alike. The corporate media, including traditionally liberal elements, like Hollywood, *The New Yorker* and The *New York Times,* have blanketed TV, radio, and the press with bogus premises about education's relationship to the economy and the role of teachers unions in blocking much-needed change. The Obama Administration substitutes educational reforms straight out of the playbook of right-wing foundations as the panacea to unemployment and poverty. When Secretary of Education Arne Duncan avers that education is the "one true path out of poverty" he displays the administration's intention to divert attention away from unemployment, health care, child hunger, and homelessness. School improvement supplants all the economic and social reforms that have, historically, been used to ameliorate poverty. Defenders of public education frequently answer these inflated claims for education with protestations that schools can do nothing to alter the fate of poor children. Unfortunately, their response serves to heighten public perceptions that school people — teachers — refuse to take responsibility for what occurs under their watch. The more accurate and politically effective response is that schools can do more and better if we have well-prepared and well-supported teachers at work in well-resourced schools, and yet, even with these conditions, schools are hostage to powerful forces that depress achievement — factors that are beyond their control. This more nuanced defense of public education and teachers undercuts one of the most difficult problems we face in defending public education, neoliberalism's exploitation of historic inequalities in education. This is especially true in the United States, where the rhetoric of the civil

rights movement has been totally hijacked in defense of charter schools and improving "teacher quality" by eliminating seniority and tenure. Even *The Nation* has bought the reification of individual teacher performance as the sine qua non of school improvement.[3]

Teachers unions globally have experienced an astoundingly well-orchestrated, well-financed attack, and resistance elsewhere in the world has been forceful and persistent.[4] In contrast, U.S. teachers unions have been easy targets. Most teachers belong to a local affiliate of the NEA or the AFT. Both the NEA and AFT are national unions with state-level organizations. In general, teachers in the largest cities are in the AFT, which is a member of the AFL-CIO. The NEA functions as a union and collaborates with labor on legislation and in politics but is not in the AFL-CIO. In the NEA, state organizations are the most powerful component. In the AFT, the local affiliate is key. Staff generally control the NEA, officers the AFT. In most school systems, the union apparatus is intact, but the organizations are shells, weakened by their embrace of the "business union" or "service model" that characterizes most U.S. unions. The synergy of business unionism's hierarchical ethos and the legal framework giving unions the right to bargain on behalf of teachers, namely exclusive representation as bargaining agent, the right to collect "agency fee" (payment to the union of what is generally the equivalent of dues, to cover expenses the union expends in negotiating and enforcing the contract), and dues check-off (automatic deduction of dues from the member's paycheck) has encouraged a totally bureaucratic approach to contract enforcement, member passivity, and erosion of the union's school-site presence. Local union officers and activists have often been clueless about how to respond to the blitzkrieg of vitriol, and the national unions have been little help. They have been unwilling to "rock the boat," desiring above all to stay politically moored to Obama, a president who has pressed for a thoroughly anti-teacher, anti-union, anti-public education agenda. Another factor is, of course, the personal power and privilege national officers and staff enjoy as a result of their cozy relationship with powerful elites.

From the start of mass public education, teachers unions, like most of organized labor, turned a blind eye to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment.[5] Teachers unions' failure to acknowledge this history has facilitated their being cast — incredibly, by billionaires who have plundered the nation's resources — as a special interest group, more interested in protecting teachers' jobs than in helping poor children succeed in school. Many parents and citizens, even some teachers, have been persuaded that tenure and seniority protect "dead wood," not realizing that when tenure and seniority are lost, so is democratic space in classrooms. The unions' unwillingness to acknowledge schooling's past and current role in reproducing social inequality, their reluctance to work as partners with activists to take on racism, sexism, militarization, and anti-immigrant prejudice, have weakened their credibility with groups who should be teacher unionists' strongest allies.

