

# Survival and Justice: Rethinking Teacher Union Strategy

by Bob Peterson

**N**EVER IN THE HISTORY OF OUR NATION HAVE PUBLIC schools been under such relentless attack. Never in the history of teacher unionism has there been a greater urgency to rethink strategy.

To meet these challenges, our public schools and our teacher unions should set two key goals: survival and justice. Furthermore, these goals are inextricably linked. Our system of public education and our teacher unions will not survive unless they more forthrightly address issues of social justice.

To put the matter succinctly, those who understand the vital importance of a system of public education must simultaneously defend and transform our public schools so that they equitably serve all students. And those who understand the vital role of teacher unions must simultaneously defend members' rights while building a new vision of teacher unionism.

In recent years, there has been growing attention to these complicated questions. In particular, an increas-

---

***Social justice unionism views itself as part of a broader movement for social progress rather than merely focused on narrow self interest.***

***It calls for participatory union membership, education reform to serve all children, collaboration with community organizations, and a concern for broader issues of equity.***

---

ing number of teacher unionists understand the need to move beyond a traditional industrial approach and recognize that teachers are also professionals responsible for building better schools. Thus they advocate what has been called "professional unionism." Within this professional unionism trend, some have advocated "social justice unionism." Simply put, this third approach builds on the best of industrial unionism,

embraces essential concepts of professional unionism, and adds a vision of social justice. This social justice perspective is grounded in the need to advocate for all students which in turn leads directly to confronting issues of race and class. This perspective informs a range of topics — from union democracy to the purpose of schooling, from teachers' relationships with students, parents, and community to the need to radically restructure society.

I believe a significant number of teacher union-



Kathy Sloane

---

## Imagine If Your Teachers Union...

- Had so much respect in the community that when a parent had a problem in a school, the parent would not only talk to the principal and their child's teacher, but to the union rep as well.
  - Operated a teachers' development center where teachers taught teachers and earned university credit for participation.
  - Ran a mentoring program where every new teacher received intensive help from a mentor who had enough time to help new teachers.
  - Had a community outreach program in which union members regularly spoke at churches, community groups, sororities, and fraternities in order to garner support for public education.
  - Was racially diverse and reflected the composition of the student body.
  - Self-monitored its members so that all teachers were of high quality.
- 

ists will be drawn to a social justice perspective, if for no other reason than it is in teachers' long-term self-interest. What in the past may have been dismissed as the luxury of "doing the right thing" is now a matter of necessity. If teacher unions are to survive, they must take responsibility for building better and more equitable schools. But better and more equitable schools will not be possible unless there is increased attention to providing opportunities for all students and their families within society at large. Our schools, in the long run, will only be as healthy and vibrant as the communities they serve.

In this essay, I will lay out the current political context, particularly as it relates to education. I will then look at the key components of the three strands of teacher unionism (industrial, professional, and social justice). Finally, I will end with a look at two top issues in education — teacher accountability and the racial dynamics of schooling — and how the different models address these issues.

### Political Context

Efforts to rethink teacher-union strategy take place within a complicated political context, especially the public education "crisis" and the conservative and anti-union backlash. There are also the specific peculiarities of teachers as public service workers.

The public education "crisis" operates on two parallel tracks. On the one hand, there is a very real crisis facing our public schools. On the other hand, the crisis, especially as it is portrayed in the media, is manufactured as part of a broader political move to privatize and defund our public education system.

Anyone involved in education knows that there is a crisis in schooling — and that this crisis is centered on issues of equity. It's not that this country does not know how to educate children, but that we do so unequally. It's not that this country doesn't have good schools, but that they are clustered in affluent communities. It's not that this country refuses to spend money on children, but that it is disproportionately showered on already privileged children. As a result, there are an increasing number of

under-funded, unequal, and segregated school systems that are doing an admittedly inadequate job of educating their students. This has a particularly negative effect on low-income students in urban areas.

