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Working In, and Against, the Neo-Liberal State: Global Perspectives on K-12 Teacher Unions

Special Issue Introduction

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I am grateful to the editors, and the editorial collective of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, for the opportunity to edit this special issue of the journal. As a journal *Workplace* has traditionally been concerned with issues relating to the university sector and higher education more generally and this invitation from the editors represents a welcome recognition of the need to link developments across educational sectors. It is important to look at how we can learn from each other, and ultimately how we can develop collective capacity for progressive change by making connections, not perpetuating divisions.

The papers collected in this special issue are deliberately diverse – in their style, their format, their authorship and in the countries they focus on. They explicitly reject many of the trappings of academia that are often used as proxies for ‘quality’, but frequently have more to do with reinforcing status and hierarchy. Some of the papers are traditional scholarly presentations of research (and have been peer-reviewed), others are deliberately different in style and intent (and are not peer-reviewed). The range of contributors extends beyond traditional academic faculty and includes teacher union activists and graduate students also. The aim is less a concern with linking theory to practice, and more a concern with connecting ideas and action. It is about a scholarship that is both critical in approach (Apple, 2010) and activist in intent (Koschoreck, 2010). If any of these papers, anywhere, contribute in some small but positive way to helping those engaged in collective struggle to promote a progressive education agenda then this will represent ‘mission accomplished’.

The intention from the outset has been to draw together a range of interesting contributions that are able to situate developments in K-12 teacher unions at a time of momentous historical significance. The particular historical juncture in which we find ourselves presents huge threats both to the quality of public education and to teachers’ working conditions –perhaps on a scale unprecedented in the lifetimes of most teachers,

and certainly most students. However, within those threats there are also opportunities, and the contributions in this special issue are intended to help us understand and explore where such opportunities exist. None of this is straightforward. Those on the Left who are tempted to think that ‘the worse it gets, the better it gets’ should read their history books. Recent election results across Europe show swings to the Right (and Far Right in several cases). Centre right and right wing governments are now in power in virtually all the major European nations. Organised labor has been on the defensive for over 30 years, ever since the organic crises of the 1970s, when led by Thatcher and Reagan in the West, a neo-liberal offensive began to pushback against the post-war Keynesian welfare settlement (Devine *et al.* 2009, Robertson, 2000). This was a key moment in history, when a more explicit class politics of the Right emerged, and the defeat of organised labor became an overt objective of state policy (Harvey, 2005).

This attack on organised labor has been particularly aggressive in relation to the K-12 teacher unions. This is for three reasons. First, and the reason that underpins the others, is because teachers are well organised. In almost all contexts school teachers are amongst the most highly unionised of any occupational group. Despite all the attacks on them, union density levels (percentage of the occupational group in a union) are generally high and have proved resilient. Unlike in many parts of the private sector, there has been nothing to compare with the deindustrialisation experienced in many western countries, and which has severely weakened what were once major and powerful labor unions. Education is, and remains, a strategically important ‘industry’, and is labor-intensive. It requires large quantities of labor, and when this labor organises it acquires an independence and an influence that is a threat to those who wish to re-fashion education along neo-liberal lines.

Second, teachers are relatively expensive. Whilst salaries may not compare favourably with those in similar status jobs in the private sector, when compared to manual worker earnings teacher salaries are relatively costly. Combined with the large numbers of teachers required to provide schooling on a mass scale, then by any definition the total costs of paying teachers represents a major economic cost (in most countries this is in the form of public spending). This situation presents capital with a problem. Education is a necessity to produce the human capital required by industry – but the costs of it (partly paid by taxes on corporate profits) represent a drain on capital accumulation. It is this contradiction that O’Connor (1973) identified as the cause of fiscal crisis and the unravelling of the Keynesian consensus. The consequence is a need to maximise the value of worker productivity by seeking to either depress wages, or increase ‘output’ (or commonly some combination of the two) – in short, the constant need to get ‘more from less’ (Ironside and Seifert, 1995). Unions are an obstacle to these processes. Their organisational capacity gives teachers the wherewithal to defend pay and to resist changes to working practices that intensify their labor process (Stevenson, 2007). This alone makes teacher unions a target, and the focus of policy strategies that aim to weaken and marginalise them.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, is the recognition that teachers’ work is ideological work. Teachers deal with ideas, and the importance of their ideological function is well

understood (Apple, 2003). There is of course nothing inevitable about what teachers do or how they work – education has the power both to reproduce and to transform, and will always contain elements of both and be a struggle between both. Teachers do not automatically work in progressive ways – but it is their *potential* to work in critical and transformatory ways that mean they are always a threat to the established social order. This explains why in recent years they have become the focus of a raft of policies that have as their key objective the control of teachers both individually and as an occupational group. Teacher unions are seen as problematic because they are capable of organising resistance to these disciplinary and controlling pressures. Their traditional defence of teacher autonomy ensures they seek to challenge attempts by the state to tighten control and encourage conformity. They therefore offer the prospect of ‘interrupting’ (Apple, 2006) the trajectory of neo-liberal restructuring.

