

# Social Unionism Without the Workplace?

February 10, 2013

TEACHERS AND TEACHER UNIONS have been under neoliberal attack since the Carnegie Foundation's 1983 *Nation At Risk*. However, since the appointment of Arne Duncan as Obama's Secretary of Education they have been on the sharp-end of the neoliberal attack on working people. Teachers are routinely demonized as ineffective, privileged public employees who are virtually unaccountable. The teacher unions are portrayed as solely concerned with defending the "generous" salaries and benefits of their members, and obstructing attempts to make teachers accountable for student performance. Tenure, due-process rights, class size limits and the like are all depicted as outmoded survivals of a public school system more responsive to the needs of teachers than students. The solutions are simple — more privately run charter schools funded by taxpayers, more high-stakes standardized tests, teacher evaluations tied to student test scores, and the effective abolition of tenure, due-process, and collective bargaining.

Most of us on the left, especially those who are active in public education unions, know the real root of the crisis of public education is the chronic under-funding of the schools, especially in the inner cities, and the endemic racism and poverty that undermines our students' ability to excel academically. The Obama-Duncan neoliberal agenda of creeping privatization/charterization, union busting and social service austerity will only exacerbate the problems, not fix them. What is needed is a movement of teachers, students and parents that can effectively struggle to increase funding, protect teachers' from arbitrary management, stop the privatization of public schools, and reduce poverty.

Unfortunately, the organizations we would expect to lead the fight against Obama and Duncan — the National Educational Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) — are not up to the task. Both organizations are large, bureaucratic machines committed to "service unionism" — where union officials negotiate wages and benefits, administer the contract and provide various services (educational courses, etc.), and the ranks of the unions remain passive consumers. This model of unionism has gutted union democracy and eschewed alliances with other unions, parents and communities. Not surprisingly, teachers' wages, benefits and working conditions have declined. Rather than organizing their members to fight the attacks on public education, both the NEA and AFT have sought "cooperation" with educational officials at the local, state, and national level. The results have been the growth of charter schools (the AFT has actually organized its own charter schools), teacher evaluations tied to student test scores, and concessions on wages, benefits, and working conditions. The AFT and NEA bureaucracies' desire for "partnership" has culminated in an early endorsement of the re-election campaign of Arne Duncan's boss, Barack Obama.

For many teacher union activists, the alternative to the bureaucratic, service-union model is "social movement unionism" — a model rooted in the practice of the CIO unions in the 1930s and 1940s and revived for the contemporary labor movement by Kim Moody.[1] While Moody's version of social movement unionism is rooted in strong workplace organization that can contest working conditions, wages and benefits, for many it means an emphasis on non-workplace organization and issues — community-labor coalitions that can contest issues of public policy such as funding for public education, health care, and defense of civil rights legislation.

Clarence Taylor's new book, *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teacher's Union*, provides an historical account of an experiment in social-movement unionism. Before the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) won exclusive collective bargaining rights in the early 1960s, New York public school teachers were represented by a number of different

unions and professional associations that pursued work-place grievances and organized for increased funding for schools and salaries for teachers. The largest and most important was the Teachers Union (TU), founded as a local of the American Federation of Teachers in 1916. Under the leadership of Socialist Party (SP) members Henry Linville and Abraham Lefkowitz, the TU shifted its focus from workplace organization and struggle to the now familiar call of bureaucratic teacher unionists for greater "professionalism." While this included the demand for higher salaries, the social-democratic leaders of the TU definition of professionalism included "cooperation between employees and management, stressing ways to improve the craft of teaching." (1) Hostile to organizing the growing ranks of substitute teachers and, during the depression, part-time and unemployed teachers, the TU rejected industrial unionism in the schools.

Rank and file teachers, led by members of the Communist Party (CP), began to build an opposition to the TU leadership's "professional unionism" in the late 1920s and early 1930s. While Taylor recognizes the deleterious effects of the CP's political subordination to the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin, *Reds at the Blackboard* attempts to demonstrate that Communists prioritized the interests of teachers, students, and parents in their activity in the TU. The CP-led "Rank and File Group" advocated an abandonment of professionalism for a militant, class-struggle industrial unionism. Prior to their winning a majority of the TU's Executive Board in 1935, the contrast between the Rank and File group and the social-democratic leadership of the TU was quite sharp:

The leadership emphasized professionalism, collaboration with management, and legislation as ways of improving the working conditions of teachers. The more left-leaning teachers, critical of the leadership, advocated a more militant program. They did not view teachers as professionals but as members of the industrial working class whose major objective was to take part in the struggle against capital. (16)

The Communist led opposition advocated organizing substitute teachers, mass demonstrations to pressure the Board of Education and New York State government to improve salaries and conditions, and more militant actions in the workplace. Not only did they condemn Lefkowitz's negotiation of a "payless furlough" for teachers with Mayor LaGuardia in early 1934, but they organized school based actions through their Classroom Teacher Group over "bread and butter issues" (21) such as salary, lay-offs, and classroom grievances.

