“But my union president won’t let me…”

written by Lois Weiner | December 2, 2014

I’ve been hearing from teacher union activists they feel stymied because their union president won’t let them carry out a project. It’s good that activists are trying to make their unions stand up for kids and I hope they keep at it. At the same time the comment reveals the sense of powerlessness that comes from being stuck in the traditional “business union” model. In this way of viewing the union, the union president is thought to know best. S/he’s considered maybe unwittingly like your boss (or parent). But this way of regarding union officers reverses what is the rightful power relationship. After all, members’ dues, your money, pays officer salaries and members’ votes put them in office. The deepest, strongest power comes from the members, who “own” the union.

If you’re feeling the union president “won’t let you” act, the first question to ask is whether a decision is rightfully the union president’s or whether it’s supposed to be made by an executive committee or the membership. While there are exceptions, New York City for example, it’s likely that you have a not too bad local constitution, as far as union constitutions go. Election procedures are generally explicit. Your local probably has bylaws. The union structure is probably representative, on paper. But few members have actually read the union constitution or bylaws, and official regulations and policies are often ignored because members have not organized to defend their rights. Yes, it’s often the case that people who’ve been elected are tired, authoritarian, lack imagination. It’s also probably true that members are passive and uninvolved and that elected officers feel everything is left for them to do. What elected officials often don’t see is that in exercising power unilaterally, they block possibilities for others to be more active.

Here’s how to get out of that space when you’re feeling frustrated that the union president is thwarting your vision and ideas. Put the situation in a way that gives you (and other members) power: You’ve not yet figured out how to win other members to your point of view and/or use the union’s mechanisms for representation to make your voices heard. Solution: Study the union constitution and bylaws. Insist they be made available. Then get together with a few people who share your thinking. (Consider organizing a caucus for support.) And let the union president know who’s boss – the members. Need more advice? I have so much to say I could write a book. And have: *The Future of Our Schools*, on sale now at Haymarket Press for 40% off until January 12.

In considering your end of year donations, I hope you'll put Teachers Unite on your short list. It does great work supporting NYC teachers and students to get rid of prejudicial, punitive disciplinary policies that force kids of color out of schools, into the prison pipeline. (I donate royalties from "The future of our schools" to TU.)

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