But the crisis that is portrayed in the media is of a different nature. The media crisis rarely talks of inequitable funding, of widely disparate communities with widely disparate resources, of this country's growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Instead, this media crisis cuts a broader swath and acts as if public schools cannot do anything right and that teacher unions are the enemies of education.

This is where the crisis in education intersects with the conservative and anti-union political milieu. The media's portrayal is based in part on the journalistic approach that "good news is not news" — in other words, only bad news and controversy are worthy of a story. But it is also the result of groundwork by the conservative movement. For years, a well-funded network of right-wing foundations, think tanks, and legal agencies have coordinated their attacks on public schools as part of a broader goal. Their purpose is not to resolve the real crisis in education, the crisis of inequality. Rather, their goal is to reduce public oversight and responsibility for our schools and instead make schools beholden to the rules of the marketplace. As educational consultant Ann Bastian has noted, "Privatizing public education is the centerpiece, the grand prize, of the right wing's overall agenda to dismantle social entitlements and government responsibility for social needs."

Attacking public schools has served another political purpose for conservatives. Low-income African Americans and Latinos are those who have been most dis-served by our public schools. Conservatives have focused on winning over Latinos and African Americans in order to both build support for their voucher and privatization initiatives and to win over constituencies that have traditionally been viewed as part of the Democratic Party base.

Conservatives also recognize the power of the teacher unions — as a check on private and corporate power, as major supporters of

the Democratic Party, and as bulwarks of support for progressive national policies ranging from health care, to gay rights, to bilingual education, to affirmative action. Thus they have used their attacks on public education as a way to erode the power of teacher unions.

Unfortunately, these attacks on teacher unions are coming at a time when the labor movement as a whole is on the defensive and progressive social movements are on the decline.

Both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) rose to national prominence in the mid 1960s and early 1970s at the time of a more robust labor movement and a strong civil rights movement. In comparison, the current attacks against teacher unions come in the midst of a 30-year decline in the U.S. labor movement and a waning of many social movements, in particular the modern civil rights movement. Overall, union membership has fallen from about 31% of the labor force in 1970 to just under 14% in 1998, even though levels of public service (and teacher) union membership have risen.

The diminished power of the civil rights movement is reflected in the rollbacks of affirmative action, social welfare, and other equity-enhancing programs. One telling indication of the changing times: President Johnson launched a War on Poverty; President Clinton capitulated to the conservative war on welfare.

This is the broad political context in which teacher unions operate. But there are added complexities, because teacher unions represent public service workers. This leads to three particular problems.

#### Public Service Workers

First, as public sector workers, teachers are paid through taxes which come disproportionately from working people. Therefore, the needs of schools and teachers are often pitted against the stretched budgets of poor and working taxpayers. Conservative and business interests have successfully manipulated this contradiction to justify decreased funding of public schools, especially in urban



Jean-Claude Lelune

areas.

Second, teachers do not produce tangible gadgets such as cars, wrenches, or lawnmowers. The “product” of teachers’ work is the education of children. Autoworkers can go on strike and demand that, as human beings, their needs take precedence over producing mere steel and chrome. But if teachers are seen as placing their needs above the needs of students, they understandably risk jeopardizing public support.

Third, the issues of race and institutional inequality complicate the role of teachers. The unequal character of schooling manifests itself in many ways — in segregated school districts, the racial gap in achievement, and funding inequities. Race is also an issue when looking at questions such as the predominantly white composition of the teaching force and the lack of a quality multicultural curriculum in most schools. Thus schools often become a focal point for racial tensions.

Race is at the heart of so many issues confronting our society — poverty, health care, housing segregation, unemployment, to name a few. Schools, despite their inequities, remain the main social institution committed to a vision of equality. As such, schools are expected to solve the problems of racial inequality without a complementary effort in other parts of society.

## Imagine If Your Teachers Union...

- Played a role in determining who enters the teaching profession.
- Had a program against racism and prejudice, with a place teachers could turn to for staff development, curricular materials, and support.
- Worked in an on-going alliance with community, parent, and labor groups on a range of social policies.
- Held membership meetings that were lively exchanges on important educational and social issues, rather than top-down assemblies of leadership speeches and reports.