This problem is exemplified by Diane Ravitch's defense of teacher unions. Unlike Chester Finn, a former ally who brags about his desire to destroy public education, Ravitch understands that once public education is destroyed, like Humpty Dumpty, it won't be put back together again — and when public education goes, so will a powerful force for democracy. Another explanation for Ravitch's about-face on the neoliberal reforms she advocated as part of the Bush Administration is that she is an intellectual and unlike her former neo-conservative allies is genuinely interested in education. She is, rightly, horrified by the anti-intellectualism that is writ large in neoliberalism's successful efforts to vocationalize education. Most of what she writes is eloquent, passionate, and accurate. Unlike the disoriented bureaucrats who run the unions, Ravitch understands that a fight needs to be made and she is willing to wage it. Ravitch criticized mayoral control of the New York City schools as undemocratic when the president of the union representing New York City teachers supported the measure. Ravitch has come out against linking teacher pay to test scores while the national unions have caved. Ravitch has shown the union bureaucrats how they could, if they wished, defend the union and public education more effectively. She is Albert Shanker's doppelganger, that is, while

he still acted like union president rather than a labor statesman.

However, as was the case with Shanker and is true of NEA and AFT officials today, Ravitch's defense of teacher unionism and public education is constrained by an ideological commitment to defending U.S. capitalism at any cost. Because she can't or won't acknowledge what has been wrong with U.S. society and public education, she can't devise a compelling alternative to the neoliberal reforms. She embeds, subtly, in her current defense of public education the claim that there was no crisis in U.S. public education before the neoliberal reforms were imposed. But there was. The Left historians she blasted in the 1960s and 70s in her defense of the status quo had it right. The schools did — and do — reproduce social inequality. In her recent essay in the *New York Review of Books* (September 29, 2011) she reduces current educational inequality between Whites and minorities to yet another in a series of over-blown crises U.S. schools have endured since their creation. She argues that "poverty matters," which it does, of course. So does racism, which she does not mention. So do other forms of discrimination which she ignores. Elsewhere, Ravitch states her desire for public education to be what she experienced in high school, in Houston, Texas.[6] (In the PBS history of U.S. public education, Ravitch fondly recalls her days as a high school cheerleader.) But how many Black and Hispanic parents will fight for a return to the status quo that barred their children from schools that served Whites?

An Emerging Resistance

THE NATION'S LARGEST CITIES were home to teacher unionism's original birth and its rebirth in the 1960s. Today opposition caucuses have emerged once again in cities, where conditions have deteriorated to an extent unimaginable even a decade ago. Charter schools, as their proponents freely admit, are one of the main weapons to make school systems free of union influence. A charter school is essentially its own school district, free of district regulations — and union involvement. In most large cities, teachers unions gave up seniority in transfer when the first wave of school closings began. Now, when schools are closed because of poor test scores and replaced by charter schools, experienced teachers are often thrown into pools of "displaced teachers." They must compete for jobs with new hires who earn one-half the salary. Teacher pay now comes out of a school's budget, so many principals, especially those with little or no teaching experience themselves, prefer hiring two new teachers for the price of one more-experienced teacher. A fact little publicized by the unions is that older minority teachers face intense racism when they interview for jobs, especially with young, white principals. Readers familiar with labor history will see the dismaying parallels to "shape up" on the docks and fields, before unionization brought hiring halls and protections for older workers.

Although tenure has been dismissed as irrelevant in K-12 teaching, its importance is greater today than ever before. As principals' pay is increasingly tied to improving test scores, and the noose between teacher pay and student test scores is tightened, teachers who want to give their students a richer diet than test prep are facing the prospect of losing their jobs if they follow their moral and professional principles. Even more chilling is schools' use of corporate propaganda, obtained through seemingly trustworthy vendors, as occurred with *Scholastic Books* promoting a fourth-grade curriculum written by the coal industry with its perspective.[7] Even where it still exists in state law, tenure has been greatly weakened because administrators can easily give teachers spurious unsatisfactory ratings due to weakened enforcement of evaluation procedures. In many city schools, principals can and do function without any check on their power, other than what is exercised by distant officials whose only concern is test scores. Over and over one hears of teachers who have bought the anti-union propaganda that is so prevalent in the media, or are too overworked and demoralized to do anything other than what they are told, or are too afraid of retribution to voice a contrary opinion. The union's presence has been so eroded and its credibility so damaged that "transforming the union" in many districts probably means building it from scratch.

