No Movement, No Justice!

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Most of the current literature on the international education crisis gives little to no big-picture context for planning a fight back. Given the parochial view of most popular education authors, many earnest, well-intentioned proposals for fight back are written within parameters the ruling class tolerates.

As someone who spends an inordinate — if not just plain unhealthy — amount of time on the Internet, not a day goes by I am not presented with an online petition to "Dump [Secretary of Education Arne] Duncan'" or asked to sign on a letter to President Obama pleading with him to stop the "Race to the Top" program. Each of these tactics assumes that if only the political class knew what was going on in inner-city classrooms, it would abandon the neoliberal plan to privatize education.

When public school advocates allow education profiteers, politicians, and the corporate media to limit the scope of the debate, they throw out strategies and tactics that would fix root causes of the problems in education. This unwillingness to challenge the status quo keeps in place structural inadequacies of the very institutions that are charged with organizing the working class against the corporate attack on our schools.

Teacher, professor, former union officer, and lifelong education activist Lois Weiner in her book *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice* gives whole-picture context and concrete prescriptions for restructuring our unions and our society to take back the commons and fight poverty — the biggest hindrance to educational achievement. Weiner turns "reformer" logic on its head and explains that poverty must be addressed to fix schools. Weiner advocates for social movement unionism, a model that broadens the scope of unions and provides a foil to myopic business unionism.

Weiner does not criticize business unionism merely through a Left critical lens, but demonstrates the material failings of the model. Weiner, through historical and organizational analysis, explains, "[t]he insider knowledge and cozy relationships union officials have with politicians cannot protect teachers' livelihoods and public education." Business unionism is the model where members elect leadership, the leadership hires staff, and a wall is built between members and the union bureaucracy. Members pay dues and use the union like an insurance agency. Union members are pushed out of the education body politic. This is the model preferred by top-down union officers and by the politicians with whom they negotiate as it limits job actions.

Prior to and in the early stages of what Weiner calls the "neoliberal project" these handshake agreements produced contracts with which members were comfortable. This was an era of fairly stable wages, but allowed for a membership to become more complacent and more reliant on officers, who grew much closer to management. Management and union leadership under this model were the elites who existed above the members they manage or serve.

Weiner writes that this reliance has left teachers unable to fight against the onslaught of privatization, which is the key aspect of the neoliberal project. "Teachers unions have been incapable of stopping these school closings because the business union model assumes that power consists of union officers' expertise to win concessions." In a contract fight, bosses are legally obligated to come to an agreement with their workers. Workers have leverage of a work stoppage — or least the threat thereof. Management's back is against the wall to bring students back in school.

There is no leverage to fight school closings, a tactic used to replace unionized public neighborhood schools with privately run, publicly funded charter schools. Districts through their relationships with state legislators have been able to narrow the scope by which teachers can strike to merely wages and benefits. Urban districts concurrently push for school closings along with austerity contracts.

This scenario has allowed the public image of teachers unions to be diminished as being "only concerned with wages and benefits" and made teachers' strikes largely unpopular with the public, or at least that is the narrative painted by the corporate media.

Weiner offers a concrete example of how the ruling class has pitted teachers unions against the public in the second part of the book, where she reprints her review of the book *The Newark Teachers Strikes: Hopes on the Line*. Weiner uses this review to tell the story of the Newark Teachers Union, which struggled with its own identity, and was forced into conflict with the poor African-American communities its workers served. Weiner writes that the second strike tore a rift through the two sides that still exists today. Recently, the Newark teachers unions accepted a merit pay proposal in its contract at the behest of Democratic Party shooting star and social media darling Mayor Cory Booker.

Weiner offers a new form of unionism as an alternative to business unionism, which she calls "social movement unionism." Weiner contrasts social movement unionism with the more popular term "social justice unionism" in that social movement unionism addresses the structural failings of even well intentioned unions operating on a program of social justice. She writes, "[Social movement unionism] addresses the need for transformation of the unions internally, especially the need for union democracy. Union democracy is a thorny issue for radicals, especially those who assume leadership in moribund organizations. 'Social justice' unionism addresses the positions the union takes on various political, social, and economic issues."

A social justice union can still be a top-down union business union that will put on airs with social justice rhetoric. Under this model, union leadership does not amplify the voice of its members; it becomes the voice of the members. To motivate members around an issue that has been chosen by leadership, there's a mad scramble for "buy-in" or at least a media strategy that drowns out the voices of dissent within the union from the public.

When tea-party types criticize union leaders as being totalitarian, using Stalinist imagery to sully social justice causes to the public, there lies a kernel of truth. Unions may be championing redistributive justice, but many are silencing members in the process. The ersatz Andrew Breitbarts of the world make a living off finding dissent within unions and making YouTube films to demonstrate redistributionist policies as being one-in-the-same as totalitarianism.