## New Strategies for a New Time

The precarious position of teacher unions has sparked debates on strategy within both the NEA and AFT. NEA President Bob Chase has called for a “new unionism.” AFT President Sandra Feldman has called on teachers to take more professional responsibility for school success and failure. (See pp. 107 and 111.)

Delegates at state and national conventions have hotly debated these issues. Many questions have been posed: How can teacher unions best defend public schools? How can unions ensure that teachers are treated more professionally? How can unions better serve the needs of all students while defending the interests of teachers?

Such debates are not new, nor are they unique to teacher unions. Historically, union leaders have had to weigh their own members’ interests against the interests of the broader working class. (See article, page 20, on how some unions in the past excluded women and people of color.)

There are also contemporary examples. In private industry, unions may support ecologically questionable construction projects or needless government “defense” programs, both of which benefit relatively few workers at the expense of many. Among public-sector workers, including teachers, a union’s focus on worker protection may come at the expense of the quality of the service provided to the broader public.

Teacher unions (and many other unions, for that

matter) need to rethink their strategies and move beyond narrow trade-union protectionism. Otherwise, they will remain isolated from their natural allies. Conservatives will take advantage of such isolation to help destroy not only teacher unions but public schools.

In looking at these complicated questions, I have found it helpful to look at three different models of teacher unionism: “industrial-style,” “professional,” and “social justice.” I would like to add an important caveat, however. These are somewhat arbitrary distinctions, most useful in helping to frame discussion. In practice, the models are rarely so purely implemented and often overlap, blending into one another depending on circumstances.

The essential components of each approach are:

- The industrial unionism model focuses on defending the working conditions and rights of teachers.
- The professional model incorporates yet moves beyond an industrial model and suggests that unions also play a leading role in professional issues such as teacher accountability and quality of school programs. NEA President Chase’s call for “new unionism” has been most identified with this professional model.
- The social justice model embraces concepts of industrial and professional unionism, but also is linked to a tradition that views unions as part of a broader movement for social progress. It calls for participatory

union membership; education reform focused on serving all children, with special attention to collaboration with parents and community organizations; and a concern for broader issues of equity throughout society.

### Industrial Unionism

It would be foolhardy not to recognize the strengths of the industrial unionism model. Indeed, it is an unfortunate commentary that many current teachers are unaware of the history of teacher unionism.

Tens of thousands of new teachers are replacing retiring veterans who were



Kathy Sloane

part of the militant teacher struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The new teachers have grown up in an era when “free-market” ideology and individual entrepreneurship have reigned supreme. Their teacher education programs have taught them next to nothing about what it took to win decent working conditions for teachers.

New teachers need to understand that a key strength of teacher unionism has been organizing and winning the right to collectively bargain. Paying teachers respectable wages and benefits and defending their academic and procedural rights can contribute to the overall quality of education. While some teachers, particularly in the NEA, don’t wish to admit it, this strength depends on teachers having a “trade-union consciousness” that recognizes that teachers, like other working people, sell their labor power in order to survive and need protection from management.

For instance, Marjorie Murphy writes in her book *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA 1900 - 1980* of numerous cases of arbitrary dismissal of teachers. The reasons ranged from being married (for women), to being members of integrated organizations (in the South), to being, or accused of being, a communist (particularly in New York). More recent examples include teachers who have been disciplined for their sexual orientation or their political activism. With the growing strength of the religious right and its increasingly successful efforts to influence school boards, teachers must be vigilant in defending basic rights of academic freedom and due process.

