

If Not Now, When?

BY DAN PERLSTEIN

American teacher unionists have at times joined with working-class community activists in a common battle to win more equitable and democratic schooling for all children. At other moments, teacher unionists have defended the centralized administration of schools against activists demanding community involvement in educational affairs. Unions both have been active participants in efforts to promote racial and gender equality and have opposed such initiatives. In a society marked by profound social divisions, notions of social justice in education are inevitably as varied as those proposing them. Visions of social justice, moreover, reflect a mixture of self-interest and ideological commitment. Amid all the competing ideals buffeting schools and the teachers who work in them, unionists' interpretations of self-interest and visions of social justice have themselves fluctuated and evolved.

In no city have the varied ideologies and alliances of American teacher unionism been more visible than in New York, and no city has played a more prominent role in the history of teacher organizing. Throughout the 20th century, New York has been a caldron of progressive social, intellectual, and political movements, a climate that has nurtured and enlarged the visions of unionists. Life in the epicenter of American teacher unionism has been in many ways atypical of conditions in the rest of the United States. Still, focusing on exceptional moments in American teachers' history can illuminate the obstacles to the pursuit of social justice teacher unionism as well as its richest potential.

Unionism, Professionalism, and Gender Equity

Teacher unions arose at the beginning of the 20th century, when schools responded to the class and ethnic conflicts of America's burgeoning cities with new mechanisms of centralized governance and administration, new bureaucratic procedures to sort students and divide work, and new forms of technical

and professional knowledge to guide educators. As historian Marjorie Murphy demonstrates, reformers hoped to isolate teachers, most of them women, from the working-class communities in which they taught, to win teachers' allegiance to male central-office professionals, and thus to have schools help maintain order in America's fractious cities.¹

Teachers were torn between old allegiances and the promise of a new professionalism. Unlike Chicago, where elementary school teacher Margaret Haley led a militant, community-based campaign that forced corporations to pay their school taxes and won a pay raise for teachers, leading New York teacher unionists shared the professional aspirations of elite reformers. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) traces its history to the Teachers Guild and the Teachers Union, inheriting from the two earlier organizations both its status as Local 5 of the American Federation of Teachers and its commitment to professionalism. The Teachers Union (TU) was organized in 1916. Union founder Henry Linville possessed a Harvard Ph.D., and over the years, as the UFT notes on its web page, top teacher unionists included "Ph.D.'s, accountants and even lawyers — men like Jules Kolodny, Dave Wittes and Charles Cogen."²

The male-dominated Teachers Union showed little interest in gender equity. At the same time as the TU struggled to attract a handful of teachers to unionism, New York's Interborough Association of Women Teachers, under the leadership of deputy-superintendent Grace Strachan, organized 14,000 women teachers with demands for equal pay.³ As in Chicago, commitment to the social justice ideal of gender equity served the self-interest of most teachers.