At the same time, some teachers have become politicized by the vicious, unfair political attacks on their ability, character, professional authority, and economic well-being. Still, they often cling to the "service model" of unionism and expect "the union" to somehow, magically, intervene. The idea that they ARE the union is slowly percolating through the ranks, and increasingly, a new generation of teacher union activists is emerging. Union renewal is taking many forms, but the most important developments from a strategic perspective are occurring in the nation's cities. Not all major cities are experiencing the kind of change that's needed. For example, in Washington D.C., a protracted, ultimately successful court challenge by a former union official who vied for the presidency did little to mobilize teachers and community. On the other hand, in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), a vibrant leadership, mostly new to union office, has brought their commitment to mobilize the membership, explicitly rejecting business unionism. In Milwaukee, long-time education activist Bob Peterson, a founder of the magazine *Rethinking Schools,* now heads Milwaukee's teachers union. Radical teachers who previously shunned the union now understand that they need it to protect teachers' economic rights, and like Peterson, see the union capable of fighting on a "tripod" of concerns: "bread and butter unionism… professional unionism… and social justice unionism." Peterson points to the need for truly mutual alliances, building strong relations with parents and community groups "not just to ensure adequate support for public education, but so that we as a union are also involved in improving the community." [8]

Though "Rethinking Schools" and others use the term "social justice" union, I think the idea of a "social movement" union is more useful because it addresses the need for transformation of the unions internally, especially the need for union democracy. Union democracy is a thorny issue for radicals, especially those who assume leadership of moribund organizations. "Social justice" unionism addresses the positions the union takes on various political, social, and economic issues. One temptation for radicals who take office without a mobilized base to support them is that union democracy becomes a hindrance to the union acting on a "social justice" program. On the other hand, "social movement" unionism gets at the need for empowering members, building the union from the bottom-up, making the union itself a social movement. A social movement union not only endorses social justice demands in education and the society, working with social movements to further these aims, it also exists as a social movement itself, pressing as much as it can against the constraints of its being a membership organization — with the responsibility to protect its members.

The CTU is probably the most important testing ground for social movement unionism. The union is now led by activists from CORE (Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators).[9] Using new-fangled social media and old-fashioned face-to-face meetings and organizing, CORE defeated the older guard leadership loyal to the national AFT office. With scarcely a second to catch their breath, CTU's new leaders were confronted with ferocious attacks by the state and city on the contract and teachers' pensions. In gaining their political footing, the inexperienced leadership made mistakes that were both natural and damaging, for instance, trusting that state union officials would be more expert about policy decisions and allowing the local president to participate in meetings with high-ranking state officials by herself. The CTU leadership faces a stunning phalanx of opponents, ranging from Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, who flaunts the prestige and support he has in the White House and from powerful "friends of labor" in the Democratic Party, to Republican and Democratic state politicians, eager to destroy all public employees unions, mostly especially those representing city teachers. CTU leaders must simultaneously take from the state and national union resources that are needed while simultaneously doing all that is necessary to oust these officials who impede the movement's objectives. In my opinion, CORE activists are an inspiration, heroic and wise.

Like teachers in other cities, Los Angeles teachers face a viciously anti-teachers union mayor. But what differentiates LA's Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is that he parlayed his position as a staffer for the teachers union, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), and his close relationship with two

of UTLA's highest ranking officers — well-known leftists — to become a labor bigwig and then mayor. UTLA was the first teachers union in a major U.S. city in which a reform caucus succeeded in sweeping the old guard out of office. However, only a small fraction of the membership voted in the election (and in the most recent election as well). The reformers have been in the unenviable position of responding to horrific attacks while also managing the union's bureaucratic operations, without being able to count on much support from the membership. Unfortunately, the reformers, who took office in a coalition that did not permit accountability among the factions, maintained many of the bureaucratic practices of the previous administration. The leadership's disastrous decision to support mayoral control — because their buddy was the Mayor — was a function of an emphasis on playing power politics rather than addressing the union's bureaucratic functioning. In the most recent elections, a long-time activist running as an independent but aligning himself with a more conservative caucus won the presidency. At the same time, a progressive caucus, PEAC, took a majority of seats on the union's board of directors. What needs to be done now — and quickly — is for leaders and activists to focus financial and human resources on reviving the union at the school site. Probably one-third of the schools, campuses as they're called, lack functioning chapters. This admittedly painstaking work of educating members that they "own" the union, to help them in organizing themselves, is inescapable. One bright spot from the reformers' victory is that UTLA's Human Rights Committee has embraced international work with Canadian and Mexican teachers unions, under the umbrella of the Trinational Coalition to Defend Public Education.[10]