Wages, working conditions, and teacher rights were the main focuses of the industrial-style teacher unionism that became dominant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The AFT initially was more willing to go on strike and was more successful in convincing teachers from large cities to join its union. This helped propel the NEA toward a more militant industrial-union model. For the NEA, this meant a significant change; until the mid-1960s, its national leadership was dominated by superintendents and administrators who tended not to see teachers as “workers” in the traditional union sense of the word.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, both the AFT and NEA were conducting strikes to ensure better wages, benefits, and pensions, as well as job protection from dictatorial principals and school boards. This forced most school districts in the country to bargain collectively (with the South being the notable exception). The two unions grew in size and strength; through their collective bargaining agreements, they

helped determine a wide range of policy. Relationships with local school authorities tended to be contentious and adversarial. Unions put a priority on protecting the rights of teachers, while district administrators focused on protecting their bureaucratic power and procedures. The best interests of children were often slighted.

There are several crucial shortcomings to the industrial approach. Often, it has lead teacher unions to negotiate contracts that rarely address broader educational and professional issues. To be fair, this is not just because of narrow attitudes on the part of union leaders, but also because of restrictive state laws and management’s desires to dominate school operations. These factors engender a “serve the contract” mentality that narrowly focuses on individual members’ concerns rather than larger professional or social issues.

---

***To insist that our schools ensure the success of all students is important for the sake of equity and for basic job satisfaction — when we go home at night we want to know that we’ve been successful.***

---

#### Professional Unionism

Both at grassroots and national levels, there has been increasing uncomfortableness with the constraints of the industrial union approach. As a result, there have been calls for “professional unionism” — a phrase used extensively by professors Charles Kerchner and Julia Koppich in their book, *A Union of Professionals: Labor Relations and Educational Reform*, (see article on page 123).

The most successful advocates of professional unionism have kept, yet moved beyond, the strengths of the industrial model. In particular, several pioneering locals have maintained a focus on defending teachers’ economic and social well-being, while at the same time they have promoted innovative reforms that speak to the interests of students. These locals include the Rochester Teachers Association led by Adam Urbanski, the Columbus Education Association led by John Grossman, and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers led by Tom Mooney (see articles, p. 31 and p. 51). (Ironically, although the AFT traditionally has been viewed as the more militant industrial-type union, and the NEA associated with a more “profes-

sional” approach, it has been AFT locals that have tended to be pioneers in radical innovations such as peer review and career ladders.)

In addition to innovative local leaders, the move toward a professional model of unionism has been promoted by a variety of national leaders — mostly significantly the NEA’s Chase and the AFT’s Feldman. But it also includes members of the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), a grouping of 21 AFT and NEA local presidents. (See article, page 22.)

The hallmarks of professional unionism are:

- Teachers are professionals who uphold high teaching standards.
- Teachers understand the interdependency of teachers with the local school authorities; collaboration, not confrontation, is the preferred approach.
- Teachers, and not just management, are responsible for ensuring that all students are learning and that all teachers are quality teachers. Quality teaching is the main way to ensure equity for all students.

The clearest articulation of professional unionism was in a February 1997 speech by the NEA’s Chase, shortly after he became president. (See excerpts, page 107.)

“Simply put, in the decade ahead we must revitalize our public schools from within or they will be dismantled from without,” Chase said. “... The fact is that while NEA does not control curriculum, set funding levels, or hire and fire, we cannot go on denying responsibility for school quality. ...

“Our new directions are clear: putting issues of school quality front and center at the bargaining table, collaborating actively with management on an agenda of school reform, involving teachers and other school employees in organizing their schools for excellence.”

#### Social Justice Unionism

Some have advocated a new vision of unionism that would go beyond professional concerns and ground itself in a commitment to social justice. The clearest articulation of this perspective was in the document “Social Justice Unionism: A Working Draft.” (See page 128.) The document was written in the summer of 1994 during a “union institute” sponsored by the National Coalition of Education Activists and attended by activists from the AFT and NEA, including national staff, state and local officers, and rank-and-file members.

The working draft outlined seven “key components of social justice unionism.” The first three components give a flavor of the document, arguing that social

justice unionism should:

1. Defend the rights of its members while fighting for the rights and needs of the broader community and students.
2. Recognize that the parents and neighbors of our students are key allies, and build strategic alliances with parents, labor unions, and community groups.
3. Fully involve rank-and-file members in running the union and initiate widespread discussion on how education unions should respond to the crises in education and society.