It is for these reasons that teachers around the world have faced the attacks they have, and why their unions in particular are the specific focus of this assault. This has been most effectively documented in the recent past by Mary Compton and Lois Weiner’s excellent volume *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers and their Unions: Stories for Resistance* (2008). The challenge for teacher unions has been to resist these attacks, and to defend, and extend, the rights and working conditions of their members, and where unions operate in progressive ways, to promote the value of a progressive education based on principles of social justice and democratic participation. There is never anything straightforward about these approaches – the tactics and the choices are always difficult. In a book I wrote recently with colleagues (Carter, Stevenson and Passy, 2010) we discerned a number of responses within English teacher unionism ranging from an accommodation with the central elements of the neoliberal orthodoxy (*rapprochement*), through more direct challenge to the logic of neoliberalism (resistance) to a yet more radical response involving a challenge to neoliberalism coupled with a reconfiguration of the union along more democratic and participatory lines (renewal). In all these scenarios, to different degrees, teachers, and their unions, are simultaneously working within, and against, the neo-liberal state. However, our evidence suggested that unions that adopted a strategy of *rapprochement* often found themselves drawn into arrangements with the state which had a seriously demobilising impact on their wider membership. Furthermore, elsewhere there was little evidence of the type of union renewal advocated by Fairbrother and others (for example, Fairbrother 1996 and 2000). There was evidence of resistance, especially in the policies of the National Union of Teachers; however, on the ground in the schools this was often undermined by a fractured and competitive multi-unionism in which member confidence was weakened by the union’s isolation (see also Hutchings’ review of the book in this special issue). In short, depending on respective union strategies, teacher union members appeared to have been either demobilised, or demoralised, into passivity. The challenge in these circumstances, and as economic conditions worsen, is to forge a new teacher union unity. In some instances this will be built on resisting very directly the pressures of particular policies, whilst in other cases it may involve going with the grain of reforms, whilst seeking to push at the boundaries of their progressive potential. In all cases, the challenge is to mobilise unions and their members to push beyond the limits of current orthodoxies – to break out beyond the parameters imposed by neo-liberal restructuring and offer the prospect of a school system

supportive of social justice, democratic engagement and that offers economic and environmental security and sustainability.

In different parts of the world, teacher unions and their allies, must navigate their own ways through the murky waters of neo-liberal 'reform'. Whilst neo-liberalism is unquestionably global in its reach, with many of the key features of restructuring looking strikingly similar in different countries (not least because it is the same 'policy entrepreneurs' (Ball, 2007) and corporate players who are increasingly working across borders) it is nevertheless the case that such experiences play out very differently in different national and regional contexts. Policy is 'vernacularized' (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010) as it becomes mediated by local circumstance – political institutions, legal frameworks, organisational structures and cultures and indeed the particularities of local teacher union contexts. Papers in this collection seek to reflect the importance of these issues by highlighting the complex issues that unions face, the interesting and innovative ways they are confronting these challenges, and reflecting a range of diverse national contexts within which these struggles are taking place.

All the papers have been written during a period of almost unprecedented capitalist crisis. I have argued elsewhere (Stevenson, 2009) that the current economic crisis is qualitatively different to anything experienced since the 1930s. The difference lies not in its scale, but in its significance. What marks the current crisis as distinctive is that when Lehman Brothers collapsed in September 2008 the ensuing fallout was a crisis out of control. Unlike so many other 'recessions', this was not a periodic 'readjustment' by capital (sometimes deliberately engineered in order to attack organised labor, as per Thatcher and Reagan in the early 1980s), but one in which the western capitalist system was genuinely at risk of meltdown. That it did not was largely due to the rediscovery on the part of the US and UK governments of a limited form of Keynesianism. In the months that followed, political developments were crucial and decisive. Neo-liberalism was economically, politically, socially and morally bankrupt. I do not think it is hyperbole to argue that it was close to death. At this point there was an opportunity for government interventions to not only rescue the economy, but to chart a new political path. One in which economic and social security were privileged over risk and insecurity. One in which markets were not to be worshipped, but regulated. One in which a new citizenship might emerge based on principles of entitlement and greater equality. One in which environmental protection might be prioritised over the relentless pursuit of growth and ever higher levels of consumption (for an alternative take, but similar argument, see David Marquand's excellent May 25th *Comment* in *The Guardian* - Marquand, 2010)