Despite Linville and Lefkowitz' attempts to disregard union democracy to defeat their left-wing opponents, the CP-led opposition won a majority of the Executive Board in 1935. Unable to block the rank and file rebellion, even with appeals to anti-communism, the social-democrats left the TU and established yet another union—the Teachers' Guild (TG). The new TU leadership not only began to organize substitute teachers and build demonstrations for better salaries and funding, but embraced a broad progressive agenda in line with the newly adopted "popular front" orientation of the Communists, which fashioned alliances between leftists and liberals in the United States and across the world. The TU endorsed campaigns in support of the emerging industrial unions, against fascism at home and abroad, and for civil rights for African-Americans and other racial minorities.

The TU, under Communist leadership, grew to almost 4,000 members by 1940, making it the largest local in the AFT. While red-baiting by the TG, various politicians, and New York and federal government investigative bodies led to the revocation of the TU's AFT charter in 1940, the TU survived and grew as a CIO affiliate. During the Second World War, as the Communists became the most patriotic supporters of the war effort, the TU leadership attempted to use the war to press its anti-racist agenda. Communists in the TU argued that racism in the United States — legal

segregation and disenfranchisement in the South; employment, housing and educational discrimination in the north—weakened the common struggle against fascism. The TU joined forces with the National Negro Congress (NNC), a Communist led civil rights group, and the more mainstream NAACP to challenge the de facto segregation of New York City schools, demand the hiring of more African-American teachers, and advocate the inclusion of Black history into the public school curriculum. Through the 1940s and 1950s, the TU made anti-racism — including the struggle against anti-Semitism — a central element of its union practice.

Having long faced accusations of disloyalty and subordination to the Stalinist regime in Russia, the Communist leadership of the TU came under sustained attack during the post-war anti-Communist witch-hunts. A coalition of anti-Communists in the New York state legislature and U.S. Congress, the New York City Board of Education, various right-wing Catholic organizations and the ostensible socialists in the TG condemned the TU and its leadership as "un-American" and "disloyal" in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The results of the anti-Communist crusade in the New York City schools were devastating. By 1956, 284 New York City teachers were fired because of their actual or alleged membership in the Communist Party and the TU was deprived of its right to represent teachers in discussions of grievances, pay, and benefits with the Board of Education. Although devastated by the loss of leading activists (including the suicide of one veteran teacher facing the anti-Communist inquisition) and their banning from the schools, the TU continued to agitate against school segregation, for more African-American teachers and for the inclusion of Black history in the school curriculum.

For Taylor, the emergence of the UFT—a fusion of the TG with elements of the High School Teachers Association (HSTA)—as the sole union representing New York teachers in 1960-61 was the victory of a narrow, bureaucratic business unionism:

The brand of teacher unionism advocated by the TU, social unionism linking community concerns, would be pushed aside to focus on improved working conditions, increased salaries, and benefits. With the UFT as the collective bargaining agency, issues that were critical to black and Hispanic communities —such as the practice of assigning the least experienced teachers to their schools and segregating the student body — would be marginalized. Just as important, black and Latino communities would lose a strong ally that, since 1935, had fostered ties between teachers and those communities. (305)

Banned from the schools, the TU was marginal to the wave of workplace actions that swept the high schools in the late 1950s. Claiming that the newly formed UFT would not defend its members from administration retribution, the TU refused to support the 1961 strike that established effective collective bargaining for teachers in New York City. Faced with the UFT's victory, the TU dissolved in 1963 and its members joined the UFT.

Although thoroughly researched and lucidly written, *Reds at the Blackboard* ultimately fails to analyze the roots of the TU's defeat by the UFT. The author's claim that the social democrats that led the UFT were "plain and simple trade unionists" interested solely in wages and working conditions is simply not true prior to 1965.[2] Albert Shanker and other SP members in the TG leadership shared much of the TU's anti-racist, pro-civil rights agenda. With fellow socialist Bayard Rustin, Shanker and other UFT leaders played a major role in the first phase of the civil rights struggle, mobilizing members for the March on Washington in 1963 and for voter registration drives in the South in 1964-1965. The UFT's campaign against the NEA for collective bargaining rights in 1961 included criticism of the NEA's tolerance of "Jim Crow" locals in the South—which the AFT had decertified years before. Among the UFT's contract demands in 1963 was increased hiring from the

South, in order to boost the number of African-American teachers. The UFT was a crucial part of coalitions spearheaded by black leaders like Reverend Milton Galamison to push the Board of Education to end the de facto segregation of the public schools and increase the number of African-American and Hispanic teachers before 1966. The UFT also made class size a central issue in early negotiations, arguing that "what is good for students is good for teachers."

