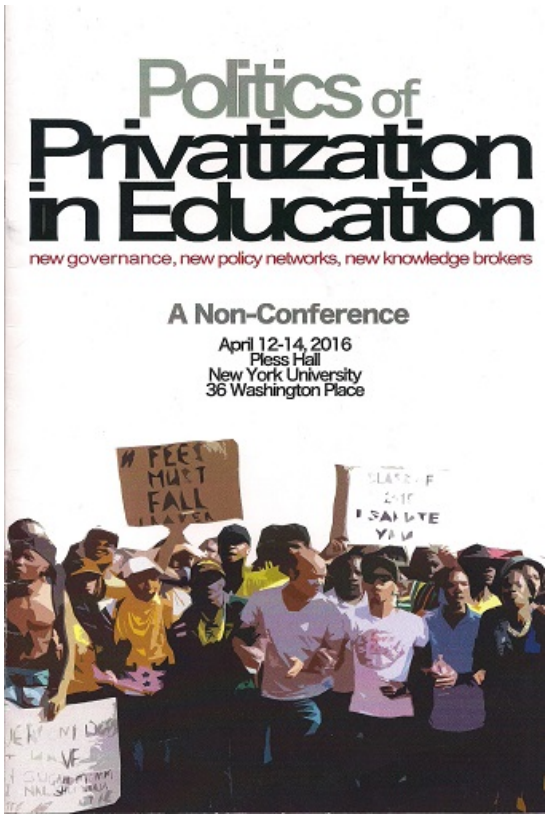
A May Day Message to Teachers – On the Front Lines of a War on Public Education

written by Lois Weiner | May 1, 2016



(*These are my remarks at an evening panel of what its organizers referred to as a "non-conference" so as to convey the need for participants to interact with one another's ideas, rather than present papers. Sessions spanned two full days. The two evening sessions were videotaped. When they are made available I will post them on New Politics*.)

First, thanks to NYU professors Gary Anderson and Carol Anne Spreen for their thoughtful, critical work in assembling the people at this "non-conference" on privatization of education globally. They have contributed to our understanding by creating space for us to learn from and with one another and by including discussion of teacher unionism, so often ignored by educational researchers.

Thanks also to NYU/Steinhardt for sponsoring the event. The university and college involvement shows that despite what has been lost in the push for universities to corporatize, scholars can still leverage resources and privileges of our positions to advance social justice in education.

A commendation goes to Education International (EI), the international confederation of teachers unions, for its co-sponsorship, and to Randi Weingarten, President of the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and Lily Eskelsen Garcia, President of the NEA (National Education Association) for being respondents in the panel. Their involvement invests what we do here with a special significance because of unions' situation in the society, unions' access to power that emerges from their being mass membership organizations that represent and can call on the resources of

millions of teachers and education workers, internationally. The power and the potential unions have to be the backbone of mass mobilizations against privatizations explain the viciousness of the attacks on teachers unions in the corporate media and political forces pushing to "marketize" schools and de-professionalize teaching.

My current research is with and about teacher activists who are building social movement unions, primarily by creating reform caucuses within the existing union structure. The caucuses are the embryos of a new kind of teacher unionism committed to social justice; mobilization of union members with community allies as respectful partners; and thorough-going union democracy, beginning at the school level. Collaborations between social justice activists, academics, and teachers unions are extraordinarily important today. When we say teachers are on the "front lines" we imply they are at war. In my remarks I will try to clarify what the forces are in this war and what is at stake, posing three challenges for us.

While privatization is an aspect of the neoliberal project in education as many speakers have noted, in fact education is being transformed by policies that cannot be separated from a more fundamental drive: to make all human activity, including intellectual and artistic work, subject to what is called the discipline of the market, but is, in fact, the control of powerful elites who manage capitalism and are using the state to extract profit from what is viewed as an untapped source. Educational researchers in the UK have recently noted that the notion of "dispossession" better captures what occurs in the policies associated with "austerity." "Dispossession" gets at the transfer of wealth and power that is at the heart of capitalism's shift in operations in this stage we call neoliberalism.

My first challenge to teachers unions is to name privatization of education as a function of capitalism's ethos of putting profit over people and to use union resources to oppose this distorted value system. We limit the explanatory power of our campaigns against privatization if we do not say explicitly that public resources belong to the public and must be allowed to remain so. There is no room for profit in the public sector. We need to stand unequivocally against educational policies that give business access to services provided in public education, whether it is teacher evaluation, professional development, or school management. Moreover, the public sector has to be overseen through democratic means. Operationally this means protecting or creating elected local school authorities. It means insisting that capitalist elites and the politicians in their thrall do not have the right to dictate terms of educational policy to communities or nations as an ostensible quid pro quo for loans and financial assistance.

