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What Will Be The Future of Teacher Unionism?

A review of United Mind Workers: Unions and Teaching in the Knowledge Society, by Charles Taylor Kerchner, Julia E. Koppich and Joseph G. Weeres. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

This article was written before the NEA and AFT broke off talks on unification.

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By Bob Peterson

The potential merger of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) brings into relief an essential question: how might teacher unions use their clout to improve the quality of education in this country?

Should the NEA and AFT merge, as appears likely, the new union's combined membership will be over 3 million. On paper, teacher unions will be stronger than ever. At the same time, public schools are coming under increasingly harsh criticism. It is not uncommon for conservative politicians to argue that teacher unions, by their very existence, prevent true reform. Some go further and argue that it is the public nature of our schools that is at fault, and call for privatization and vouchers. How teacher unions address the issue of school reform has far-reaching consequences, especially in urban areas. Most important, the education of millions of children will be affected. Also at issue, potentially, is the very survival of teacher unions and our system of public schools.



Calls for reform of teacher unions have not just come from outside forces. NEA President Bob Chase, in one of his first major public speeches, called for "New Unionism" in February 1997. The speech sparked a heated debate among many NEA members, including an intense session at its national convention when the NEA adopted a proposal to allow locals to negotiate peer assistance and review programs. Within the AFT, meanwhile, the death of Albert Shanker in early 1997 spurred conversation about the AFT's future and opened up new possibilities. Significantly, the new AFT head, Sandra Feldman, has called for teacher unions to take an active role in reconstituting failing schools.

Union locals have also been playing an important role. The Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), consisting of 21 local teacher union leaders representing both NEA and AFT affiliates, meets regularly and discusses strategies to get local unions to take a more active role in educational reform. Many of the locals involved with TURN are those that have successfully experimented with revising contract language to stimulate school reform in areas of peer evaluation, student assessment, curriculum and instruction, accountability, and professional development. Another grouping of pro-reform AFT and NEA activists, who work with the National Coalition of Education Activists, issued a 1994 call for a new form of unionism entitled *Social Justice Unionism: A Working Draft*.

The NEA, founded in 1857, currently has 2.4 million members. The AFT, founded in 1902, has some 950,000 members. At their conventions this summer, both will vote on whether they should unite. If

both agree, there will be a four-year process to decide details of the organizational structures and unifying principles of the new union. Should they merge, the new union will surpass the Teamsters (1.4 million members) as the largest AFL-CIO affiliated union in the country.

Given the challenges and possibilities facing teacher unions, the new book *United Mind Workers* comes at a propitious time.

The book, subtitled *Unions and Teaching in the Knowledge Society*, is by three education professors at California's Claremont Graduate Schools: Charles Taylor Kerchner, Julia E. Koppich and Joseph G. Weere. "This book is about teacher unions, not as they are, but as they might be," they write.

The NEA has commissioned a 50-page summary/study guide of the book which the NEA will sell. Adam Urbanski, President of the (AFT) Rochester Teachers' Association, called the book a "timely and significant contribution. ... The thrust of the book is right on."

United Mind Workers covers a broad range of topics including educational standards, wages and benefits, evaluation and staff development, and other professional issues. In each case, the authors stretch traditional notions of unionism and advocate innovations. Even if only half of the authors' proposals were adopted, teacher unions would have a new "professional" character that would change how schools operate and how the public perceives teacher unions.

Despite its strengths, the book has significant problems. It lacks a coherent social analysis and seems to capitulate to aspects of a conservative, "free-market" approach to education. Moreover, while Kerchner and his colleagues do a stellar job detailing what teacher unions should do to become more "professional," their near silence on teacher unions and social justice is disappointing. More troubling, they never discuss the issue of race and teacher unionism.

Teachers As Experts

The authors staunchly support teacher unionism yet are frank with their criticisms. They argue that teacher unions have done a good job organizing around issues of job control, work rules, and economic rights. The task at hand, they argue, is that unions must now organize around "the other half of teachers' jobs" -- teachers as educators.

