# What do "social movement teachers unions" look like?

written by Lois Weiner | November 20, 2013

One question I'm frequently asked is what "social movement teacher unionism" looks like and how to get there. The first place people are looking, and correctly so, is the Chicago Teachers Union, transformed by radical activists who learned from failed reform efforts and began to build the union at the school, rather than mostly concentrating their efforts at capturing the union apparatus as had been done previously.

CORE's success was based in part on Chicago's unique circumstances that don't exist elsewhere. They have much to teach teachers elsewhere and at the same time, their success can't be reduced to a formula. We have much to learn (and share) from how this new movement is evolving elsewhere. For instance, activists in NYC and Newark NJ (whose organizing almost yielded them a majority of the union leadership positions in the most recent election) shared insights in this panel about their vision of a democratized union, one that works with parents and students, and how they are working towards it.  I'm still bowled over by the specifics they provide.

In Los Angeles, I'm looking to the success of the "Union Power" slate because of its excellent program and work in mobilizing members. I encourage UTLA members to become active in its campaigns. What I think we've learned from the LA teachers union in the past years of reform efforts is that no matter how intelligent, conscientious or militant individual leaders are, their capacity doesn't substitute for building a movement.  No leader can do it for us. Real change in our unions, in UTLA and the LA school system, depends on organizing at the school, member by member, building a union presence based on a set of principles and respectful alliances with parents and community. "Union power" isn't about endorsements for an election but rather building a social movement that holds its leaders' feet to the fire and at the same time shows up to support projects the union officers put forward.

Elsewhere in the AFT, reform movements are percolating in Providence RI and Philly.  In both places, AFT members who understand that the union must attend to the historic injustices of a segregated school system and name racism as a systemic problem are seeing that they have to engage teachers about the lack of democracy in their union and its sclerotic operations. Things are hopping in the NEA as well, in North Carolina, Seattle, and Portland.  Next week I'll offer some thoughts on how the AFT and NEA differ and what this means for organizing.

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.