We know now this did not happen. Instead there is the paradox that Keynes' was resurrected from the dead to save neo-liberalism from the same fate, and once that job was done Keynes was laid back to rest, whilst neo-liberalism has re-emerged – revived and reinvigorated. Nearly two years after the collapse of Lehman's we are left with governments squabbling over petty steps to regulate the banks, whilst the same governments are dictated to by 'the markets' for their failure to control their public spending. The failure to do the right thing when neo-liberalism was breathing its last gasps means that there has been no resulting ideological shift in the political centre of

gravity. Rather there is an acceptance by the political elites that the huge bail out of the banks must now be paid for by cuts in public services - an orthodoxy happily endorsed, reinforced, and turned into the new commonsense, by the global media. These cuts will vary in intensity country by country, but are already being felt hard. The situation in Greece is well known (Moss, 2010), and others are predicted to follow in their path. In Ireland teachers have experienced job freezes and across the board pay cuts (T.U.I., 2010). In the UK, following the election of a Conservative led government, forecasters are predicting cuts on a scale that exceed anything experienced in a generation (Curtis, 2010).

The attacks on public education, in all sectors, are likely to be sustained in duration and unprecedented in scale. Whatever one thinks of teacher unions as the vehicles (or not) for progressive thinking and action, it will be teacher unions who will be in the forefront of the campaigns to defend public education. However the choices that face unions will, as always, be both difficult and risky. The fragmentation of education systems, and the introduction of competitive pressures, have always had more to do with undermining teachers' collective power and preparation for privatization than with providing any incentive to 'raise standards'. It is no accident that teachers will face these challenges in a set of highly unfavourable circumstances in which mobilising a unity in action will have been made more difficult by the break-up of public education systems. Securing such unity will be even more difficult where, as per the situation in England described above, teachers have allowed divisions between themselves to persist, where multiple unions proliferate and where there are powerfully competing and conflicting union identities (Redman and Snape, 2006).

However, whilst teacher union unity may be a necessary condition for effective resistance, it will not be sufficient. For that to happen it is vital that teacher unions develop coalitions, and build alliances, with a wider range of groups in civil society – other labor unions, within and beyond their public sectors, parents, students and community groups. It may also be that this cross national assault brings forth greater global activism, in which, facilitated by new technologies, solidarities develop across national boundaries (see Bronfenbrenner *et al.* (2007) for examples of this in the private sector). None of this is new to unions; it is what unions have often done, and with good effect (see Poole's (2007) account and analysis of the teachers' strike in British Columbia). However, that does not make it less difficult and teacher unions do not always have a good history of privileging solidarity over sectarianism (Seifert, 1987). Coalition building is complex, and can be uncomfortable. It often requires courage. Sometimes this involves the need to let go of totemic beliefs – none of which is easy. However, the prize is worth more than the sum of the parts. It is my argument that the coalitions that will be necessary in the forthcoming period have considerable progressive potential. In the dynamic and creative processes that will underpin the way such coalitions coalesce, form and re-form new dialogues will be generated. These may at times be difficult, but they are also likely to be invigorating and vibrant. They will provide an opportunity to raise fundamental questions about the nature of the system that has spawned this crisis, and the type of education people may want in the future. What starts as a defence of the *status quo* has the possibility of becoming a much more progressive

campaign for something new, different and better. In so doing it challenges teacher unions to transcend a limited economism (Jones, 2009), and to begin to articulate a much broader vision of what a progressive education might look like. Another world becomes possible.

There are already signs of the sorts of campaigns I am describing. In England, in a system fundamentally weakened by teacher union divisions, two teacher unions have joined together in a boycott of standardised tests. This is industrial action by teachers that has not impacted on children negatively – quite the reverse. Teachers and children have been liberated from a system that has encouraged a narrow and usually joyless pedagogy, focused overwhelmingly on teaching to the test. It is action that raises fundamental questions about the nature and role of standardised testing (and its importance in the market-driven edifice that is the neo-liberal model of school systems – see NUT, 2010) and indeed opens up the possibility of a much wider debate about the function and purpose of schooling. As such it offers the prospect of bringing about a small, but critical, shift in the ideological thinking that underpins the neo-liberal hegemony and, as the crisis shifts to the public sector, new possibilities to roll back its frontiers begin to emerge.