I see social justice unionism as moving beyond a “trade-union” or “professional” perspective to a “class-conscious” perspective. This class-consciousness recognizes that teachers’ long-term interests are closer to those of poor and working people whose children are in our public schools, than to the corporate leaders and politicians who run our society. It views parents and community as essential partners in reform, with a stress in urban areas on developing ties with communities of color. It is committed to a bottom-up, grassroots mobilization — of teachers, parents, community, and rank-and-file union members.

Essential to social justice unionism is a recognition that schools have played a dual, contradictory role in society. On the one hand, they reinforce and reproduce class, racial, and gender divisions and inequality. On the other hand, they provide an opportunity to break down those divisions and inequalities. For all their faults, public schools are one of the most local, democratically controlled institutions in society. They are a constant battleground of competing visions and priorities.

A social justice perspective struggles against those practices that mirror and replicate society’s inequalities — practices such as tracking, narrowly defined standards, infatuation with standardized testing, and admissions requirements for public schools. Further, a social justice perspective mobilizes teachers and parents to overturn such inequitable policies. How a union positions itself in such educational debates will demonstrate whether the union is serious about educating all children or whether it is merely paying lip service to such a goal.

A social justice unionism approach, for example, would caution against knee-jerk reactions by teachers and their unions to complicated matters such as student discipline, and would call for safeguards against racial or class biases in any policy. A social justice approach would also challenge long-established practices of teachers that condone and perpetuate

tracking, and demand feasible alternatives. It would be wary of some union leaders' tendencies to comfortably co-exist with corporate or conservative approaches to standards and high-stakes testing.