The actual roots of the UFT's success was the willingness of a new generation of TG leaders, in particular the AFT organizer David Seldon, to enter into an uneasy alliance with militant, rank and file high school teachers in the late 1950s and early 1960s in order to pose a credible threat of a strike. Faced with declining real wages and deteriorating conditions, young, mostly Jewish, high school teachers revived the High School Teachers' Association and carried out a series of job actions, including illegal strikes, in the late 1950s. Seldon, Shanker, and Charles Cogen, the first UFT president, convinced the leaders of the HSTA to abandon their demand for higher pay for the high schools teachers and to join the TG in launching the UFT. The TG leadership hoped that the mere threat of a strike would force the City and Board of Education to grant the UFT exclusive recognition. However, it was militant rank and file high school teachers that forced the leadership to call the 1961 strike that won collective bargaining and the 1962 strike that secured their first contract—despite anti-strike legislation that was more draconian than the current New York State Taylor law. It took several years, culminating in the disastrous 1968 strike against community control of the schools, for Shanker to tame the rebellious rank and file and transform the UFT into the bureaucratic service union it is today.

Ultimately, the roots of the defeat of the TU's brand of social unionism can be found in their CP leadership's subordination to Stalinism. While not the mindless automatons (no less spies) portrayed by the anti-Communists, CP members were subject to strict political discipline—to following the basic outlines of the party's line that was shaped by the shifting diplomatic requirements of the Soviet bureaucracy. Especially after the Communists around the world adapted the popular front strategy in 1935, CP activists in U.S. unions, including the TU, abandoned workplace militancy that could threaten their alliance with liberal Democrats and "progressive" union officials.[3] While the CP-led opposition in the TU campaigned against the social-democratic leadership's "professionalism" and for militancy based in the schools, they took office as the party's line changed. Almost immediately, workplace organization and action disappears from Taylor's account of the TU's activity. Almost immediately, the new Communist leadership embraced the old leadership's notions of "professionalism":

To court broad support, the TU placed greater emphasis on professional concerns and did not limit itself to bread-and-butter issues. The new leadership announced a fresh focus on "educational policy." Professor Goodwin Watson, a leading psychologist at Teachers College, would head the union's Educational Policies Committee, promoting the "art of good teaching." The union declared that an "organization like ours cannot confine itself to a narrow line of economic activity only. Teachers, like other humans, do not live by bread alone." To keep the "creative impulse" alive in teachers, the Educational Policies Committee proposed a number of courses for teachers to enhance their knowledge. (43)

The only difference Taylor cites between the TU's "vision of professionalism" and "the middle-class version held by Linville and the previous administration" was that "the TU tied teachers to the larger working class by offering courses in working-class history and culture..." (43-44)

Taylor gives us no sense of what the TU's did in the schools. He describes how the TU leaders

responded to attacks on teachers and public education with open letters, resolutions and public rallies — largely what the UFT does today. Did the TU in the schools mobilize teachers against supervisory harassment? Were they able to enforce limitations on the length of the working day in the pre-collective bargaining era when supervisors had the power to order teachers to work well beyond the conclusion of the school day? Nor does Taylor address the TU's practice in the workplace during the Second World War. As Nelson Lichtenstein[4] has argued, the CIO's support for the wartime ban on strikes hot-housed the bureaucratic centralization of the industrial unions. The Communist Party's embrace of the no-strike pledge, and their role in enforcing work discipline during the war, undermined their credibility among militant workers in the CIO. Taylor waxes enthusiastically about how the TU leaders were able to wrap their anti-racist message in wartime patriotism, but says little about how their support of the U.S. war effort impacted their relations with rank and file workers and the Board of Education management. Clearly, the TU's wartime patriotism did little to protect them from the post-war anti-Communist purges.

The history of the New York Teachers' Union provides an important lesson for contemporary teacher union activists who want to build an alternative to the bureaucratic business unionism of the AFT and NEA leaderships. The embrace of a broad "social justice" agenda and coalitions with parents, other unions and social movement organizations is not sufficient if we want to transform teacher unions into organizations capable of defeating the neoliberal offensive against public education and teachers. Without strong, school-based organization, our broad social unionist agenda will appear to most teachers as, at best, worthy but unobtainable goals, and, at worst, as ignoring the deteriorating conditions most teachers face today. The key to rebuilding membership activism — the only source of power for working people — will be a strategy that roots social unionism's broad political agenda in the day-to-day struggles of teachers around job protections, tenure, and pensions.