

Militancy, social justice, and democracy: Teachers unions need them all

It's hard for people who have never been on strike to understand how transformative the experience can be, especially if the job is one's life work. All of sudden, power relations are reversed. Workers are calling the shots about what they will and will not do. Life in school is so routinized that anything new can cause shock waves, and a strike by teachers is a tsunami. Students experience, first-hand, what it's like when people stand up for their rights and beliefs, defying authority. What a lesson!

Shortly before teachers in the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), the NEA affiliate in Portland, Oregon narrowly averted a strike, a reader sent me a letter he received from a Portland teacher describing the response of middle school students in his school. I am sharing it with the author's permission. It shows the powerful effect of the strike preparations and why powerful elites so fear teachers unions.

The Portland union fashioned its strategy on the one Chicago's teachers used. The union leadership used the contract to defend aspects of teachers' work that directly affect learning rather than focusing on salary. They reached out to parents and used social media. The union leadership expended enormous energy to mobilize members, involving them in the contract fight. From what I've read the union leadership generated tremendous solidarity and passion among PAT members.

More and more teachers unions are adopting these strategies. It's an important shift. At the same time, a key

element in Chicago's success has been democratization of the union structures and reinforcement of democratic norms. Was the same true in Portland? That's a question not discussed in coverage I've read on the Left and the absence of attention to union democracy is problematic.

One question we should always ask is how the demands were decided and how the bargaining team was formed? Was the team elected by the membership? How was it made representative of member opinion? The contract campaign is an opportunity to deepen the membership's participation in decision-making. Did that happen in Portland as it did in Chicago, which had an elected bargaining team of dozens of people and spent months gathering, refining, and voting on contract demands?

Another question we should ask is how discussion and ratification of a proposed settlement occurs. Is the discussion organized so that union officers "sell" the proposed settlement to members – or does the process encourage members to raise questions, concerns, and problems? It will be members who have to defend the contract, so having their involvement in developing specifics of the final agreement is essential to what occurs after ratification. In Chicago, in the midst of a strike, the negotiating team brought the proposed agreement to the union's representative assembly, which refused to endorse it before taking it back to members for a closer look. I think that has to be the bar to which we hold unions.

As is demonstrated by SEIU's shocking suit against individual dissidents who formed an independent union (NUHW) when threatened by a takeover, unions must have protocols and policies that support member power. Not just voice – power. A social justice program combined with member mobilization isn't enough. We need the synergy of ideas and leadership from above and leadership and power from below. Democratic norms and procedures make that happen.

Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics. Or write me at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Now out – "Class Action" – with much to read that can help grow "Chicago" elsewhere. Ideas – not a blueprint...