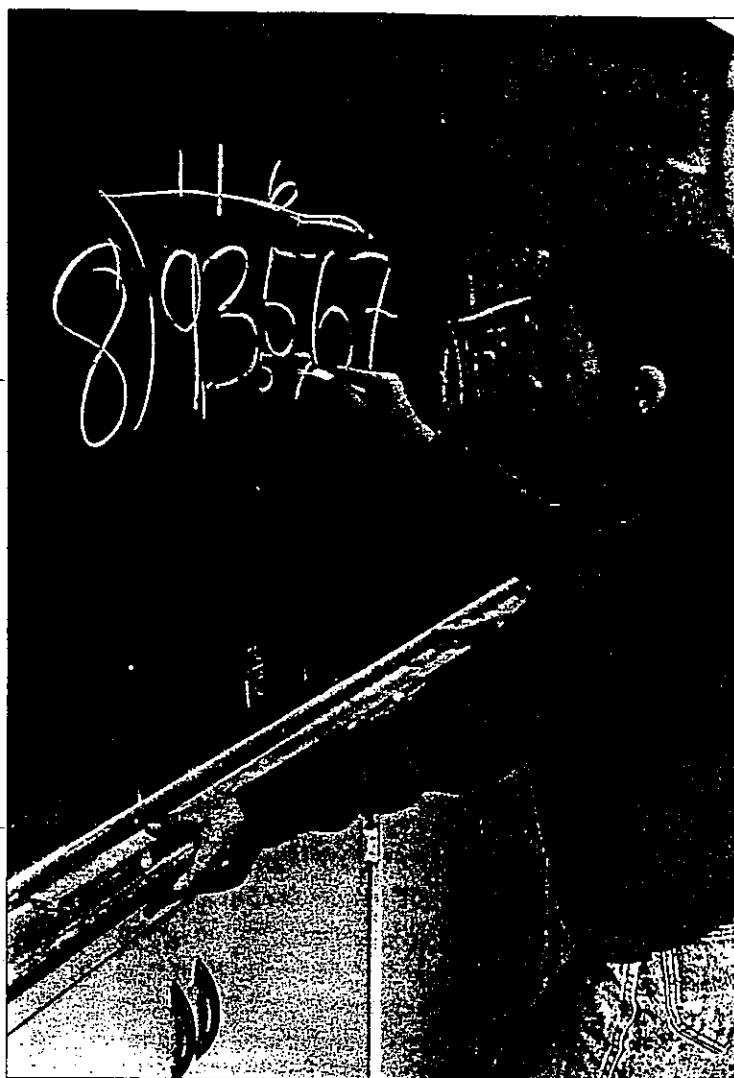
Acceptance of male privilege and insensitivity to women's concerns have been ongoing issues in teacher-union politics. Although as early as 1925, women comprised 50% of the TU Executive Board, and in the 1930s, they outnumbered men at union meetings, when Henry Linville's ideological descendants founded

the United Federation of Teachers, New York organizers once again ignored women teachers as potential unionists. "When teachers loudly and publicly bicker with each other, when tongue-clucking 'talk' and futile hand wringing are substituted for vigorous action," UFT president Charles Cogen argued in urging teachers to abandon other organizations, "how can we expect anything but contempt?" Cogen labeled an "old woman" a teacher "of any sex or age who ... accepts unquestioningly ... [the] dictates of anyone in authority over him, and who refuses to protest — even mildly — any unwarranted transgressions into his professional domain." In the early 1960s, the UFT's founders focused their efforts on angry young men in the junior high schools, and were completely surprised — and unaffected — when thousands of female elementary school teachers participated in early UFT actions. When, in the late 1960s, the UFT was locked in bitter conflict with Black community activists rather than with central administrators, union leaders would again view inflexibility as a virtue rather than a failing.⁴

The Teachers Union

Today's UFT traces its ideological and organizational roots to New York's Teachers Union, formed by Henry Linville and other social democrats. Through electoral campaigns and, especially, labor organization, social democrats sought to extend political democracy to economic life. Social democrats believed that the United States could evolve gradually toward socialism without a fundamental re-ordering of its political structure; that if distinctions of class could wither, other, more superficial social divisions would disappear even more easily; and that the U.S. might achieve a universally held culture, with universal standards of judgment, into which all would assimilate. Racial problems, in this view, were largely caused by and subservient to class conflicts. The social democratic response to American racism received its most famous expression from Eugene Debs, who defended "the Negro's right to work, live and develop his manhood, educate his children, and fulfill his destiny" equally with whites. Still, he claimed, "The Socialist Party is the Party of the whole working class, regardless of color," and therefore it had "nothing special to offer the Negro."⁵

Aspiring to professional respectability while espousing a mildly reformist vision of socialism, New York's social democratic teacher unionists placed more faith in discrete lobbying campaigns than in mass demonstrations. Until the 1930s, Linville and his followers retained firm command of the Teachers Union, but



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amid the growing activism and radicalism of the Depression years, teachers began to demand that the union take a more militant stand on school issues and broader political questions. When a Communist-led rank-and-file coalition won control of the Teachers Union in the 1935, the original Socialist leadership bolted the TU and formed the Teachers Guild, an organization which soon won the backing of the American Federation of Labor and in 1960 gave rise to the United Federation of Teachers.