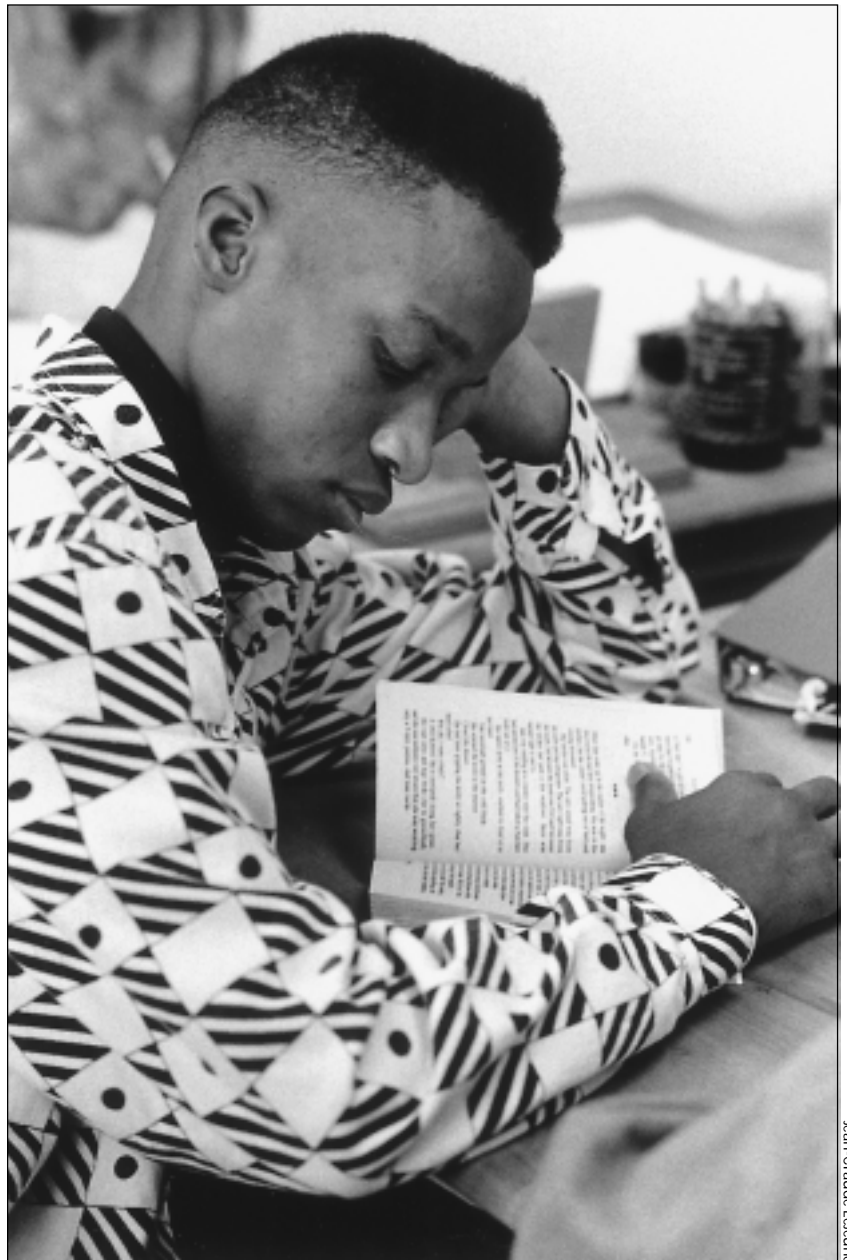
#### Teacher Accountability

How might the differences in these three approaches play out on a particular issue? Looking at teacher accountability provides some clues.

Those advocating a more professional approach have focused on teacher accountability as a primary concern. Authors Kerchner and Koppich note that, traditionally, teacher unions have tended towards an industrial union model of accountability. This model sees accountability as the responsibility of principals and supervisors, not teachers. (It is sometimes referred to as an "external" accountability system, because it comes from outside of the teaching corps.)

Clearly, unions have the legal and ethical responsibility to protect the due process rights of all teachers, even incompetent teachers. In practice, however, this traditional, industrial approach to accountability has meant that the unions have taken a hands-off approach to doing anything at all about ensuring a qualified teaching corps. The industrial union response generally has been, "That's management's problem." The truth of the matter, however, is that most principals find it uncomfortable to confront bad teaching practices and often don't follow established procedures for getting rid of incompetent teachers. Most traditional teacher accountability systems dance around the hard issues of teacher quality and instead focus on the technicalities of the dismissal process.

Those advocating professional unionism argue that teacher unions must look beyond the self-interest of individual teachers and consider the broader needs of schools and children. They respect and honor the rights to due process, but also promote "internal" teacher- and union-based controls on quality. Some of the mechanisms they have used include peer mentoring, peer evaluation, and career ladders. (See articles on these innovations in the "Promising Practices" section, beginning on page 31). One of the clear advantages of peer review is that moves the dialog away



Jean-Claude Lelune

from procedural technicalities of the dismissal process, and instead focuses on the substance of teaching and how to improve that teaching.

While a professional approach stresses "internal" accountability over the "external" control of a principal, a social justice approach might add additional components. It would suggest that parents and community have input in teacher evaluation.

The Rochester Teachers Association, for example, negotiated a provision in their contract to encourage parent input in teacher evaluation. The provision involves soliciting parent input in teacher/home communication and homework matters. It is an

important step in recognizing that parents should be more than just homework helpers and pizza fundraisers. (A related issue that unions are increasingly dealing with is overall parent participation in schools, in particular setting up structures so parent voices are truly listened to and respected. Such questions have been particularly complicated because of the racial and class contradictions of schools, and in some districts because of organizing by religious right forces against progressive programs and teachers.)

A social justice perspective also holds that unions should promote accountability and equity on a district-wide level. For example, the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers conducted a survey to determine which high schools were offering calculus and advanced language courses. The survey found that predominantly lower-income neighborhood schools were not offering these classes while specialty schools and the college-prep high school were. The union's subsequent organizing around the issue caused a major policy shift in the Cincinnati Public Schools, which instituted a special allocation to schools to ensure the availability of advanced classes at all schools.