"Defining and measuring quality -- for students, for teachers, for schools -- is central to what unions need to do," they argue.

The authors note that teachers are "unacknowledged experts" and know more about teaching and learning "than do governors, business leaders, and most college professors." But, they argue, collective bargaining has only legitimated teachers' economic interests and has never recognized them "as experts about learning."

Kerchner and colleagues identify an underlying phenomenon that they say necessitates a new approach for teacher unionism -- the shift from what they call an "industrial society" to a "knowledge society." The authors also take up issues such as charters, privatization, and decentralization, implicitly underscoring the ideological shift away from centralized solutions towards local decision-making.

The book argues that teacher unions should focus organizing in three core areas:

- Quality of learning and teaching.
- School-based compacts.
- Teacher hiring and advancement.

Quality of learning and teaching. Unions should promote quality by becoming involved in rethinking teacher training and the teacher's job responsibilities, creating standards for student performance, and implementing peer assistance and review programs. Specific suggestions range from having unions promote teacher-based curriculum committees to developing flexible work hours so teachers have more time to reflect and work together outside of the classroom. Kerchner and colleagues

strongly support national standards -- calling them necessary because they define the central mission of education. They believe that teacher unions should put considerable resources into creating "a system of indicators of school accountability at the national and state levels" and into training members "to gather and interpret indicator data at the local level."

The authors are strong advocates of peer review, which they describe as "the process by which teachers assess the professional competence of their colleagues." They see peer review as an "essential quality lever" for schools. It is not only a superior means of evaluation, they argue, but also is a means by which "teachers can describe their craft" -- and change conversations among teachers and interactions between teachers and parents, students, and school administrators. Using peer review, they argue, unions can assume responsibility for the quality of the teaching profession. The authors outline the peer review experience of Columbus, OH, that began in 1981 and that of Poway, CA, two of a handful of districts that have begun to experiment with reform. After reading their explanation, one is left to agree with Rochester Teachers' Association President Urbanski who says, "Peer review is only controversial where it hasn't been tried."

School-based compacts. The authors believe that another key reform involves "differentiating among types and styles of schools." They lament that even though two million teachers belong to strong labor organizations, they have been unable to "develop workplaces built around collaboration and teamwork." To solve this problem, they propose that current contracts be replaced with a "slender central agreement setting forth consensually achieved educational goals" and coupled with "site-based compacts" that include community input. Under their scenario, "most of the decisions that lie at the heart of teaching and learning would shift to schools" -- including hiring and letting go of teachers, setting schedules and work days, deciding on supplementary salaries, contracting out, and so forth. They acknowledge that in recent years there have been efforts to "loosen the constraints of the contract without losing the purpose of collective bargaining." But they believe that such reforms have been reduced in most instances "to sporadic flirtations with flexibility" and have been "fairly timid, focused on single issues and hamstrung by much of the same sort of tight procedural language and bureaucratic machinery that characterizes the contracts themselves."

Teacher hiring and advancement. One of the authors' most intriguing ideas is to radically change how teachers are hired and placed in schools. They recognize that employment security was a hard-won right. But they distinguish between "job security," which they define as the granting of tenure in one district, and "career security," which is based on the idea of portable benefits and pensions which would allow teachers to move from district to district or state to state without losing financially. They envision unions establishing "electronic hiring halls" and taking over the role of most personnel offices of local school districts. Such "hiring halls" would be patterned after hiring halls of longshoremen and waitress unions. They would register applications, help applicants prepare portfolios, maintain an electronic database for its service area, and act as an employment broker. Tied to their idea of "career security" are career ladders. Under their vision of career ladders, teachers who take on increased responsibilities in areas such as curriculum and staff development would get higher pay. The authors also write favorably about districts that pay more money to teachers who have gone through the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards certification (a questionable practice, in my mind.) Further, they write that once individual schools have the right to develop their own "compacts," decisions to supplement a base teacher salary would be made based on a teacher's "demonstrated knowledge and skills." They dismiss concerns that such policies might enhance "unhealthy interpersonal competition." Instead, they argue, they would have "the effect of enhancing the ability of individual teachers or groups of teachers to be entrepreneurs, to market their specific complement of skills and talents to schools seeking these attributes."