Following the 1935 split, commitments to social justice animated both Teachers Union and Teachers Guild activities. But they were not always the same commitments. The Communist-led TU, notes historian Robert Iversen, attracted large numbers of teachers both through its "vision of a better world" and through its "indefatigable militancy and organizational skill in day-to-day struggle."⁶ Despite the exodus of the

social-democratic faction and the opposition of school officials to teacher unionism, the TU grew from 1,200 members in 1935 to 6,500 in 1938.⁷

One of the most significant differences between the TU's new leadership and Linville's more moderate group was its response to school racism, which the TU now made a major focus of its work. Although Blacks constituted only a small percentage of New York's students in the 1930s, school segregation and discrimination were already well-established. "Old, poorly equipped and overcrowded" schools were a primary

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source of Black discontent, a 1935 city investigation reported, and "many of the white teachers" assigned to Harlem schools "regard the appointment as a sort of punishment."⁸ Even after he became disillusioned with Communism and left the Party, former Communist leader George Charney fondly recalled TU's militant activism:

Pressing their demands for better schools, more schools, textbook revisions, Negro teachers and principals, free lunches, and so forth ... mothers came [to meetings] *en masse* to organize programs, assign delegations, and join in city-wide activities. In every school, white teachers, with the active support of the Teachers' Union, came forward to collaborate with the parents in this inspired effort to transform a community through education.⁹

Alice Citron, a leader in the overlapping Communist and Teachers Union circles of the 1930s, epitomized Depression-era anti-racist school organizing. In her Harlem classroom, Citron's lessons included original plays drawn from Black history, and she compiled bibliographies on Black life for other teachers. After the end of the school day, she volunteered in campaigns to institute a free lunch program, the celebration of Negro History Week, and improvement of school facilities.¹⁰

The theory on which TU based its anti-racist campaigning originated in the American Communist

Party. Extrapolating from the crucial role played by national minorities in the Russian Revolution, and influenced by demands for African-American self-determination, Communist reasoned that the union of the working class and Black community could catalyze the formation of a revolutionary movement capable of challenging American capitalism. Even if the Communist vision of self-determination for an "oppressed Negro nation" has rightly been dismissed as "a bit of 'fatuous romance,'" notes historian Mark Solomon, it led Communists "to deal with racial issues and attitudes in ways that were totally beyond the awareness and comprehension of most white Americans," and gave rise to "the most determined efforts of a predominantly white organization to achieve equality since the abolitionists."¹¹

TU members joined with parents and community activists to organize pickets against the brutal corporal punishment of Black students and to secure the construction of Harlem's first new schools in decades. For almost twenty years, TU-led coalitions in Harlem and Brooklyn remained New York's most militant and effective grassroots school reform effort. Although most teachers never joined the TU's radical campaigns, once again, principled efforts improved working conditions and enriched teachers' work.

The TU's ability to simultaneously promote the interests of white teachers and of Black communities provided it no protection from the anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthy era, when hundreds of activist teachers were forced out of the school system and parents were cowed into ending association with "subversives." In 1950, the Board of Education declared that neither it nor school supervisors and administrators was permitted to "negotiate, confer, or deal with or recognize [the Teachers Union] in relation to any grievances or any personal or professional problems, nor grant to said Teachers Union any of the rights or privileges accorded to any teacher organization." The ban, which lasted until 1962, destroyed the TU and cleared the way for the rise of the UFT.

The Teachers Guild and the UFT

Even in the heyday of the TU, Guild activists were promoting an alternative vision of teacher unionism, one that would lead directly to the establishment of the United Federation of Teachers and through it to the transformation of teacher organizing across the United States.

Within the Guild, a younger generation of teachers combined the mild reformism of Linville's generation with the militancy of their Communist competitors.

The Guild, according to veteran socialist and future UFT leader Jeannette DiLorenzo, "was a social movement as well as a trade union movement." Like many future UFT leaders, DiLorenzo had grown up in a home where "the religion" was "being part of an international movement." She studied socialism and Marxism at the Rand School and honed organizational and leadership skills in the Young People's Socialist League. Through countless meetings, debates, and bare-knuckled ideological and organizational battles, future UFT and AFT leaders mastered a vision of teacher unionism which they would maintain steadfastly through future decades. "I never stopped to analyze whether it was good people I was working for" DiLorenzo would remember. "It was the idea; it was working for a better world."¹²

When the Civil Right Movement arose in the South in the 1950s, the Guild's response was shaped by its continuing commitment to the Debsian ideal of full opportunity for workers of all races. Prodded by the Guild, as early as 1951, the AFT voted to charter no new locals that practiced racial discrimination, and by 1956 the union ordered southern affiliates to desegregate or be expelled. The AFT's efforts contrasted with those of the National Education Association, which did not fully desegregate until the 1970s.¹³

