

What can retired teachers do to help?

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Welcome news: The strike last week of England's two largest unions was highly successful, gaining strong favorable publicity on social media and rallies. (Mea culpa: I was corrected by a Scottish comrade about my use of "UK" - Scotland has an independent government and educational system. Wales didn't strike because its government nudged a bit on contract issues). Many teacher activists in the US now have personal contact with UK activists, and the President of the Chicago Teachers Union, Karen Lewis, made a trip to the UK, presumably to share information and insights. Last August the current President of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) joined a new network of US teacher union activists meeting in Chicago. We're seeing creation of a new network of activists internationally, supported by work a former NUT President, Mary Compton, does through her updated website. (If you want to know what's happening globally with teachers, her site is a must-read. You can follow her on twitter too.)

What's the role in this growing new social movement of teacher activists asks Cam Kilgour, a Toronto District School Board teacher who describes himself as "retired and wanting to do anything I can to support our schools here and around the planet" ? I include myself in this category, since I began my highschool teaching and union activism in the early 1970s, leaving to become a college professor fifteen years later.

I think those of us who are no longer working members of preK-12 teachers unions have a great deal to contribute. We have time and energy for union-related activity that teachers who are working full-time do not. We understand what it means to have a strong union presence in a school, how the union can support teachers' professional autonomy and their right to teach free from the fear that characterizes so many schools today. Our historical memory is immensely valuable, and we need to share understandings and information about what has been successful with a new generation of activists.

At the same time, our experience was, for the most part, not in unions that were social movements. The culture and organization of teachers unions since shortly after their rebirth in the 1960s were seriously flawed by "business unionism" which defined "the union" as staff and elected officials. The unions in which we participated were not what we need today. I think we need to acknowledge that and to let this new generation of teachers forge a different model. In union elections that allow retirees to vote, we can organize other retirees to support candidates who want unions that are not afraid to fight for what's needed and right (rather than what officials cast as "practical"). We can organize to educate retirees about the fact that their financial security and the well-being of their grandchildren depends on this movement's growth and success, its challenge to the model of unionism that has weakened the profession and allowed our opponents to win public support for its disastrous policies of privatization.

The role of retirees is to support this new movement, help mentor and develop leaders, not be the leadership ourselves. We are outsiders now who should be counted on for help, intellectual and organizational. There's more than enough work to be done!

I invite reader comments, either on this website 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.