The Issue of Race

How to deal with racism and race relations is a

daunting problem for any institution in this country. It is particularly difficult for schools and teachers.

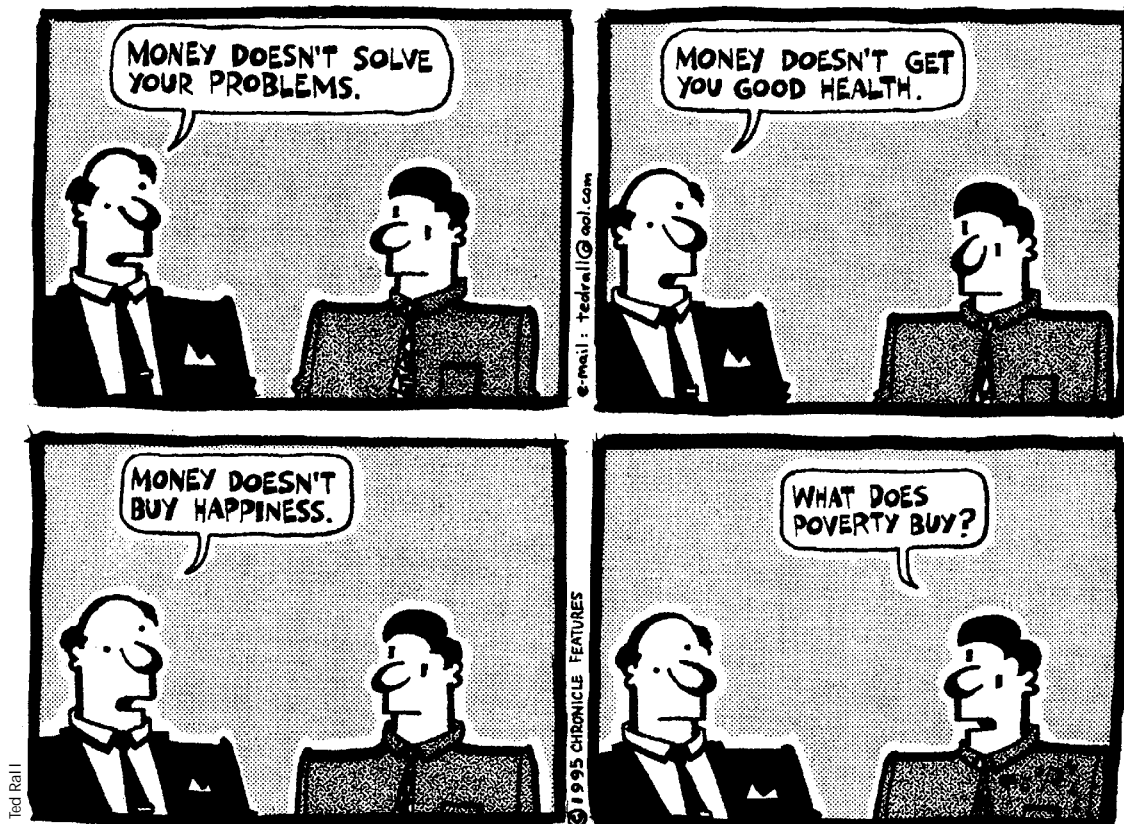
Teacher-union relations with communities of color have been particularly affected by an approach that prioritizes the interests and rights of teachers above the concerns of students and community.

The most prominent example in recent decades was the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike in New York City. The conflict centered on the extent to which local communities (in this case, mainly African-American communities) could control their schools, particularly with respect to staffing. The union was opposed to community control, arguing parents should not make staffing decisions. The union won the battle, but at a daunting price. To this day, this strike is often cited as an example of the insensitivity of white-dominated unions to the community's legitimate concerns over the education of its children.

