Teachers union leaders need union democracy

written by Lois Weiner | January 15, 2014

Teacher activists have been buzzing in the blogosphere about AFT President Randi Weingarten's shift, endorsing a moratorium on linking teacher evaluation to students' scores on standardized tests and on the new national curriculum, Common Core. "Too little, too late" say some, while others express gratitude for the change. I think the more important issue is that the president of a teachers union doesn't have the right to make a decision on major national policy without being directed by union members. Both issues were significant enough in their impact on teachers' careers and professional lives, as well as kids' futures, for debate to be held in every local, votes taken, and union officials directed (not asked, directed) to do what members voted.

No union leader, no matter how smart, wise, or dedicated can substitute for the intelligence, wisdom, and courage of a membership that is mobilized and exercises collective control of its union. That control occurs through members at every level of the union supporting and directing those who have more organizational authority. The Chicago Teachers Union and Karen Lewis, CTU President, model this ideal. She understands and acts on the premise that union power resides with the members. Members "get it" too and hold her feet to the fire. In contrast, in the national AFT and NEA, union officials have no direct tether to the membership.

Weingarten's stance on the moratorium is, I predict, a temporary shift, a result of indirect pressure the union leadership has experienced from the first wave of unsatisfactory evaluations. AFT members are being educated that the union has to "play nice," that is, give up even more. This strategy is evident in the amazing collection of articles in the Winter 2013 issue of its magazine, the "American Educator" touting labor-management collaboration. Nothing in the magazine explains that collaboration requires that both parties have a "live and let live" attitude and that the neoliberal project is based on destroying the unions, especially teachers unions. We won't make that go away by showing that we want to work with politicians who do the bidding of powerful elites who are explicit they want to marketize education and turn teaching into contract labor. When you collaborate with people who want to destroy everything you stand for, you're assisting in your own destruction.

One might think the union would focus on collaborating with parents, students, and community. But nope, what we need today, according to these articles, is collaboration with "management." But who precisely is "management" now? Management is principals trained by the Broad Academy to demand the power to fire teachers at will, with no legal or contractual protections. Management is mayors like Rahm Emanuel who control city school systems and try to break the unions. The Camden NJ school superintendent, who was never a school principal and barely taught, is management for Camden teachers.

I have a hunch that if AFT and NEA officers organized informed debate and votes in their locals, they'd learn that many members don't think there's much to be gained by trying to collaborate with management these days. Maybe I'd be proven wrong. This is an empirical question. So let's ask members, including music and gym teachers who've received unsatisfactory evaluations because students' *math or language arts scores* on standardized tests haven't risen enough to satisfy benchmarks. Let's ask Chicago teachers who battled to stop Emanuel from closing schools for budget reasons only to see charter schools springing up to replace them. Let's ask teachers what

they want their unions to do about testing, student and teacher careers tied to exams about which teachers, students, parents, community have no say. I'll live with whatever members decide, after we've had the vigorous debate we need,

How about real debate in publications that our dues make possible? We can have an exchange in the “American Educator” about labor-management collaboration. That would be a start to the kind of collaboration we need – members talking, making decisions with other members about what our unions should say about the future of our profession and public education.

I invite reader responses at drweinerlo@gmail.com. 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.