Of all the teachers unions in major cities, it appears at first glance that New York's union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), has done the best job in protecting teachers and public schools. Many of the worst abuses teachers have suffered elsewhere have been forestalled by the union's political clout in Albany. Charter schools have not mushroomed as fast as they have elsewhere, for instance California. Schools being closed due to low test scores are not being auctioned off to the highest bidder, as is occurring in Los Angeles. But appearances are deceiving because while the UFT has indeed been able to protect many of the vestiges of the old system by calling in its political chips, it has done so at the expense of alienating its natural allies, insulating the bureaucracy and allowing the union to all but disappear at the school, and seriously erode at the district level, where union staff may decline to provide chapter chairs with the most minimal forms of support, like meeting with principals about grievances. One estimate I've heard from a loyalist to the current leadership puts the number of schools with no functioning union chapters at far more than one-third, probably closer to three-fifths. Many teachers are too frightened to attend union meetings or even meet privately with union staff at the school site. What they may consent to do, when pressed, is to put union materials in teachers' mailboxes, but they will do so only in secret. One fine young teacher in a selective Manhattan high school touted to be "progressive" and favored by leftish parents was given "unsatisfactory" ratings by the principal for "harassing" colleagues. He put a notice in their mailboxes informing them of a get-together to discuss the school's admission policies. The chapter chair refused to help because she wanted to stay in the principal's good graces, and union staff were unwilling to be involved. Their job as they see it is to file grievances that they are sure will succeed. The UFT clearly lacks the capacity — and will — to defend its members and the schools. Some activists theorize that the union is morphing, perhaps through conscious intent, from a "service model" of unionism into a membership organization that wears the mantle of union but in fact is a provider of consumer services, like low cost auto insurance.

Still, the UFT bosses have not yet seen a serious challenge. In the last change of rule, the crown was passed to Michael Mulgrew, who actually taught in the city schools, unlike Randi Weingarten, a lawyer who served as UFT President and is currently AFT national President. Mulgrew's face is new, but the apparatus remains impenetrably bureaucratic and the union's politics are essentially as they were under Shanker. There is little sense from the way the union leadership presents itself or acts that teacher unionism has experienced an assault that challenges its existence. The union

newspaper's coverage of school struggles — or rather lack of it — shows how little engaged the UFT is in protecting the contract, schools or teachers, as well as how remote it is from community-based groups fighting on social justice. In the October 27, 2001 issue of the union newspaper, Michael Mulgrew's picture appeared 9 times in the first 11 pages. An article applauded the success of Junior ROTC at one of the city's many racially segregated city high schools. No mention was made of the anti-militarization campaigns that are occurring elsewhere in the nation, for instance in Los Angeles, with UTLA's support. Another story informed teachers about their rights — in handling disruptive students. No mention was made of advocacy groups' work about racial discrimination in school disciplinary policies, of activists working to alter school organization and culture so that "disruptive" students are less so. Stories on charter school organizing painted a glowing picture — another victory! There was one nod to the fact that Occupy Wall Street was a few blocks away from union headquarters, a story (with a picture of Michael Mulgrew) described the union's participation in a coalition demanding no tax breaks for millionaires. But mostly the newspaper contained sentimental snapshots of teachers doing charity work. In light of the real conditions in the school system, including thousands of teachers who are paid (for now) but jobless, draconian cuts in funding felt in loss of money for supplies and class sizes that often exceed the contractual norms (not enforced), and the absence of union chapters in at least one-third of the schools, the paper's contents are almost surreal. Clearly, this is a union leadership that doesn't understand that publicity about teachers walking in support of breast cancer awareness will not suffice to defend their schools, their jobs, or their right to have a real union represent them.

The UFT's one victory in recent memory was organizing family day care workers, that is, making them union members. The UFT, in alliance with ACORN, used its political muscle to win the right to have family day care workers have union representation and have their dues deducted from their wages, which are paid by the state. An election for the bargaining agent occurred, a small fraction of the workers in the unit voted, and the UFT won the vote. While this seems to be a win-win, strengthening the union and giving exploited workers union representation, in fact the "top-down" process fails to build the resiliency union members will need to win or defend gains. Often what occurs in this kind of organizing is that shortly after the election for representation, the new members are forgotten. In this familiar scenario not limited to the UFT, union officials use the new members to strengthen their bureaucratic hold on the union apparatus. Union membership gives workers access to some protections, much needed and deserved to be sure; but especially when members are not in the majority constituency (teachers in the case of the UFT), they are trapped in a union that does little to represent them. The case of the family daycare workers is especially poignant because the UFT/ACORN alliance muscled out what had been the authentic community-based organizing of family daycare workers, by a Brooklyn group, Families United for Racial and Economic Equality.[11]

