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## **Connecting Teacher Unions and Teacher Union Research**

The Teachers' Work/Teacher Unions Special Interest Group of the  
American Educational Research Association

It is not uncommon to hear, in some circles, that there is not much available research into teacher unions. This is partly right, and partly wrong, and to start with the 'wrong' first... There is actually quite a lot of interesting research work relating to teacher unions, especially k-12 teacher unions. Indeed there are probably more books and papers devoted to analysing teacher unions than any other single occupational group, certainly in terms of a focus on contemporary white collar occupational groups. Where the statement might be considered correct is in relation to the vast majority of the literature relating to education, education reform and the politics of education. In these works, almost regardless of the perspective of the researcher, the presence, role, contribution, impact (call it what you like) of teacher unions is absent. It is as if teacher unions are air-brushed out of the picture, and yet we know that whatever one's attitude to particular reforms, the precise way those reforms play out in individual schools and workplaces, is shaped significantly, and sometimes decisively, by the activities of organised teachers and the unions that represent them. One has only to read the educational press, or contributions in the blogosphere, to know that teacher unions shape the educational landscape in significant ways and it is important for educational research to reflect that.

Scholars who have traditionally sought to do this often work together through the auspices of the Teachers' Work/Teacher Unions Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. Whilst many teacher unions undertake research through their own organisations, or commission research from outside parties, the AERA SIG is the only forum where those from the academic community involved in undertaking teacher union research can meet together and share work on a regular basis. As the SIG's title suggests, the concerns of the SIG are not narrowly focused on teacher unions, but with wider questions about teachers' work, teaching as work and teachers as workers. The SIG's program at the AERA annual meeting often features many papers concerned with broad questions relating to the labor process of teaching, and wider issues of teacher professional learning. What unites the contributions is a concern with exploring the nature of teaching as work from a perspective that sees teachers as workers, and therefore the link is established between studies of the labor process of teaching and

studies focused on the organisations that represent teachers in the struggles over that labor process.

The SIG represents a broad range of opinion, and a broad range of research interests. That said, the SIG's approach is unambiguously, and unapologetically, 'pro-union'. Those who work within the SIG share a commitment to generating research that helps us better understand teacher unions as organizations, but from a position that sees unions as central to securing a progressive agenda for education generally, and for those who work within education systems. This is not 'fan club' research, quite the contrary. However, it is about creating a space in which those who recognise the importance of teacher unions, not just as 'educational players' in a system, but as vehicles for progressive change, can undertake and promote work in a critical, but supportive environment. As one SIG member once commented – 'It is nice to be able to discuss the real issues in my research, rather than spending most of my time responding to questions asking me to justify the existence of unions in the first place.'

The SIG's values as an academic community are reflected in its practice as an organisation. The group seeks to eschew an inward looking academic-ese and deliberately aims to engage with those outside of the academy. Teachers, union activists and union officers are encouraged to participate in the SIG, with several presenting papers at the annual meeting. A premium is placed on research that overcomes the spurious, and specious, divide between 'researchers' and 'the researched' , and which helps connect ideas with action. The SIG's inclusive culture is also reflected in its international character. Perhaps because it is the only such body in the world, it is arguably inevitable, that the SIG acts as a hub for researchers around the world, and the SIG committee, and its program at AERA, always reflect interests that go way beyond North America. That said, interest is still largely drawn from the Anglophone nations (USA, Canada, UK, Australasia) and a priority in the coming period will be to seek to make links with colleagues elsewhere in the world who are doing excellent work, and often in very difficult circumstances.

Within AERA the Teachers' Work/Teacher Unions SIG is a minnow – and sometimes officers feel they have a job defending the place of the organisation within the wider framework of AERA. However, the SIG continues to thrive with a committed group of officers and an excellent annual meeting program each year. The atmosphere at SIG sessions is always convivial as well as provocative and many of us involved in the group have found it tremendously supportive as a means of nurturing interest in our work, and helping us make contact with others doing similar work elsewhere. There is always more to do, and in the coming period the SIG will be seeking to extend its international links, and also continue to challenge the unhelpful divisions that can divide academics and activists. In the meantime it will continue to provide a home for scholars committed to researching teaching as work, and teachers as workers. In the longer term we will know we are successful when teacher unions are no longer airbrushed from studies of educational reform, but fully reflected in work that claims to represent the full complexity of educational reform.

Full details of the SIG's work can be found at its [blog](http://aeratwtusig.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/) (<http://aeratwtusig.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/>), whilst the group can also be followed on [twitter](http://twitter.com/aeratwtusig) (<http://twitter.com/aeratwtusig>).

As a small SIG, seeking to maintain and develop its presence within AERA, the SIG always values new members as members not only increase the vitality of the organisation, but also increase our profile on the AERA program – AERA members can add individual SIGs to their membership by going to the [AERA website](http://www.aera.net) (<http://www.aera.net>) and clicking on the “Member Login” in the upper left corner, logging in with a user number and password and clicking on “SIG Memberships” on the Member Welcome page. We encourage you to join the SIG, and to join us in at in 2011 at AERA's annual meeting in New Orleans. The group had an excellent annual meeting in Denver and some exciting plans have been mooted for New Orleans. We look forward to seeing you there.