The controversy over staffing often is connected to issues of seniority. In Boston, for example, the teachers union went to court in the early 1980s to overturn programs that attempted to sustain the number of teachers of color, via a system of "super-seniority" in lay-offs. Such a "super-seniority" approach was designed to replace the traditional system of "last hired, first fired," because teachers of color tended to have

less seniority.

More recently, in Milwaukee, the union has yet to fully recover from the repercussions of its decisions in the early 1990s regarding staffing at two innovative African-American immersion schools. The schools were specifically set up to deal with the high academic failure rates among African Americans, especially males. Because of the unique nature of the schools, there was a request that one-third of the schools' teachers be





African American. The union opposed the request because it violated contract provisions that set a maximum percentage, ranging from 23 to 28 percent, of African-American staff at district schools. Many in the African-American community still cite the controversy as an example of why the union cannot be trusted to care about the education of African-American children — even though in recent years an African-American woman has been elected union president and the union has shown increasing flexibility. For example, in 1999 the Milwaukee union negotiated a contract provision which allows school-based committees to side-step seniority to hire staff based on their compatibility with the school's mission and needs (see contract-language excerpt, page 64).

Professional unionism — as a whole — tends to downplay issues of race. When asked, advocates will often note the importance of race. But documents, written discussions, and conference topics, generally fail to highlight the centrality of race. For example, in Chase's speech announcing the NEA's new unionism, the issue of race is not even mentioned once. Likewise, documents of the Teacher Union Reform Network rarely talk about race directly.

In contrast, a social justice union approach would directly take on issues of race. The British Columbia Teacher's Federation, for instance, runs an education program which deals with race on personal, political, and pedagogical levels. Through a combination of workshops, training sessions, policy statements, and youth organizing, the provincial union has encouraged teachers to discuss and deal with race issues. (See article, p. 52.) Another example, albeit on a smaller scale, is the Cleveland Teachers Union's development and distribution of a teaching guide on African-centered/multiculturalism curriculum in 1995.

A key priority of social justice unionism is building coalitions and alliances with parent and community advocacy groups that speak to both school reform and ensuring equity in society as a whole. There are, unfortunately, not a plethora of examples showing such alliances. But some unions have taken noteworthy and positive steps to reach out to their logical allies. For example, the California Teachers Association and the Washington Education Association worked against statewide referenda prohibiting affirmative action. On a local level, some union locals have aggressively supported programs to recruit teachers of color, building ties with community groups in the process.

## Conclusion

Historically, teacher unions have operated on the premise that their overarching responsibility is to protect their members. I would argue, however, that in the long run, unions will be able to do so only if they adopt a social justice model.

Unions are under ferocious attack and will not survive unless they are seen as advocates of school reform. Of necessity they must adopt more responsibility for the teaching profession and the academic achievement of students. Further, only by building alliances with community and parents will unions be able to withstand the conservative onslaught.

But even the best-run school district in the world cannot, over time, compensate for all the inequalities in our society — which is why a commitment to social justice must go beyond education and reach into all aspects of society. If teachers want true equal educational opportunity for their students, they must work for equal opportunity throughout society, not just in education but in health care, employment, and housing.

Social justice unionism also makes sense on a more individual level. Teachers, as all workers, want to go home at night and know they have been successful during the day. When their students live in poverty and without health care, when their students are without hope because they see unemployment everywhere in their community — then the teachers' job is all the more difficult.

In the past, other unions have faced difficult challenges and set ambitious goals. Today, teacher unions face a similar challenge. We must demand and build a democratic teacher union movement that recognizes its interests are bound up with the interests of the children and communities we serve. Only then will we be able to gather sufficient forces to ensure that public education gets the resources that schools deserve and that children need. **TU**

---

Bob Peterson teaches 5th grade in the Milwaukee Public Schools and is an editor of *Rethinking Schools*. He's been a teacher union activist for nearly two decades.

## Resources

Kerchner, C. and Julia Koppich. *A Union of Professionals: Labor Relations and Educational Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

Murphy, Marjorie. *Blackboard Unions, the AFT and the NEA 1900 - 1980* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).