One bright spot in the New York City teachers union's political horizon is Teachers Unite, which is trying to bring activists on social justice in schooling together with teachers who want to see the UFT transformed.[12] Teachers Unite is small but growing. One of its most successful activities has been providing workshops on building the union at the school site, taught by teachers who are themselves chapter leaders. Teachers Unite's activity demonstrates what could be done to build the union if the UFT bureaucracy really wanted to do so. Teachers from other activist groups, including Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), which produced a splendid video countering the misinformation in *Waiting for Superman*, are collaborating with Teachers Unite on social justice campaigns in the city schools, including helping to organize against school closings.[13] Another hopeful development is that Teachers Unite is part of a still-emerging national network of reform groups.

Occupy the Unions!

IF TEACHERS UNIONS ARE TO CONTINUE to exist as a meaningful form of workers' representation, members need to transform them — and fast. The future of the movement depends on activists realizing that they, not staff or officers on the state and national levels, have to be the catalysts for change. Just as there is no escape from building the union at the base, there is no getting around the hard work of developing authentic alliances with parents and community activists, coalitions that acknowledge historic inequalities and support communities in their needs, rather than being paper organizations that are dusted off when the union wants to display community support. Elected officials, from school boards to governors, are violating union contracts with impunity. Lawsuits, by themselves, the favored method of dealing with law-breaking officials, can't stop this. What can is direct action undertaken with parents and community, as the CTU has done in combating school closings in Chicago.

In contrast, the AFT and NEA national leadership pursue a strategy of cozying up to their "friends" in the Democratic Party, including President Obama. This undercuts the brave activity of many teachers battling in their schools against the policies Obama and Duncan are pushing. For instance, both national unions have accepted use of standardized tests to judge student performance and teachers' pay, in order, they say, to stay "credible." But "credible" to whom? Certainly not teachers who risk their livelihoods by speaking out against the harm done by education having been reduced to teaching to/for the test. The president of the AFT chapter in his charter school shared with me his outrage and dismay at what occurred when he called the state union for help in dealing with the principal's demand for pay increases linked to student test scores. He was told the changes the principal demanded were official AFT policy.

In July 2011, the NEA officially endorsed Obama for President. The AFT will undoubtedly follow suit, once organized labor decides the time is right to make this commitment. Although the AFT and NEA nationally are in the Democrats' hip pocket, a different scenario might occur in local school board elections. Teachers unions are beginning to run candidates for school boards. Often local unions support candidates with the same "lesser evil" rationale the national and state unions use in endorsing Democrats. But in some places, this strategy is being challenged. Instead of electing someone, anyone, who is marginally better, teachers unions are thinking of how they might use the races as an opportunity to build support from the ground up. Campaigns for school board elections can be testing grounds for building new electoral alliances, alliances that are wholly independent of both parties, speak truth to corporate power, and advance a vision of public education that supports collaboration among schooling's constituencies. As Occupy Wall Street has demonstrated, the country is hungry for leaders who will speak out against capitalism's excesses. Neither the NEA nor AFT can provide that leadership, nor be partners in a movement that challenges Wall Street, as long as its top officials want the unions to be included as collaborators in maintaining U.S. capitalism's domination of U.S. society and the globe.

As labor researchers Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock explain, though the AFT supports its far-flung global operations with "high-minded rhetoric of global labor solidarity, philanthropic goodwill, and democracy promotion," the union wants most of all to further U.S. hegemony. The AFT's international operations are vast, ranging from "Bolivia to Burma and Kenya to Kazakhstan."[14] Ironically, the AFT aims to educate teacher unionists elsewhere in the world to desert the traditions of social movement unionism that we in the United States should be learning — and imitating — here at home. Given claims by some progressives that the AFT changed with the end of the Cold War and Shanker's death, it's important to note Sukarieh and Tannock contend that the AFT "continues with its cold war legacy largely uninterrupted. Its current director of international affairs, David Dorn, was also director during the Shanker era. Rather than question, apologize for, or distance itself from any of its past international work, the AFT celebrates and explicitly claims to be continuing with this exact same line of activity…The AFT continues to expand

its international programs.. from its 1990s base in Eastern Europe to the current focus on the Middle East." (p. 186).

