

Understanding Challenges for Urban Educators in the Age of Trump through a Deweyan Lens: New Dangers and Old Responsibilities

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What should Donald Trump’s election as President change for educators, teacher educators, and researchers—and for those of us who, in particular, work in and with low-income communities of color in cities?

Dewey argues that our transcendent obligation as educators is not to a particular institution but to our profession.¹ What is that obligation now and how do we fulfill it? I suggest in these comments that our analysis of how to satisfy our professional responsibilities should emerge from an understanding that those who are at the helm of our government will, if they are allowed, intensify policies that will harm our students, their communities, and our schools. I propose ideas about operationalizing a moral and pedagogical commitment to protect our students and our society’s democratic aspirations.

As academic research catches up with policies put in place based on economic beliefs

about the “free market” and “choice,” we see evidence of how policies like school closings, charter schools, and privatizing services, justified rhetorically as “putting kids first,” have been harmful. Even when policies are not accomplishing what was claimed they would, as has been demonstrated about effects of vouchers in Milwaukee, advocates may contend the weakness is in implementation rather than the premises of the reforms.²

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Despite accumulating evidence that education reforms we call “neoliberal” have intensified racial segregation of schools and failed to boost achievement, under the Trump administration, these policies will be intensified, but likely without the explicit bipartisan support that has heretofore characterized the project. One question is how alterations in state and federal relations will impact implementation of privatization.³

Teaching and Teachers in the Aftermath of the 2016 Election: A Deweyan Perspective

² Ford, M. R., & Andersson, F.O. (2016). Determinants of Organizational Failure in the Milwaukee School Voucher Program. *Policy Studies Journal*, 18, 1-19.

³ Another issue, one that takes me beyond the focus of this article, is how to address continuing support within the Democratic Party for privatization, while juggling this project with push from civil rights organizations on equity concerns.

¹ Dewey, J. (1933). The underlying philosophy of education. In W. H. Kilpatrick (Ed.), *The Educational Frontier*. New York: The Century Co.

In “My Pedagogic Creed,” John Dewey sets out how the dynamic interaction between the psychological and sociological configures learning, observing that students’ psychological needs drive the interaction.⁴ Dewey’s assertion that that students’ psychological needs drive learning means teachers, teacher educators, and researchers must provide hope and nurturing to our students, creating safe spaces in our classrooms, and if we can, our schools. We need to see and address the psychological and emotional needs of children who are fearful they or family will be deported; worried they will be attacked if they respect their religion; or angry at violence directed at their communities by police.

However, for Dewey, the teacher’s responsibility includes defending democracy and public education.⁵ Dewey arrived at his understandings of teachers’ social responsibilities over time, becoming increasingly involved with social justice in the society, and conditions in schools, as he worked directly with teachers and schools.⁶

Dewey’s legacy helps us understand how this juncture in history presents an urgent need to see our classrooms in the context of the school and society, and for us to challenge inequality and injustice. At the same time, he explained that looking only outside the school is insufficient. For schools to support democracy, they must themselves be democratic institutions. He observed:

until the public-school system is organized in such a way that every teacher has some regular and representative way in which he or she can register judgment upon matters of educational importance, with the assurance that this judgment will somehow affect the school system, the assertion that the present system is not, from the internal standpoint, democratic seems to be justified...For no matter how wise, expert, or benevolent the head of the school system, the one-man principle is autocracy.⁷

Teachers unions, for reasons I explain briefly below and more fully elsewhere,⁸ are often ignored as resources to democratize schools and the society. They have been regarded by many social justice activists as irrelevant, or worse, opponents of progressive change.

Yet Dewey’s slogan, “education for democracy, democracy in education,” was for most of its history the banner under which the American Federation of Teachers organized teachers to unionize.⁹ Understanding the potential of teachers unions to support social justice struggles for social, political, and economic equality is now more essential than ever for urban schools, students and teachers.¹⁰

A new civil rights movement, Movement 4 Black Lives, is emerging side-by-side with protests by immigrant youth, responding to communities under attack by anti-immigrant sentiment and deportations.¹¹ These social move-

⁴Dworkin, M.S. (1959). *Dewey on education, selections*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵Dewey, J. (1903, December). Democracy in education. *The Elementary School Teacher*, 4(4), 193-204. Dewey, J. (1929). *The sources of a science of education*. New York: Horace Liveright. Dewey, J. (1933). The underlying philosophy of education. In W. H. Kilpatrick (Ed.), *The Educational Frontier*. New York: The Century Co.