A vision of uniting all teachers and a strong commitment to unionism remained hallmarks of the New York AFT local when the Guild reconstituted itself as the UFT in 1960. "The goals of the embattled teachers," UFT founder Dave Selden claimed, "were the usual worker goals—higher wages, better benefits and improved working conditions. Perhaps the ultimate goals were higher status and dignity."¹⁴ AFT President Carl Megel argued in 1962 against equating teachers with such professionals as doctors and lawyers: "A doctor or a lawyer is a businessman.... A teacher is a worker. You are a day laborer."¹⁵

When the UFT initiated its organizing campaign, it received tremendous support from the labor movement. Unions donated tens of thousands of dollars and lent field workers for the 1961 election in which the UFT won the right to represent New York's 43,000 teachers. Noting that white-collar employees had come to outnumber blue-collar workers in the United States, UFT Pres. Charles Cogen acclaimed the election as labor's biggest collective bargaining victory since the UAW organized Ford's River Rouge Plant in 1941.¹⁶

While portraying teachers as workers, UFT leaders also sought to promote teacher professionalism. If a teacher were "considered a production worker," UFT founder Dave Selden conceded, such issues as class size

would be non-negotiable questions of educational policy rather than issues of working conditions. "But a teacher is not merely a production worker. He is a professional," and like other professionals, Selden argued, teachers had a right to be "self-directed and use their judgment in their work." By this definition, he argued, teachers might rightly negotiate over class-size not because large classes "sweated" teachers into undue hardship but because teachers rightly had a say in pedagogical issues.¹⁷

Unionists' understanding of teachers' work was not the only reason they invoked teacher professionalism as well as industrial unionism. The emergence of teacher unionism signaled important changes in American economic and political life. After World War II, automation and deindustrialization led to a decline in the number of number of factory jobs, and together with McCarthy-era repression and pro-management changes in labor law, to an even steeper drop in blue-collar unionism. Meanwhile, the number of state and local government jobs mushroomed. New York City alone lost 40% of its one million manufacturing jobs between 1950 and 1969, but increased its 375,000 government jobs by 40%.¹⁸

Union leaders were keenly aware of changes in the labor force, changes which made organizing groups such as teachers crucial to the future of the labor movement. When Brotherhood of Electrical Workers President James B. Carey addressed the NEA's 1962 convention, he pointed to the UFT's New York campaign as a model for teachers across the United States. The NEA's simple professionalism, Carey argued, "implies that your *craft* is somewhat above this world of ours; it implies a detachment, a remoteness from the daily battle of the streets, in the neighbor-



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hood, and in the cities." Without unions, he warned, teachers would lack decent wages and thus the ability to "afford integrity and honesty" in their work.¹⁹ Another union official made the big picture plain. "How long will the file clerk go on thinking a union is below her dignity," he asked *Business Week*, "when the teacher next door belongs?"²⁰

The synthesis of industrial unionism and professionalism proved immensely popular with teachers in New York and across the United States. Still, teachers' self-directed activity involves the direction of other persons. Inevitably, the new professionalism distanced city teachers from the urban communities in which they worked. Nowhere was the potential for conflict between urban teachers and the families they serve more clear than in New York.