AFT and NEA rely on their size, wealth, and connections with the U.S. government to dominate politics of the Education International (EI), the global federation of teachers unions. There used to be significant foreign policy differences between the NEA and AFT, with the NEA being more liberal. However, those distinctions, even ephemeral, seem to have been lost. Both joined in squashing democracy at the EI conference in Capetown this past summer, where they used their control of the EI's administrative apparatus to push through a palatable (to them) resolution on Palestine and Israel. According to a conference participant with whom I spoke, AFT and NEA shocked Western European delegates with their brazen (and successful) effort to control debate and force an outcome that was more in line with U.S. foreign policy.

Three different resolutions on Palestine and Israel were presented to the conference. One came from the EI board, another from the UK higher education union, Universities and Colleges Union, and the third from the National Union of Teachers (NUT). Operating much as the AFT leadership does at its own conventions, the AFT and NEA maneuvered to suppress the NUT resolution, which was a forthright condemnation of Israel's actions towards Palestine. They first tried to persuade the presiding NUT officer to withdraw the resolution. This effort at intimidation failed, so they warned NUT delegates that should they persist in presenting their resolution, the AFT delegation would bolt from the conference. An NEA staffer being groomed for leadership in the EI's administrative office handled negotiations on behalf of the AFT and NEA, and ultimately, a "compromise" resolution was approved, one that dropped sharp criticism of Israeli policy. Delegates from the Middle East were enraged at the resolution and by their having been silenced in the debate.

With all of the political struggles going on in the world, with the concerted attacks against teachers unions, why did the AFT and NEA make the NUT's resolution on Palestine the main focus of their political intervention at the EI? Why would the leadership of NEA and AFT jeopardize their political legitimacy by flaunting their control over the EI's administrative apparatus? The answer is in the lopsided nature of the AFT and NEA's political compass, permanently stuck in the direction of the U.S. government's desires. Nothing counts as much for the NEA and AFT leadership as the prerogatives of U.S. capitalism and the government that protects it. Their political loyalties to U.S. imperialism are seen in almost every political decision. For example, the NEA and AFT ban membership by the Chinese and Cuban unions in the EI because they are not free of government control. Fair enough, but why then permit participation of the Egyptian union — entirely controlled by the Mubarak dictatorship — until the union fell in arrears on its dues, shortly before Mubarak was overthrown? Teacher union leaders from the global south object to the contradiction between EI's professed support for free trade unions throughout the world and its, that is, the NEA and AFT's, one-sided application of criteria that coincide with the desires of the U.S. government. Under life-and-death pressure from their own governments and fearful of further attacks by international agencies that answer to Washington, teacher unionists in Asia and Africa are understandably reluctant to challenge the AFT and NEA. Given this imbalance of power between unions in the global south and the AFT and NEA, the Western European unions have a special responsibility to fight for democracy in the EI and for consistent application of the ruler measuring whether unions are indeed "free" of government control.

When Naomi Klein spoke at Occupy Wall Street she noted that the rest of the world had been waiting for this challenge at capitalism's heart. The same is true of U.S. teacher unionism's renaissance. Teachers and students around the globe need teachers in this country to occupy their unions. At this writing, the eyes of the world are on the courageous activists who are facing down the world's most powerful elite in downtown Manhattan. Our eyes should also be on the heroic activity of teachers moving to occupy their unions. The future of public education globally depends

in great measure on them.

Footnotes

1. Neoliberalism, Teacher Unionism, and the Future of Public Education

2. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1298568319076/makingschoolswork.pdf

3. Matt Damon, Diane Ravitch, and scapegoating teachers

4. www.teachersolidarity.com is probably the best source of information about teacher union resistance globally.

5. Rousmaniere, K. (2001), "White silence: A racial biography of Margaret Haley," *Equity and excellence in education*, *34*(2), 7-15.

6. What's right – and wrong – in Diane Ravitch's new take on school reform

7. Tell Scholastic: Stop Selling Kids on Coal

8. It’s Time to Re-imagine and Reinvent the MTEA

9. www.coreteachers.com

10. www.trinational-usa.org

11. http://findarticles.com/p/news-articles/new-york-amsterdam-news/mi_8153/is_20050804/organize-york-family-care-providers/ai_n50545408/

12. www.teachersunite.net

13. Inconvenient Truth screening @NYU Oct 27th

14. *Labor Studies Journal,* June 2010.