⁶Nebeker, M.L. (2002). The teacher and society: John Dewey and the experience of teachers. *Education and Culture*, 18(2), 14-20.

⁷Dewey, J. (1903, December). Democracy in education. *The Elementary School Teacher*, 4(4), 193-204, p. 195.

⁸Weiner, L. (2012). *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

⁹Weiner, L. (1996). Teachers, Unions, and School Reform: Examining Margaret Haley’s Vision. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, 10(3), p. 85.

¹⁰Weiner, L., & Jerome, D. (2016). *Urban teaching: The essentials*. New York: Teachers College Press.

¹¹Wood, G. K., Lemley, C. K. (2015). Mapping Cultural Boundaries in Schools and Communities: Redefining Spaces through Organizing. *Democracy and Education*, 23(1), article 3. Available at

ments are responding to economic, political, and social policies that have devastated communities of color in the cities and diminished possibilities for public education to serve all students well. While activism on social justice issues in education among and for communities of color—after years of little recognized movement-building—has finally been brought to public attention, the contestation of power within city teachers unions has received scant attention.

Yet a development under the radar of educational research and the mass media is how a new generation of teacher union activists committed to social justice is winning leadership in their local and state unions.¹² The history and transformative leadership of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) have heralded and supported the emergence of a new generation of teacher union activists who are challenging the premises on which teacher unionism, indeed the US labor movement, have operated for a half-century.¹³

CORE's transformation of the CTU is a highly significant political development that is an actual and potential "game changer" in teacher unionism.¹⁴ One key element of this change is in developing relations between parent, teacher, and community that sidestep the "blame game" that has undercut creation of respectful alliances.¹⁵

<http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss1/3>.

¹² Rottman, C. (2013). Social justice teacher activism. A key to union vitality. In Erika Shaker (Ed.), *On the Front Lines: Teachers, Unions, and Social Progress* (pp. 73-81). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹³ Uetricht, M. (2014). *Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity*. New York: Verso Books.

¹⁴ Barlett, R. (2013). Creating a new model of a social union: CORE and the Chicago Teachers Union. *Monthly Review*, 65(2), 12.

¹⁵ Gutierrez, R.R. (2013). Beating the Neoliberal Blame Game: Teacher and Parent Solidarity and the 2012 Chicago Teachers' Strike. *Monthly Review*, 65(2), 24.

The project DeVos and the Trump administration will now advance aims to eliminate spaces in schools for critique, social justice teaching, and the voices of parents and communities historically underserved by public education.¹⁶ As I explain elsewhere, powerful elites who share information and policies across international borders understand (unfortunately, more than do most teachers) that, despite teachers unions all too glaring problems, they are the main impediment to the project of public education's destruction being fully realized. Even when unions don't live up to their ideals, teacher unionism's principles of collective action and solidarity contradict neoliberalism's key premises: individual initiative and competition. Labor unions presume people have to work together to protect their common interests, which contradicts the "survival of the fittest" ethos of the "free market."

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Another reason unions are a threat, making them a target of legislation that limits their ability to organize, is that they can exercise institutional power. Because unions have institutional roots, they are a stable force. A union can draw on a regular source of income: membership dues. These characteristics give teacher unions an organizational capacity seldom acquired by advocacy groups or parents.

Paradoxically, the very factors that make teachers unions stable and potentially powerful

¹⁶ Compton, M., & Weiner, L. (Editors). (2008). *The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions: Stories for resistance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

also induce hierarchy and conservatism. Neither unions as organizations nor union members as individuals are immune to the prejudices that infect a society, even when these prejudices contradict the union's premises of equality in the workplace. Though the popular media cast teachers unions as powerful, the unions are quite weak at the school site, where an educated, mobilized membership is their source of strength. Many union leaders are disoriented and confused, and the well-orchestrated, extravagantly financed, anti-teacher and anti-teachers-union propaganda campaign has succeeded in partially discrediting the unions as organizations—and even the idea of teacher unionism itself.

International solidarity isn't charity. It's in our self-interest, as is democratizing and revitalizing teachers unions.

