

Social movement teacher unionism in the NEA? In the South? As sure as there is BBQ

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We're seeing social movement teacher unionism arise in the South, in NEA, in Organize2020, a hardy band of activists who intend to transform their NEA state affiliate, North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE). I was invited to speak at their first state-wide conference but when we were iced out (literally - an ice storm downed power lines and paralyzed the portion of the state where the conference was to be held) caucus activists and I met together to discuss the challenges they face.

As occurred when I met CORE's leaders in their early days, I was dazzled by the passion, smarts and commitment these activists bring. We talked frankly about the need to confront hard issues that have stymied growth of unions in the state, most of all racism. Their program is great but what impresses me most is their commitment to democracy, in the school, in their communities, in a revived labor movement, and in teachers unions. It's in their bones and hearts, not just their program. They clearly see the obstacles to building a new kind of teachers union in a political landscape that has for decades withered under the Right's scorched earth policies; at the same time they aren't intimidated. They have a commitment to collective leadership, which I saw in action as they mapped out organizing plans. They're not accepting the false dichotomy of either social justice or bread and butter. They understand a new kind of teachers union has to fight for both simultaneously, educating and organizing teachers in the schools so that they don't say "Where's the union?" when a conflict arises. This group of activists want teachers to know that THEY are the union and have to build mutually-respectful alliances with parents, community, students, and other workers to make deep change happen.

We've seen militant action by a few NEA locals, for instance in Oregon, which I'll write about next week. And we're waiting on election results for UTLA, the union representing teachers and support staff in Los Angeles Unified School District. UTLA's Union Power slate is committed to social justice in education, mobilizing members in the schools and establishing democratic norms in their union. I'm hoping they win. If they do, they'll be shaking up NEA.

But Organize2020 seems to me very special in its fierce commitment to building a militant, democratic NEA in North Carolina, transforming the entire state organization, from the bottom-up, challenging the way staff determine policy and the deadening weight of NEA's bureaucratic protocols. The caucus is pioneering what might be done outside the major cities, where we've seen significant teacher pushback.

Of course, they have a secret weapon missing in other states: North Carolina barbeque - Eastern style. You can get the sauce with tofu if you don't eat pork. With that BBQ, along with biscuits, hush puppies, and fried green tomatoes as fuel, Organize2020 is bound to build a very powerful movement.

Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics. Or write me at drweinerlo@gmail.com.