The papers in this collection raise questions, highlight problems, and identify opportunities that present themselves to those who work in, and with, teacher unions. Many of them do not focus on the economic crisis *per se*, but they are written at a point in time when economic crisis provides the backdrop to these accounts. What they do represent is the work and activities of teacher unions, and teacher unionists, who have been living with neo-liberalism for a long time. They indicate the ways in which neo-liberalism has unfolded in different national contexts, and the different issues this has presented for teacher unions. Crucially, they explore and analyse the different ways in which those working in teacher unions seek to work both within, and against, the neo-liberal state. At one and the same time seeking to defend and extend members' rights within the system, whilst simultaneously trying to challenge the underlying philosophy and push beyond it.

We are proud to include two contributions that provide accounts and up-dates of organisations that in their different ways have concerns relating to K-12 teacher unions. Both the Teacher's Work/Teacher Unions Special Interest Group of AERA, and the Education Labor Collaborative have an interest in promoting the work of teacher unions and readers are encouraged to learn more about the work of these two networks. These contributions to the collection are profiled in the Field Reports section.

First in the article section, Jill Pinkney Pastrana's paper focuses on the impact of neo-liberal reforms in Chile, and the actions of the teachers' union (the *Colegio de Profesores*) to resist the attacks on teachers, their union, and the public school system they work in. Chile has long been regarded, somewhat ignominiously, as the country where neo-liberal reforms were implemented first, and more aggressively, than anywhere else. In the period since the 1973 deposing of Allende Chile's teachers and students have been subject to a relentless onslaught of neo-liberal restructuring by a mixture of both dictatorships and apparently democratic governments. The result is a system where any

vestige of public education hangs by a thread. Jill Pinkney Pastrana points out that teachers, and their union, are fatigued by the long years of struggle, but that new and creative campaigns of resistance do offer hope, not least when these are connected to broader international demonstrations of solidarity.

Cindy Rottmann's paper reminds us that the struggles for progressive change, and for social justice, take place *within* unions as well as *through* unions. All teacher unions are sites of struggle as those within them contest both principles and tactics. Often seeking to reconcile so-called industrial, professional and social justice demands (NCEA, 1994). Whilst it can be tempting to talk of 'the union' it is important to understand the dynamic nature of unions as organisations and the different ways in which competing demands and positions emerge as union 'policy' and the ways in which policy is expressed in the form of union activity and action. Rottmann's paper adopts a micro-political analysis and provides an insight into how the internal struggles within unions manifest themselves, and in turn how these inform union engagement with the state.

Jeff Garsed and John Williamson's paper focuses on developments in Australia. They analyse in detail how the Australian education system has been affected by their own version of neo-liberalism, and how the election of the Rudd-led Labor government has provided more continuity than change when assessed against its right wing predecessor. As in Australia, so too elsewhere (see the experience of the Obama administration and that of New Labour in England), where left of centre governments have been elected their neo-liberal instincts appear most exposed in relation to education.

Heidi Pitzer presents a powerful critique of the *Teach for America* initiative, a project that places graduates without a full teaching qualification in school teaching posts as a form of internship. Her paper illustrates how an initiative that has considerable implications for the quality of education in urban schools is also underpinned by a strong ethos of anti-unionism. She shows how teacher unions are perceived as, and indeed presented as, obstacles to the de-regulated, flexible and privatised school system that *TfA* promotes as the answer to 'achievement gaps'. *TfA* represents a central element of the neo-liberal agenda, with its emphasis on undermining and weakening teachers' collective organisations, and Pitzer's paper raises important questions about how teacher unions in the US need to engage with this.

Alex Alexandrou presents his research on the work of teacher learning representatives in the Scottish teachers' union the *Educational Institute of Scotland*. As Alexandrou's work has developed over time he has been able to chart the development of this new union officer role in which union representatives take an increasingly important role in promoting the professional learning of their colleagues and making continuing professional development (CPD) a bargaining issue. Alexandrou suggests that as these union members have become more established, in some cases, they have taken on a role that begins to challenge some of the dominant ideas in current education policy by promoting an 'alternative agenda' in CPD. As such, these learning representatives illustrate clearly the potential, but often the difficulty, of working 'in and against' the state, seeking to go with grain of reforms, whilst also trying to push beyond them.

Duygun Gokturk's paper echoes many of the issues raised by Pastrana, and reminds us of the hugely difficult, and dangerous, conditions that some teachers endure when they seek to defend their professional status and values by combining with others in a union. Gokturk describes the experience of Turkish teachers as they work in conditions of both military dictatorship and then embryonic and fragile democracy. She uses the concept of liminality to help understand the spaces in which teacher union activists in Turkey can make sense of their world, and their struggles.

I am grateful to all the authors for their contributions. I would also like to extend particular thanks to the AERA Teachers' Work/ Teacher Unions Special Interest Group (several of whom have contributed to this special issue). As a researcher of teacher unions I have always found the intellectual support, and the comradeship, of this group enormously helpful.

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