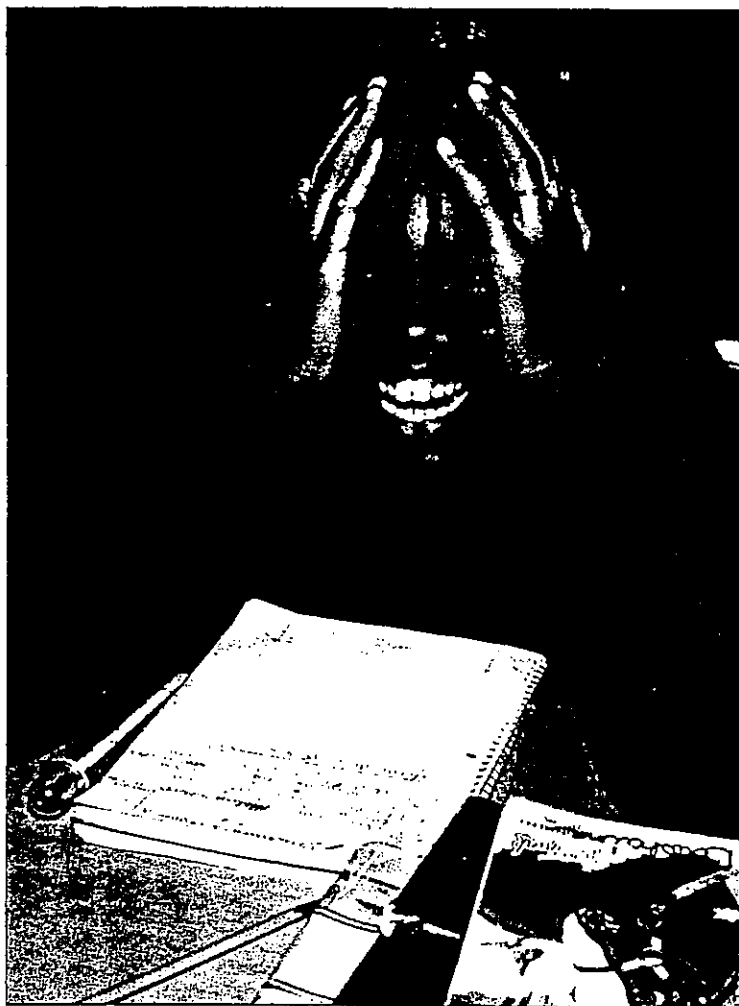
By the late 1960s, the racial politics of education, together with wider changes in urban life, had undermined Black activists' faith in the good will of white teachers. The UFT never applied to local race-relations problems the militant commitment to racial equality

which informed its response to Southern struggles. Among the accomplishments of which the union boasted to teachers, for instance, was its having "killed the Superintendent's plan to force teachers to transfer to difficult schools."²¹ In 1964, when over 400,000 of New York's one million students boycotted school in order to press for integration, the UFT declined to endorse the protest.²²

Following the failure of the campaign to integrate New York's schools, Black activists increasingly demanded that school curricula and jobs be controlled by Blacks themselves. In 1968, experimental local school boards in Brooklyn's Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood and the IS 201 district in Harlem became the focal points of New York's political life. After the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board attempted to remove 13 teachers from the district's schools, the UFT went out on strike for much of the fall of 1968. By the end of the year, the UFT had won its strikes and effectively ended the movement for decentralized "community control" of schooling.

In defense of the union's position, UFT leaders argued that the same principles of race-blind due process and interracial solidarity that had led them to support the Civil Rights Movement justified their opposition to community control. Nevertheless, in the context of the school conflict, invocations of professional autonomy increasingly dominated Debsian notions of working-class solidarity. Teachers, future AFT president Sandra Feldman claimed on the eve of the 1968 conflict, "in general support civil rights and equal educational opportunity, but their commitment to a fight for improved schools was ... largely, and understandably, self-interest ... a struggle to create a respected profession from a beleaguered, downgraded occupation."²³ "We don't deny their equality," a white teacher claimed while walking a UFT picket line, "but they shouldn't get it by pulling down others who have just come up. It's wrong and reactionary for them to pit their strength against a group that struggled for years to make teaching a profession."²⁴ "It has always been the intent of the UFT," Al Shanker claimed in the face of Black demands, "that community participation does not mean that those decisions under professional control should be surrendered." Union teachers, he stated bluntly, "will not continue to teach in any school or district where professional decisions are made by laymen."²⁵

In addition to the heightened passions of the moment, the very conditions of urban school teaching contributed to teachers' willingness to distance themselves from the communities in which they worked. By



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the late 1960s, a majority of New York's students were Black or Latino; meanwhile, most teachers were white. An increasingly wide physical, cultural, and political gulf separated teachers, who could abandon cities for suburban retreats, from their students, who lived in decaying urban neighborhoods. The majority of teachers, New York teacher activist and future urban school reformer Deborah Meier has observed, brought prejudices against poor minority children to their work, and "rather than undermining these prejudices," the teaching experience "arouses them."²⁶ Amid the troubling and visible tragedy of widespread minority student failure, adherence to seemingly uniform, race-blind standards of instruction asserted teachers' professionalism while absolving them of responsibility for their ineffectiveness.

