

Reimagining and remaking union solidarity

May 28, 2014

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) hosted a conference on global education "reform" May 24, bringing together NUT activists with union leaders and scholars from the global south and north. My blog this week adapts my presentation, which along with papers from others (all quite informative) will be published on the Research Collaborative of www.teachersolidarity.com

Global elites are altering teachers work in ways that go well beyond the scope of traditional contract negotiations. Standardized testing, privatization of the education sector, including teacher and school evaluation, creation of private schools paid for by public money, whether called "free schools," "academies" or "charter schools," are undermining the profession and children's education. However, a new generation of teachers is being politicized and radicalized very rapidly. Just as we see a global footprint of neoliberalism's global project in education (with important national differences), so we can now detect a footprint of resistance. One reason international work is so vital is that it enables us to borrow and adapt ideas, just as our opponents do. We need not and should not wait for successful strategies to emerge spontaneously in our own communities or countries. One element in the emerging footprint is new kinds of alliances with parents and community, taking traditional coalition work to a different terrain. This is territory that can make unions uncomfortable because they must share power in ways that are often unfamiliar and difficult to manage with legal strictures of collective bargaining.

But these new types of alliances are supporting teacher activists where they feel too isolated and weak to speak and act as union members. Teachers are forming organizations with parents and students based on clearly articulated, shared principles that include social justice issues as well as concerns that teachers unions traditionally address. These alliances, in turn, generate new tactics and strategies. we can learn from what has occurred in Mexico, described in the paper by Hugo Aboites.

"So, coupled with the demonstrations and marches teachers in several states organized "congresses" as they were called, which reunited hundreds of parents, in one occasion; large numbers of students in another; also communities and parents. From all this, new proposals for education started to emerge. This led to a re-appreciation of many projects organized by teachers and communities founded years before. In one of these projects, pre-hispanic languages were rescued as well as the culture they belonged to..Teachers and communities also organized projects of production and services to benefit students and the whole community. In some states, full-fledged alternative schools were created, and all the schools of the state rejected standardized testing."

We have until now been on the defensive. To shift to the offensive requires putting forward a new narrative of what we want from and in schools and new kinds of activism, moving beyond contract unionism and the strategies associated with it, including the strike. Though the strike has long been and can still be a powerful weapon, it too is limited in its effect when the employer is willing to weather the loss - which is now the case in much of the world. Alternative tactics are emerging: parents occupying schools to resist school closings in Chicago and Newark; teachers boycotting standardized tests in individual schools, school systems, and countries. However, we see resistance shifting to the offense in Mexico: teachers occupying schools with parents, making schools sites of human emancipation. Teachers, together with one another, joined by parents and community, taking back their schools from the powerful elites who aim to eliminate democratic control of education are succeeding in doing so. What has occurred in Mexico suggests an

additional strategy, one that can be added to the “rolling strikes” that have been used successfully. Why not have “rolling occupations”? Instead of walking out, invite parents and community to join the school staff to make the school liberated territory, for a day emancipating teachers and students from the drudgery and control of a curriculum powerful elites dictate is necessary to make them compete for jobs.

Very often international work is the provenance of a small sector of union activists or officials. While this is understandable, it is also dangerous because commitments to international work are often seen by members as siphoning off resources better spent at home. One role for researchers is to help unions and teachers explore the impacts of international policy on their own work. In the end space for meaningful international work depends on the union developing a presence in the school site, having members who understand that *they* are the union [i] and that “union issues” for teachers must address power struggles about who decides what we teach and how. The context of struggle over one’s own work, with work being broadly defined beyond contract and economic concerns, supports’ members’ understanding the need to receive – and provide – solidarity, starting in their own school, extending to their nations and globally.

Reimagining and remaking education, development of a vision constituent members of unions share, is essential for forging authentic relations of solidarity among unions globally. It is this vision rather than a particular set of organizational relations that should define our work. All who support the vision and principles deserve support. A redefined solidarity means that we in London send a message of support to the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF), which takes on strike action this week. We call on the EI to do the same. Is the BCTF a member of the EI? No. Does this matter? No. BCTF members are defending teachers’ rights to give all children the education they deserve by having a workable class size and composition. Their struggle is the same teachers throughout the world have to wage and institutional memberships and national borders ought not influence relations of solidarity.

Another way we might operationalize the principles I have described would be to draft a statement on control of curriculum and standardized testing, pointing out how international testing, PISA in particular, degrades education and is based on the faulty assumption that globally workers have to compete for jobs in a race to the bottom, in a process that often destroys the environment. We might circulate this statement for support among researchers, unions and advocacy organizations. Affiliates of the EI might then present it as a motion, directing the EI to end its collaboration on testing and involvement with the international agencies (and corporations) that design and administer the tests.

The agenda I have outlined is admittedly ambitious but so are the aims of our opponents. They aim to destroy our profession because we educate the next generation. We are a threat to their control over social, political, and economic relations. We cannot win by following the old rules or looking backward to what has been lost. Key to our success is international work among unions, defined as our mutual and collective reimagining and remaking of education to develop the full potential of all children.

My blog will resume in July. You can still reach me with comments at drweinerlo@gmail.com. And I’ll be posting (those less frequently) on twitter , Facebook.

[i] Stephanie Ross, "Varieties of Social Unionism: Towards a Framework for Comparison," *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society* 11, no. 16-34 (Autumn 2007).