Weiner acknowledges the difficulty in running a truly democratic organization. She uses the Chicago Teachers Union's new militant leadership led by the rank-and-file caucus CORE as an example of new hope in the face of the neoliberal project. During the 2012 Chicago Teachers Strike, teachers were pressured by the media and politicians to act quickly and ratify a new deal one week into the strike. After the plan was presented to membership, its school-based representatives voted to move the vote two more days to give school workers time to read the agreement before voting. It was a risk as even national media led by simpering neoliberal technocrat bloggers pontificated that the strike could ruin children's lives.

Since the teachers are limited to striking over wages and benefits, this would be an easy argument to make, but anyone who took a moment to put his or her spreadsheets down would see that teachers, inspired by the social movement unionism of the CTU leadership, were using the

spotlight to address issues of education justice like class size and lack of resources.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part sets context for the assault on education and the failings of teachers unions to fight back. The second part is comprised of articles Weiner wrote for *New Politics* on education that provide historical analysis to the state of education and the structural failings of many teachers unions. In the first part, Weiner provides a discussion of the definition of teachers, which is a topic missing from much of the current literature on the subject. Weiner describes what makes the "heart of teaching" — which is crucial to constructing arguments for public education. She defines teachers as both idea workers and as caretakers. The gendered nature of carework carries the baggage of institutional sexism against female workers. In the chapter on the Newark Teachers Union, Weiner delves deeply into this concept. Carework is often not considered to be part of the workers' struggle in that it is often associated with what is expected of women in the home. Weiner does not let the Left off the hook: she mentions that teachers unions also have paid little attention to issues of gender (or even class).

The notion that teaching is "women's work" and an extension of women's instinct as caretakers has been deleterious to women, teaching and the labor movement. This notion further institutionalized sexism and allows that sexism to create poor working conditions for teachers regardless of gender. Had teachers unions employed a social movement model, teachers unions could have worked as champions of the women's liberation movement. The case could have been made that carework is real work and that teachers should not accept poor working conditions as part of their "care." The notion that teachers are not workers because they are motivated by intrinsic maternalism has allowed for the common practice of externalizing the cost of classroom supplies to teachers. This led to a decrease in real wages. This also allows management to push a lean production model in the schools, forcing more and more work on teachers.

One of the best features of Weiner's book is that she provides concrete examples for unionists to transform their unions into social movement unions. She advocates unions taking on issues that may not be bread-and-butter contract clauses, but would receive popular support from membership, like single-payer healthcare. Members who may not have been interested in organizing for their union may be more willing to organize around issues they are passionate about, which brings more people into the larger body politic of the union.

Weiner urges would-be union reformers to look beyond local issues and be active in their national unions. Weiner breaks down the power structure of both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). Both unions are structured in very different ways; however she describes both as top-down and in her words in need of "democratization." She dissects the anatomy of the AFT through an analysis of its conventions under the rule of AFT President Albert Shanker. Weiner very succinctly uses the same framework to analyze the political program of the AFT and its relationship to members. She describes how this plays out internationally through the AFT and the NEA's involvement in the Education International, an international confederation of teachers unions.

Weiner writes about the shift in education historian Diane Ravitch. She acknowledges the about-face that Ravitch, once a proponent of neoliberal education reform has made; but offers analysis as to why Ravitch does not offer alternatives to the neoliberal plan. Weiner gives credit to Ravitch for being an intellectual who is genuinely interested in education. She contrasts her with the neoconservatives who forge ahead with neoliberal reforms in the face of mounting evidence that prove that they are not only ineffective, but also dangerous. Weiner describes how Ravitch's faith in capitalism has narrowed her worldview. Ravitch can only see the failings of the school system

beginning as far as the neoliberal reforms started taking form. A broader critique of the U.S. school system would lead one to see how the social inequalities of society have led to the problems in the schools.

Weiner's distinction is important because the ruling class paints a narrative that poverty can be fixed by the acumen of teachers; therefore a poor economy is the fault of teachers, not the leaders who hold the purse strings of our collective wealth. The view that education problems are the fault of bad education policy and not bad economic policy obscures problems of inequality from the conversation, allowing the one-percent to continue accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor and working class while blaming the poor and working classes for their own problems.

Another common argument thrown at public education advocates by the so-called reformers is that they do not offer solutions and we use poverty as an excuse. Weiner shows how poverty is not an excuse, but it's certainly a major factor for educational failings. She does not place all of the blame on poverty, citing that had teachers unions been structured democratically involving the community, there would have been mechanisms to fix the problems of poverty. Teachers must not only find better practices in the classroom, but must also be in the streets fighting for economic justice for their students.

At just over 208 pages, Weiner's book does not tell the whole story, but tells much more of the story than books two or three times its length. I would recommend this book to a wide audience. The first part of the book has popular appeal and I would not hesitate to recommend it to people of all political worldviews. The second half of the book, the compilation of Weiner's *New Politics* education articles gives great Left political analyses. Overall, this book is highly recommended for anyone interested in learning about the fight to save public education.