Yet, transformed teachers unions can provide a muscle that parents and advocacy groups very much need. This new kind of unionism builds consensus with its potential allies on educational issues by examining how all stakeholders view the problem—before taking action. In cities as different in size and demographics as Minneapolis and Detroit, Philadelphia and Portland, teachers unions or reform caucuses within these unions have organized actions with parents and students, including demonstrations, packing board meetings for presentations, circulating petitions presented to the board and local politicians, and civil disobedience—even occupying the school building. In what has become a model for other reformers, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators, elected to lead the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), developed a program that lays out what schools should look like and what Chicago

children deserve—and don't receive because of educational apartheid.¹⁷

CTU's strike and contract negotiations were used quite creatively to fight for improvements that affected children directly, like providing teachers the right to distribute books on the first day of school and providing air conditioning when the temperature soars. For example, the union countered the Mayor's insistence on a longer day for students (for more test preparation) and no extra pay for teachers with a demand for a better day, and the rehiring teachers of art, music, and physical education.

A Global Perspective is Deweyan

One challenge we face is that the attacks on public education and teachers' unions that low-income communities of color feel most acutely are part of a global project. For this reason, teachers resistance must be international, too. Here, too, Dewey's career guides us. He traveled widely to assist many other countries to reform or create their systems of public education so that schooling advanced democracy.¹⁸

Education policies are borrowed and adapted through international collaboration of the wealthy and powerful, in economic organizations and international summits.¹⁹ We have an important stake in the success of teachers' resistance elsewhere in the world because their movements helps weaken what is a common opponent. International solidarity isn't charity.

¹⁷ Barlett, R. (2013). Creating a new model of a social union: CORE and the Chicago Teachers Union. *Monthly Review*, 65(2), 12. Lipman, P. (2013). The rebirth of the Chicago Teachers Union and possibilities for a counter-hegemonic education movement. *Monthly Review*, 65(2), 1. Available online <http://monthlyreview.org/product/mr-065-02-2013-06/>.

¹⁸ Westbrook, R.B. (1993). John Dewey. *Prospects*, 23(1&2), 277-291.

¹⁹ Compton, M., & Weiner, L. (Editors). (2008). *The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions: Stories for resistance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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Moreover, we have much to learn from struggles of teachers unions elsewhere in the world. They often have a more organic relationship with communities and social justice campaigns, as is shown by teachers in Mexico, struggling to democratize their own union as well as battling their government to defend the right to a free, public education for all Mexicans.²⁰

Our Work and the Future

As I write, no one knows what our political future holds. Regardless of what opponents of a free, quality, publicly-controlled system of public education propose, the basic contour of our activism should be to identify resources we can as individuals and organizations mobilize to protect our students and public education.

The Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project at New Jersey City University aims to provide the resources for transformed teachers unions and communities to develop mutually respectful alliances. These bonds should emerge from a shared understanding that stark inequality in US public education has been present since its creation. Though teachers and teachers unions did not create systems of public education, they share responsibility, along with the rest of educational establishment, for an unjust, unequal status quo. And though there have been important exceptions, teacher unions have more often than not shown complicity and silence about systemic racism in education.²¹

²⁰ Bacon, D. (2016). Mexico: Blood on the textbooks. *Guardian* (Sydney), 1747. Retrieved at <https://search.informit.org/documentSummary;dn=326485366611777;res=IELAPA>.

²¹ Rousmaniere, Kate. 2001. White silence: A racial biography of Margaret Haley. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 34(2), 7-15.

Two key assumptions that underlie the Policy Project's work distinguish it from other think tanks producing materials that critically scrutinize the claims and outcomes of reforms associated with privatization. Both are, I think, consistent with Dewey's principles and ideals.

First, the Policy Project does not assume that US education must be changed to conform to the needs of transnational corporations. As has been the case since creation of public education, academic credentials remain essential for individuals to obtain well-paying jobs.²² However, it is also true that most jobs being created today do not require advanced academic skills and do not pay well.²³

Both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders pushed economic equality into the forefront of national debate during the Presidential election.²⁴ Though they differed sharply in their analyses and programs, campaign rhetoric highlighted the problem of corporations shifting jobs to other countries. However, Sanders highlighted that this dynamic occurs not only because of trade per se but also due to disparities in wages and working conditions among countries.

What was not a focus of debate—but that is germane to education reform—is that the number of “good jobs” is shrinking, and only a small fraction of the population will be able to obtain them.²⁵ For education activists, under-

²² Labaree, D. F. (1988). *The making of an American high school: The credentials market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²³ Anyon, J., & Greene, K. (2007). No Child Left Behind as an anti-poverty measure. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(2), 157-162.

