

Should we “play nice” with the NEA and AFT?

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The teacher activist blogosphere has been buzzing about the perfidy of the AFT’s and NEA’s endorsements of teacher evaluation tied to students’ standardized test scores and a new national curriculum, the Common Core. Both policies are key to the neoliberal dream of a national, privatized system of public education that will synchronize educational outcomes with an economic reality of growing joblessness and underemployment. (I know these are strong claims and I refer readers who want further verification and explanation to my analyses in *New Politics* and book.)

Peggy Robertson, a Colorado activist, writes in her FB post “I truly am trying - desperately - to figure out how to occupy my union...- it is hard - crazy hard. I am just now getting involved, but let’s just say the first two encounters have left me speechless. I am doing the work of the unions yet I pay them every month to sell me out. The irony.”

Mercedes Schneider says she’s been told to “play nice” with the two unions, explaining she’s “been wondering about ‘the unions’- the two major national teachers unions- the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). I have been told that “the unions” are the major forces on the side of classroom teachers in this fight against the corporate takeover of American public education...I want that to be true- but I cannot ignore what I am seeing...I have been told not to question the unions- that my doing so could hinder their effectiveness in fighting ‘against reform.’”

First to Peggy’s point. Union reform work is unlike any other political activity we undertake because of the unique nature of unions as institutions. Unions need to represent all members, not just those who agree with an activist, progressive perspective. Union reform work requires us to be active on different fronts, simultaneously. We must talk with members and persuade them of our ideas, working on collective actions. That has to go on at the school but often we can find like-minded activists beyond our schools and should connect with them. Networks develop in ways that are unpredictable and the first rule is “take it where you find it,” as we’re seeing in North Carolina - the topic of a future blog.

At the same time, we have to take on the ideas and policies of union officials, who control the union apparatus, to try to keep the existing “leadership” from doing harm. Meanwhile, we have to keep organizing on issues outside of the union structure, developing allies among parents and communities. It often happens that our work with these allies leads us to teachers who won’t have anything to do with the unions, for reasons that are understandable but need to be challenged.

The reasons the AFT and NEA have to be transformed is because of the power they exercise and the potential social movement unionism has. No clearer evidence is needed of teacher unionism’s capacity than what we’ve seen in Chicago as a result of radical teachers persuading their colleagues of the need to “own” their union. Though Chicago has a unique history, teachers are teachers. The skills and knowledge needed to reform a union aren’t found in the drinking water. They have to be taught, learned and shared. Some of what we must do to transform our unions is generic to union reform, as activists learn when they collaborate with reformers in other unions. Some issues are particular to teaching and education and have to be thrashed out as we engage in struggle.

We absolutely have to take on the NEA and AFT- as critical friends. To do so we

should be clear that the “union” is not its elected officials. Sometimes “the union” is not even a particular organizational form. We may need new forms of organization, especially when unions lose the right to bargain collectively – as is happening with breathtaking rapidity.

“The union” is an organization of workers that defends a set of principles. To me and a rising generation of activists those principles are solidarity, democracy in the workplace, defense of quality public education for all kids, equality and justice in the workplace and in society. Union officers are part of the problem but they have the power to betray these principles because they are allowed to do so by their members, who have adopted the passive role encouraged by the business union model that has dominated US labor for decades.

Paulo Freire’s advice in “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” that “freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift” and “Not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift” holds for pedagogy and in teacher union politics. A good place to start to understand how to “occupy” the unions is to (re)read Freire – and go to the Labor Notes conference, this year in Chicago, April 4. Yes, kick ass, don’t play “nice.” Union reform is a contact sport. But remember to do it collectively. We don’t need heroes or victims, we need victories.

I invite reader responses, either to New Politics as a blog or to me directly at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.