A reply to Herman Benson: The Chicago Teachers Union is a different kind of labor union

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The exchange between Herman Benson and Dan La Botz highlights one, if not the primary, issue that has to be resolved if we are to turn back the tidal wave of anti-union and anti-democratic policies that have transformed the nation's social and political landscape. I think both Herman and Dan would agree that we need a revived labor movement. But what will drive the revival? And what form should it take?

Herman's definition of revival seems to consist of more "oomph" from the AFL-CIO leadership and more attention to union democracy. Both are sorely needed. The question is whether these are adequate to restore, let alone push forward, the political and economic policies we so desperately need. In education, the answer is a clear "no" and the example of the Chicago Teachers Union supports Dan's argument.

Yes, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) conducted a militant strike. But it was not a traditional strike by any means, if we take as a definition of tradition what has existed in US unions for four decades. What we see in Chicago has been more like the kind of organizing done by the CIO, fusing a progressive social program to union demands. CORE, the insurgent caucus that leads the CTU and was re-elected last month in a landslide (with over 60% of the members voting) has shifted the political terrain of education politics by embedding union demands in a vision for public education. Yes, the strike was a contract dispute, but these courageous, wise activists found a way to win over the vast majority of teachers to use the contract fight to fight for much more. Theirs was a fight for public education – as is their current struggle against the unnecessary, racist school closings that other cities are facing. CTU has taken on the power establishment of Chicago and the White House. They organize along side parents and community activists, as partners. In doing so, the CTU has shown teachers and organized labor the kind of unions – and unionism – we need. Now.

The victory of "right to work" legislation in Michigan shows how very tenuous U.S. labor's hold is on the right to bargain collectively. Is it even a movement? Herman has been so right for so long about union democracy. Still, his analysis reflects the problems liberals have had in understanding that neoliberalism has destroyed the landscape in which unions have functioned. (In an upcoming article in "The Jacobin," I'll be discussing liberalism's failure to "get" what's ailing education and the unions in more detail.)

(Note: You can now follow me on twitter @drloisweiner.)