

Philly teachers - the kind of troublemakers who built teachers unions

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I have a long-time friend who recalls how, as a young teacher, she came to her Brooklyn school on November 7, 1960 to walk the picket line. She was terrified at breaking the law and was only one of a very few teachers in her school to strike. Fearful but also committed, she held hands with a gal pal for mutual support. Only 5,600 New York City teachers out of 45,000 walked the picket line. My friend loved teaching and felt that conditions in the school

would improve if teachers had a union that spoke for the profession. This minority action led to formation of what is now the largest teachers union local in the world, the United Federation of Teachers.

The story of modern teacher unionism's creation is of a relatively small number of courageous individuals who banded together, defying the existing social norms, taking direct action - at personal risk. They were dismissed by leaders of mainstream teacher organizations as zealots who endangered all teachers by acting with no one's authority but their own.

We again see courageous teachers taking action in small groups, with parent support, to defend their professional ideals, publicizing and boycotting standardized tests that are especially brutal for kids who have no chance of doing well for reasons beyond the control of any child, school, or teacher. Two especially vulnerable groups are children with special needs who don't have the capacity to master work being tested and English Language Learners (ELLs), who have recently arrived in the US speaking a different language.

However most teachers unions are straining to make nice with the testing regime, to maintain "a seat at the table," as AFT President Weingarten likes to describe the compliant role the union plays. We see important exceptions, with the Chicago Teachers Union once again being a model of how a union can navigate legal constraints and still support members who are standing up with parents to oppose the testing. When teachers and parents in dozens of schools defied the school board and boycotted a test (that was not going to "count" no less), the CTU announced support and geared up to defend its members. The movement to "opt out" of testing has been largely driven by white middle class parents and teachers, but as CTU President Karen Lewis masterfully explains, standardized testing has its roots in the eugenics movement. CTU's stance on standardized testing, the superb materials it distributes to members, the media and parents, and now, its defense of teachers who refuse to be frightened into doing what they know is wrong for their students - all show what can happen when we have teachers unions that are democratic and militant.

In contrast to the CTU's public, energetic support of boycotting teachers, the Philadelphia Teachers Federation (PFT) has been slow to rally to the defense of teachers at the Feltonville School who informed parents about the tests and then faced disciplinary action from the school

board. In a recent blog Diane Ravitch helped the teachers by publicizing their struggle but didn't mention the PFT's role. Parent activists expressed their support for the teachers days before the union made a public statement. Though the leadership clique that has long controlled the PFT has not provided a public explanation of its delay in expressing support of the teachers' right to inform parents, loyalists of the union brass were not shy in emails they sent to teachers in their schools about branding Feltonville teachers as disruptors who should have respected the right of the union (honchos) to dictate when and how to resist - or not. Leading Feltonville activist teachers are members of the reform Caucus of Working Educators (CWE), which has mounted a petition campaign and mobilized to win broader support of the Feltonville teachers and rights of parents to opt out their children out of the tests. CWE has done with far fewer resources what the PFT should have done - long ago - with far more. The leaders of this opt-out movement are mostly gutsy women, teachers and moms, who are standing up for kids, public education, and the teaching profession.

A look at the PFT website tells the story of a business union, unwilling and probably unable in its current form, to represent members forcefully or defend public schools. The home page has no mention of the opt out issue, though it's hot news in several Philly community papers. There's no mention of the opt out struggle even under "News and issues." But maybe's there's a mention of the disciplinary hearing Feltonville teachers face under "Events"? Nope, top event on that page is a glowing account of what the PFT appears to consider the big story for Philly teachers, parents, and students: "This Year, PFT members raised **\$16,780** for "Komen for the Cure!" The story carries a prominent photo of PFT President, Jerry Jordan - whose picture is also on the homepage. Having a union president's picture all over union materials is evidence of the paternalism that, unfortunately, characterizes many unions, even those with an overwhelmingly female membership, like teachers unions.

It's important that Jerry Jordan has finally stated support for the right of teachers to inform parents about opting-out of the tests, but winning on standardized testing, which threatens teachers' livelihoods and kids' lives, will take far more than a statement to the press or sending a lawyer to help a Feltonville teacher in the disciplinary hearing. CWE understands, as do the Chicago reformers who now lead the CTU, that business unionism is a dead end. We can't make deals with politicians who aim to destroy our schools, our profession, public education. We need democratized, mobilized unions to push back successfully. Teachers who care about kids need to learn, fast, how to transform their unions. If you need some advice, you might ask the teachers at Feltonville - after you sign the petition supporting them and parent's right to opt out of tests. We have a great deal to learn from their struggle.