

Two important precedents in building social movement teachers unions

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One week, two precedents.

A group of determined Colorado teachers and education activists met last weekend under the umbrella of the United Opt Out (of testing) organization and wrestled with how to build the growing social movement opposed to standardized testing and what is often called “corporate school reform.” I was privileged to meet with people who are committed to transforming teachers unions. We clarified terminology about how the caucus system in the NEA is one of official committees, endorsed by the organization, whereas a reform “caucus” in most labor unions is a group wholly independent of the official union.

One strategic issue we grappled with was how best to maximize their resources, given that they have a foothold in Douglas County (with an AFT local), Denver’s Classroom Teachers Association (an NEA affiliate), and activists in suburban locals elsewhere in Colorado (NEA). One possibility is to form a state-wide caucus with local branches in both AFT and NEA locals. This Colorado caucus will be cutting edge nationally, unifying (AFT/NEA) activists at the state level. One aspect of this development that is useful for us to recognize is the leapfrogging it represents. People are not just trying to duplicate what CORE and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) have accomplished. They’re applying what CTU has done but shaping strategy to their local conditions. As I’ve written before, there’s no single blueprint or handbook that can direct teachers in transforming their local unions. For sure, CTU has much to teach activists. At the same time, the CTU will be learning from – and supported by – movements elsewhere. Colorado’s experience is relevant to Chicago because the CTU is constrained in pushing its agenda state-wide because the Illinois AFT and NEA do business as usual. Colorado may help us all figure out the nuts and bolts of creating a state-wide AFT/NEA organization that can help activists throughout a state push a common agenda in their unions. Though their numbers are not (yet) large, this smart, determined band of activists is doing great work that’s going to help us nationally, maybe internationally too. I left Denver with a (political) Rocky Mountain high.

The other precedent came with the AFT finally publishing a dissenting point of view, in the form of a letter, in the *American Educator*, the magazine members’ dues support. In late 2012 AFT published an article slamming the work of historian Howard Zinn and refused to print a rejoinder, in any form. (Do take a few minutes to read the Zinn Project’s description of the imbroglio and critiques of the AFT article [here](#).) After some lively exchanges on twitter, which I admit to having suggested, whoever decides editorial policy for the AFT magazine – clearly not the editor – decided to allow a letter about Zinn’s work. The Zinn Project was limited to 150 words and those who supported the original article treble that. Curiously, the AFT mag printed one letter defending the original bashing of Zinn’s work signed “Anonymous.” A teacher who needed anonymity could self-identify in a general way, like “History teacher in Ohio,” so I’ll wager “Anonymous” is an AFT staffer politically hostile to Left historians, a powerful figure who navigated publication of the article.

Having a diversity of members’ voices expressed in union publications should be assumed, but it’s not so we have to fight for it. Our next battle: Who decides that an article bashing Howard Zinn is published, rather than a symposium on teaching US history with different viewpoints? Or a piece by the Zinn Project explaining its work? But for now let’s relish this precedent and victory.

When activists first start their work, they frequently see only those in the room with them

and are discouraged. Much is happening under the radar of the corporate media. Be assured you are joined by thousands, tens of thousands of teachers, throughout the world. Understanding that resistance is global helps us keep our eyes on the prize.

As always, you can contact me at drweinerlo@gmail.com and follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as this blog every Wednesday.