²⁴ Hirsch et al. (2017). A wasted opportunity. *The Jacobin Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-unions-randi-weingartenleo-casey-labor-movement-racism/>.

²⁵ Anyon, J., & Greene, K. (2007). No Child Left Behind as an anti-poverty measure. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(2), 157-162.

standing this is key, because reforms carried out in the name of “higher standards” and “excellence” mask how schooling and the economy are actually being resynchronized.

Education is being refashioned to diminish the number of students who obtain the sophisticated thinking and skills needed in highly-paid white collar or professional jobs. And as proponents of policies that are dismantling the old system of public education correctly observe, it is most often students of color—living in communities that have been poorly served by public schools—who are excluded from this competition for the shrinking number of well-paid jobs.

This analysis of the labor market and the economy has complex implications for teachers unions that want to push back on educational policies that diminish opportunity for poor students of color in cities. On the one hand, education cannot create jobs and reverse the economic devastation many communities face—though that is an essential issue teachers unions must raise within organized labor. At the same time, schools and teachers that are better supported can help more students to succeed academically.

Often the reasons for students’ lack of academic success and the ways to solve it are cast as an either/or: Either schools are to blame or factors beyond the school walls are responsible. In fact, social justice activists and teachers unions, working together, need to change school and teaching practices as well as struggle for economic and social policies we know will reduce poverty, unemployment, and social oppression.

The challenge for teachers unions is to acknowledge that some schools (and teachers) do not serve kids well and can and should do better while exposing realities like child hunger, homelessness, and unemployment that undercut what even the best schools and teachers can do.

Strong Alliances and Transformed Teachers Unions

The other assumption that makes the Policy Project unique and that configures the briefs is its contention that teachers unions need to be transformed to be more effective in defending members and the public good. Despite their potential, teachers unions, as they exist in many cities, are not reliable allies for social justice initiatives or strong defenders of the working conditions that support learning.

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Yet a movement of activists is rebuilding teachers unions on different principles. They may call their aim “social justice” or “social movement” unionism, but they share a commitment that union power needs to come from the bottom-up, as it does in social movements.

A social movement teachers union is committed to democracy at the school and in the school system. It is this commitment to democracy that opens the door to building authentic alliances and coalitions with community groups, parents, and students, as well as other unions. Leading transformed teachers unions is demanding in a way that heading a traditional labor union is not. Arlene Inouye, an officer of the United Teachers of Los Angeles and a Policy Project advisory board member, observes: union democracy and power from the bottom up, for us, has required extensive communication and collaboration with our governance bodies. But in a paradoxical way, it has also required more leadership from the top, in putting

forward our goals, and plans for the coming years... In engaging with union leadership, we open up a dialogue and space for feedback, and we alter our plans accordingly. I've learned that carrying out social justice unionism requires stronger leadership but in a collaborative and collective spirit.²⁶

The Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project aims to support this new generation of social movement teacher unionism activists to stretch the union's definition of "what counts" for members. Using research and insights from activists for social justice, the Policy Briefs that we produce will try to help transformed teachers unions understand their role as connective tissue, linking struggles for a just, equitable society—and world—to teachers' immediate concerns about their pay, their work, and their schools.

In the coming months, Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Briefs will explore policy controversies by scrutinizing fundamental assumptions about what we want from schools and then applying these understandings to analyze how policies already proposed or enacted fit with those assumptions and vision.

We invite ideas and authors for Policy Briefs and commentaries as well as suggestions for topics that are in Dewey's tradition of advancing our profession's obligation to make schools democratic and strengthen democracy. Lois Weiner is Professor of Elementary and Secondary Education at New Jersey City University, where she directs the Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project and coordinates a Masters in Urban Education for experienced teachers. She writes widely in diverse venues about education and teacher unionism. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) honored her first book

Preparing Teachers for Urban School, for its contribution to teacher education. Most recently she and Daniel Jerome revised *Urban Teaching: The Essentials*, (2016, Teachers College Press.) Her book, *The Future of our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice*, (Haymarket Press) is a primer about how transformed teachers unions might contest the global project that is reshaping education to suit the demands of transnational corporations.

²⁶ See <http://www.utla.net/about-us/officers/arlene-inouye>.