The systemic dispossession of the global south and poor communities of color within the global north is a transfer of resources from vulnerable, impoverished people to corporations and the wealthy few. Like the original colonial project, the current economic dispossession destroys cultures and is racist.

My second challenge is to understand the different roles of academics, social justice activists, and unions in encouraging understanding – and resistance to – this global project of capitalism. The challenge for teachers unions is especially complex and difficult as they must represent all members fairly and well. Unlike advocacy groups organized on the basis of shared principles, unions are mass membership organizations. If they are the exclusive bargaining agent they include members with highly divergent, contradictory political beliefs and values. Mass membership makes building consensus more difficult, but union democracy, starting at the school site, supports the process. We should expect that key policy decisions, like whom the union endorses for President of the United States in party primaries, are taken to members, providing an opportunity for political education and reinforcing members' understanding that they – not officers or staff – "own" the union.

Not everyone on the front lines of this attack on public education, teachers, and their unions sees this war as we have configured it in our discussions. Social class, race, gender, religion all influence how teachers view this war. As we see in the excellent website Mary Compton hosts, www.teachersolidarity.com, the assault is global as is the resistance. Teachers who must strike to be paid wages owed them for months; teachers who are assaulted, kidnapped and jailed for exercising the rights as citizens and workers often see how privatization relates to the degradation of their work and their society's resources. In the global north teachers are experiencing assault but in less violent ways. While the assault is global, it is not experienced in the same ways.

Feeling disempowered and alienated from vehicles for resistance, some teachers identify students and parents as their adversaries. This occurs especially in schools that are under-resourced and repressive, where students and parents lack formal education and are members of communities that have been historically oppressed. Teachers are human and are not immune to toxic social prejudices and bigotry. As we see all over the world, those who are economically oppressed often turn against those who are equally or more oppressed. Rage obscures the more distant political and economic forces that create and maintain economic dislocation.

Unions must respond to members' wishes but often in so doing they ignore the powerful educative potential of vibrant union democracy and mobilization. Hence unions at all levels, local, national and international adopt policies that assume the irreversibility of members' current beliefs. In so doing they paint themselves into a corner of adopting what seem "pragmatic" policies: accepting pay for performance; standardized testing; buying into the validity of PISA testing regime; collaborating with the OECD and the World Bank; accepting donations from our foes for purposes that seem to favor our interests. In reality these seemingly "practical" policies undercut possibilities of successful resistance by alienating our potential allies and demoralizing the most politically conscious union members.

What is a truly "practical" union approach to deal with extraordinarily powerful opponents who aim to destroy all that we stand for and must protect? A seasoned leader of the NUT (National Union of Teachers) explained to me how he understands what unions must do to defend teachers and public education:

> *Seeking to engage with governments and employers but ON TERMS YOU DEFINE with a movement you have built behind you that requires them to engage is the only way in a functioning civil society that unions can bring about change. We try in our own small way in the NUT with campaigning platforms like Stand Up For Education and Exam Factories to create the context for encouraging members to act and parents to support us. Their expectation is that this will eventually lead to talks that give us what we want. The fact that we get talks sometimes and are offered little or nothing is to be expected.*
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> He warns that the success of this strategy is not guaranteed:
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> *It is a measure of the quality of leadership and the upward pressure from membership whether we get drawn into legitimising things we are opposed to, or whether we "expose" the duplicity of those we deal with in how we report what is taking place, and try to use this to press on with the campaign.*

The dialectic he describes is between union democracy (upward pressure of members) and leadership – its courage and vision. I would broaden the scope of struggle, adding to this dynamic an understanding that communities and parents must be supported in their own campaigns about social justice that do not directly involve schools. Support and respect must be mutual if we expect public support for teachers on the front lines.

My third challenge is to invite frank dialogue between critical researchers, activists, and union officers about resistance to neoliberalism's global project. This discussion is difficult to organize and sustain, in part due to scarce resources but also due to the insularity of our institutions. Another impediment is the understandable defensiveness of unions, attacked viciously by so many opponents. Still, hearing the critiques of friends, whether activists or academics, who show their support in struggles, is essential for us all. The critique must be accompanied by support. The support must be accompanied by critique.

We face enormously dangerous, powerful opponents in this war. They aim to destroy public education and with it democracy. They want to control what children learn and how they are taught, so as to produce workers and citizens who will fit into a world order that refracts human need through the lens of profitability. Teachers on the front lines need transformed unions. They also need support of academics and social justice activists, to develop a critical understanding of this war, of their real enemies and allies, of successful tactics, and an inclusive vision of education that maximizes human potential, not profits.

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