Union Democracy

The book touches briefly on the issue of union democracy. At one point, the authors charge that "both unions, but the NEA in particular, develop conversational orthodoxies in which some subjects are virtually undiscussable. A serious outbreak of free speech would be of great benefit." Later on they argue that "union structures are basically hierarchical, just like management structures, and prestige, influence, and attention flow upward. The building representative or steward is largely an afterthought, as is the functioning of the union at an individual school."

While some union leaders will disagree, internal democracy is a legitimate issue. Given the potential merger of the NEA and AFT, it is a particularly important time to discuss such matters. A strong dose

of rank-and-file involvement can only strengthen the union, regardless of how increased democracy may affect some in local or national union leadership. There has been a historic divide in many teacher unions between those who commit themselves to union activities and politics -- an almost full-time occupation in addition to teaching, if one hopes to influence the union -- and those who commit themselves to "professional teaching" practices such as starting innovative schools, leading district curriculum committees, or participating in state and national professional organizations. This historic division reinforces other pressures that keep teacher unions focused on issues of wages and hours. What gets lost, as a result, is a union emphasis on broader educational reforms. If teacher unions are serious about furthering quality education, they will have to devise ways to promote true union democracy and better involve teachers experienced in educational innovation and reform.

Free-Market Ideology

As a co-founder of an innovative inner-city public school in Milwaukee, I am sympathetic to the authors' contention that a lot of decision-making should be shifted to the school level. Interestingly, that same experience convinces me that some of the radical decentralization proposals put forth by Kerchner and his colleagues (and others whom they reference such as Paul Hill) would be detrimental to local school-based operations. (See my article, "Total Decentralization: Contradictions and Dangers," *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 9, #4). While I believe local schools should have considerable say over matters of budget, staffing, and curricula, problems will emerge if local schools are responsible for staff bonuses, salaries or benefits, or contracting out matters such as food and janitorial services. I'm worried not just about the potential for patronage. More important, I know the incredible amount of time that such matters can consume, diverting attention from the key issues of teaching and learning.

Proposals for such total decentralization may sound nice in theory but rarely come from classroom teachers who have been involved in decentralization for any length of time. I believe that the book's perspective on school-based decision-making is rooted less in a commitment to grass-roots democracy than in a capitulation to marketplace ideology and the onslaught of market-based reforms such as vouchers for private schools. (For a critique of the marketplace approach to education reform, see the Rethinking Schools special publication, [Selling Out Our Schools: Vouchers, Markets, and the Future of Public Education](#).)

Throughout the book, the authors link market forces, the "new institution of public education," and the need for entrepreneurship among teachers. They correctly criticize unions for "propping up dysfunctional school systems" and rightfully advocate for more decision-making at the school level. But they appear willing to dismantle necessary centralized functions and accountability. Their vision of schools is so decentralized that the dominant power in education becomes marketplace forces -- which honor individual decision-making over collective democracy and which have always privileged children and families who have the money to seek out the best neighborhoods, schools, and educational services.

I believe that teacher unions can more effectively fight voucher and privatization schemes -- and recalcitrant school boards -- if they embrace educational innovation and flexibility. But Kerchner et al. seem to view innovation and flexibility as ways to make a market-based public school system more palatable.

What About Social Justice?

The authors' willingness to accept a market-based ideology of school reform is linked to an even more fundamental weakness in the book -- the lack of analysis of schools' relationship to broader social issues. True, the authors talk about the future of schools in what they term a "knowledge society." But they ignore social issues of class, race, and gender inequalities. Without a broader social analysis, it's hard to talk about whether reforms such as charter schools, national teacher certification, or national standards will promote equitable and quality schooling for all children.

