

Notes on teacher unionism in the UK - same struggle as here

April 6, 2013

Preamble: Last weekend I spoke at the annual conference of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in Liverpool, the UK's largest teachers union. Largest in Europe too, I think. (NUT - correct me if I'm wrong, please.) I was invited to address the Campaign for a Democratic and Fighting Union, what we in the US would call a reform caucus. The CDFU has won some of the seats in the NUT's leadership but not all. In this respect it looks to me like the CDFU is in pretty much the same position as reformers in the Los Angeles teachers union. One significant difference is that the NUT has a history of mobilizations in recent years, including a glorious boycott of their version of standardized tests. Another is that labor unions in the UK have a far higher density than they do in the US, and it may still be possible to talk about there being a "labor movement" there, which I don't think exists in the US. Still, the neoliberal project in education, begun under Thatcher, has scored breathtaking victories, including privatization of governmental oversight of schools and teachers. And now the government aims to do away with the national pay scale for teachers, increase pension contributions, and delay retirement. Sounds very familiar, right? In my remarks to the CDFU, unfortunately not videotaped, I push activists to change their mindset, going on the offensive. I was asked to discuss lessons from the Chicago teachers' strike. Here's the text of my speech, with relevant links inserted. Tonight I'm going to lay out thoughts about what has occurred in the struggle over Chicago schools and implications for the NUT generally and the upcoming mobilizations in particular. I'll be drawing on my new book, "The future of our schools." Obviously in 10 minutes I cannot summarize everything in the book, so I urge you to read it. The book is short and accessible. I have written it for busy teachers. First, let us establish the context for our discussion. Globally we are in a life-and-death struggle for education and our profession. Our opponents aim to destroy our livelihood and the ideas that brought us into the profession. Their goals, which they mask in rhetoric about "Making Schools Work," are to make public education a "free market" open to entrepreneurs; create a revolving door of minimally-trained teachers; reduce the curriculum to basic math and literacy content that workers will need to compete for low-paid jobs; control teachers and students with standardized testing; and weaken public oversight by breaking up school systems and replacing them with privately operated schools. The biggest impediment to their carrying out their plan is teachers unions. Our enemies understand the potential of unions, better than do many teachers, and it is for this reason that the unions have been the target of such a well-orchestrated global campaign to cast teachers, like other public employees, as selfish shirkers and lazy incompetents, blocking educational improvements that will benefit poor children. Teachers unions are dangerous because we put forward ideals of collective voice and action that contradict the neoliberal valorization of individual effort and competition. Moreover, unions plant the seed of democracy in the school. For research explaining and supporting these ideas I refer you to the book Mary Compton and I co-edited, "The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions: Stories for resistance." Neoliberalism has won a significant ideological victory that we must foreground in developing successful resistance, in putting our opponents in a defensive position. We need to listen to students, parent and community groups and really learn from and with one another, in common struggle. In doing this, we push back on a reality that our enemies exploit, though it is of their making: Working and poor people often make less money and have a more precarious economic existence than do teachers. Enfraging though it is, we have to recognize that the rich and powerful who control media and government have persuaded many parents that there is nothing that can be done to increase funding for schools, to pay for pensions and salaries that are better than what parents have. Complicating this challenge is the

racial, class, and language divide that often occurs between teachers and working class and poor parents and their communities. We have much to learn from the victory of CORE, (Caucus of Rank and File Educators), the reformers who won the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). At the same time, Chicago's history as a city and school system make many factors in the union's development singular. This may seem self-evident, but I have found that many teacher union activists want to be told what to do, based on CORE's success. We need to remember that there is no template.

Chicago had a significant history of parent and community organization that preceded CORE's victory. While CORE has developed and strengthened alliances with poor and working parents of color, parents' self-organization preceded CORE's election to union office. Community and parent groups in Chicago had organized on school closings, and CORE benefited from this legacy. CORE's commitment to social justice helped the union to win over many radical teachers not previously active in the union but here too, CORE drew on the existing resource of Teachers for Social Justice, a group of young, radical teachers committed to social justice in education. CORE was also assisted by the work of activist/scholars, especially Pauline Lipman.

Though they may not have seen their work through the lens I use to explain it, social movement teacher unionism, they were, in fact, developing a social movement of teachers, with the union providing the filament that kept the fabric whole. How might we apply this to the NUT? Based on what I have heard in debates during Conference, I think you have laid much of the ground work to be a social movement teachers union. What's needed now is to make that shift conscious, using it to guide every element of union life. Your message in every campaign must educate members and persuade parents and community that you - not the politicians and bankers - are the real defenders of children. Consider how you discuss the elimination of the national pay scale. Certainly this reform harms teachers and the profession. But the political meaning of eliminating the national pay scale must be your message. This reform is intended to make schools more unequal, to give some students access to a professional teaching force while subjecting others, the vast majority, likely those who are most needing of high-quality instruction, to a revolving door of low paid instructors. THIS is the key message to take to the public in your campaign about eliminating the national pay scale. Embed the need to protect teaching as a profession in that larger political story. Take back the ideological terrain and the narrative that has been stolen. It is we who are the defenders of children from poor and working families, of all children, not the politicians, corporate profiteers, and bankers. Likewise with pensions. Strike action, no matter how militant, will be undercut if the pension issue is not linked to a demand for the bankers to pay their fair share for education. The precise demand I leave to those with more knowledge of the particulars. I think you get my point. This is a war for people's minds. There are many more parents than there are teachers - and it is them to whom we direct our slogans. If you want to fight and win on OFSTED [note: the body doing inspections of schools], as I agree you must, cast this in ways that addresses parents' fears about school quality. Again, you know the particulars better than I do, but since OFSTED has been privatized, I'd like a campaign that says "Don't let the profiteers control your children's school."

I'll close with one suggestion. The Chicago Teachers Union produced a remarkable document, "The schools Chicago students deserve." This is their vision for educational change. They name educational apartheid and describe how students have been harmed by the reforms put in place to make schools work. The union exposes tax breaks given to banks and corporations and demands that this money be used to fund programs needed for students' well-being, from smaller classes to libraries, the arts, and support services. It exposes the racism in the system's unequal allocation of resources to schools. One has to read well into the booklet before seeing any mention of teachers' economic demands. These important bread-and-butter demands are configured as one key support for quality schools, but not the only one, and not the first. This was the message the union took to members, parents and community. Their strike was for public education. Because of the coalition-building the union had done over many months, the news media could not persuade Chicago parents or community that the strike was waged by selfish teachers out to line their pockets at the expense of students. Before the vote to strike, members had been tested in mobilizations; teachers

felt empowered; and parents and community trusted that the union was, indeed, at their side, defending them and their children. Chicago teachers have altered the political terrain. Whether they are able to sustain this ground depends in good part on whether teachers in the rest of the US - and the world - yes, the NUT - follow their lead in being social movements that defend public education. As in the US, mass public education in the UK was won by militant struggles of trade unionists. They succeeded because the unions were part of a social movement that projected a vision of a different kind of society, one that was more equal, just, humane, free. That broader movement does not exist today, and it is our job to be part of creating it. We start by making our own union a social movement that works as allies with parents, community, and other unions - when they will work with us. So let's talk now about the UK and the NUT. Thanks for inviting me and please consider me a resource. Post conference advice: NUT officers should learn from CORE's policy of lowering officer salaries so that CTU officers and staff earn no more than Chicago teachers. That's how to answer the hypocrisy of the Telegraph, which defends billions to profiteers while focusing on teacher union officers' pay. Still we can't give them an opening like this...