The same economic changes that led the labor movement to organize teachers and other white-collar workers also undermined the UFT's invocations of working-class inter-racial solidarity as a vehicle for advancing Black freedom. As factories disappeared, industrial democracy could no longer animate the imagination of New York's poor. Their grievances — welfare rules, police brutality, poor city services, urban renewal, and school policies — were the results of an oppressive state rather than an oppressive boss. Indeed, as Black teacher activist Rhody McCoy argued, the people of Ocean Hill-Brownsville were a "community" because "they were involved in struggles with poverty programs, with political machines They've had common goals and interests."²⁷ At a time when community activists in New York and across the United States increasingly embraced demands for Black Power, the April 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. dashed any residual faith in the promise of racial integration.

Despite the changes in urban life, UFT leaders insisted throughout the 1968 conflict that the social democratic politics of interracial solidarity remained the surest means of securing real power for Black Americans. Current AFT president Sandra Feldman was a leader in the UFT's 1968 struggle. Community control, she argued, "strengthens segregation and places upon poor communities the burden of creating desperately needed, massive, substantive, programmatic changes in their schools." Only the federal government, Feldman insisted, "can provide the kind of resources needed" to substantially improve inner city education "and only a massive coalition of forces can prod Congress into action."²⁸

By 1968, however, U.S. government commitment to social welfare programs and racial equity had already

begun to ebb. When AFL-CIO leaders endorsed the UFT's 1968 fight against community control, however, it was because of the union's importance "not only for the future of teacher unionism but for the growth and expansion of white collar and public service employee unions as well." Even as they endorsed the UFT, labor leaders signaled the degree to which teacher unionism had distanced itself from the needs of working-class communities.²⁹

The 1968 school crisis established the UFT's powerful role in school politics and urban life, a role that benefited teachers in later salary renegotiations. Moreover, the same ideals of professional autonomy that brought the UFT into vicious conflict with Black community activists led it to be an early advocate of gay teachers' right to be judged by their work alone and not their identity.³⁰

Victory in 1968 was, however, expensive for New York's teachers. In the years following the school conflict, racial tensions demoralized school work and undermined the very liberal coalition that the union claimed to seek. In an earlier time, the UFT's rhetoric of equal opportunity, due process, industrial unionism, and professionalism might have enabled members to transcend narrower views and individual bigotry. In 1968, the UFT's anachronistic invocation of interracial working-class solidarity legitimized racial inequality in the contested world of the schools, a result that has led virtually every commentator to conclude that "no crisis in recent New York City labor relations history evokes such despair as events ... in 1968."³¹

The Past and Future of Social Justice Unionism

Self-interest alone is inadequate as a guide to personal action or social analysis in part because self-interest is never really clear. "Conditions," John Dewey observes, are not "fixed or even reasonably stable Social conditions are running in different, often opposed directions. Because of this fact the educator ... is constantly compelled to make a choice. With what phase and direction of social forces will he throw in his energies?"³² Teachers' notions of self-interest — and the alliances to which they give rise — inevitably reflect the theories and beliefs which shape their interpretations of social reality.

Teacher unions have at times challenged the inequalities of American life, and fostered broader demands for the public good. At other moments, they have placed teachers' immediate interests and privileges of teachers above more expansive ideals. And often, teachers have been served reasonably well by such visions, even if their more disadvantaged students have

not been. But whatever their short-term appeal, teachers are also harmed by theories which lead them to ally themselves with class, gender, and racial privilege. In order to protect self-interest, public school teachers must, in the long run, protect the public interest.

However much they have differed, the men and women who shaped New York's teacher unionism — people such as Henry Linville, Alice Citron, Al Shanker — have been animated by expansive social visions. This should not be surprising. Although today's attacks on public schools — vouchers, privatization, and the like — are in many ways new, public schooling has always been threatened by those who put privilege above the common good. Will today's attacks on schools and other public services lead teacher unionists to imagine ideologies responsive to today's realities? Will unionists find means of convincing fellow teachers that threatening circumstances demand new coalitions and not circle-the-wagons reaction? The history of teacher unionism raises questions that only its future will answer. **TU**

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Footnotes

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