The authors delineate between old style unionism, which concentrates on "industrial" issues such as wages and working conditions, and a new unionism that organizes around "mental" issues such as quality teaching and education reform (don't forget, the book is titled *United Mind Workers*). Some traditional union activists are critical of the idea that "industrial" unionism is obsolete. They argue that

given the "management" mentality of school boards and the anti-worker policies of many state governments, teacher unions need to keep a focus on "industrial" issues and tactics. I agree. But if teacher unions also adopt more "professional" stances -- which at times conflict with traditional "industrial" concerns such as seniority -- we will strengthen our ability to fight those forces who unrelentingly attack teachers and our system of public education.

Kerchner et al. help sharpen the debate around "industrial" versus "professional" unionism. But it is disappointing that the authors fail to recognize that teachers must also organize around "social" issues such as race and class inequity -- a concept I call "social justice unionism." Kerchner and colleagues are not completely oblivious to the connection between the broader social world and the conditions of learning and teaching. In the closing paragraphs of the book they hint at the role teachers can play in social issues. "Teachers are in a position to advocate for children and to assist parents and families in building safe, decent communities," they note. They also write that "teachers, in greater numbers to a greater extent than any other adults, spend time with the nation's children," and that "unions can effectively advocate for children and can ... lead in recreating a politics of justice, tolerance, and kindness."

The problem is that in their entire 212-page book, this is all they have to say about social issues. Despite the huge impact on schools of problems such as poverty, discrimination, substance abuse, and joblessness, the authors are silent on how unions might help build a more just and equal society. One could read *United Mind Workers* and come away with the idea that all that is needed to transform American schools is for teacher unions to reorganize themselves on more professional lines.

The authors make important suggestions. But such proposals will not lead to quality education for all children unless they are linked to a commitment from teacher unions to work for social justice at the local, state, and national level.

It is unfortunate that the authors didn't mention any efforts -- either historical or current -- of unionists advocating social justice or unions building coalitions with community forces to improve social conditions. The history of AFT Local 5 in the latter half of the 1930s is one example. Working in Harlem, the union collaborated with local community, parent, and church groups. The collaboration succeeded in getting two new schools built, in removing racist textbooks, and in promoting the study of African-American history and culture.

Granted, such examples are not common. But that's related to one of the main points I want to make. If teacher unions are truly concerned with safeguarding their members' rights and preserving our system of public schools, they must take up policies that promote social justice. It is not just urban schools that are in crisis in this country. Our urban centers themselves are at risk. In response, most politicians advocate the building of more prisons, beefing up police forces, carving out "safe" neighborhoods for the middle class, and privileging urban development focused on sports stadiums, corporate office space, and arts facilities. Rather than ignoring such realities, teacher unions should be in the forefront of demanding social policies that provide more resources for our children, families, and schools, particularly in urban areas.

Ignoring Race

In failing to take up social issues, the authors commit an even more egregious error: they don't deal with race. It's hard to believe that in 1998, a book on education could ignore this issue. There are any number of important educational matters related to race -- ranging from affirmative action, to the decreasing number of students of color in teacher training institutions, the racial gap in achievement scores, to problems with teacher expectations of students, to the increasingly white teaching force in urban schools that are increasingly populated by students of color. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that race is central to the future of schooling in this country.

By failing to underscore issues of race, the book makes it impossible to highlight positive examples of how some unions have dealt with race and diversity -- such as the British Columbia Teacher Federation's anti-racist initiative. This review is not the place to examine all the implications of such an omission, but hopefully a similar oversight will not be made in the conversations around an AFT/NEA merger.

Despite its shortcomings, however, *United Mind Workers* is sure to spark much-needed debate on the future of teacher unionism. In particular, it should foster discussion of professional issues that have too long been ignored in some union circles. Its shortcomings should not deter people from reading the book. My hope is that people go beyond the authors' analysis and wrestle with how the NEA and the AFT can embrace "social justice unionism" as a way to transform public education and preserve its democratic spirit.

*Bob Peterson (REPMilw@aol.com) is an editor of **Rethinking Schools** and teaches in Milwaukee.*

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