

Democracy, critical education, and teachers unions: Connections and contradictions in the neoliberal epoch

Lois Weiner, *New Jersey City University, New Jersey, USA*

Abstract

Why does a divide exist between scholars of critical education and teachers unions and how might it be bridged to develop a more robust, mutually beneficial relationship? In this article I explain why supporters of critical education have a huge stake in the transformation and regeneration teachers unions and describe how critical education might, in turn, support teachers unions to develop a new grammar and vocabulary to discuss education. The paper concludes with discussion of pedagogical implications of unions educating members about the injustices and contradictions of capitalism. It contrasts this pedagogical and political approach with the expectation that union members will agree with a critical perspective or adopt critical pedagogy.

Keywords: *teachers unions; neoliberalism; critical pedagogy*

Both higher and lower education are being transformed by policies that aim to make all human activity, including intellectual and artistic work, subject to what is called the discipline of the market, but is, in fact, the control of powerful elites who manage capitalism and increasingly use the state without political challenge (Compton & Weiner, 2008). The need to develop and build a social system that is an alternative to capitalism is likely more urgent today than it was 20 years ago when Woods (1995) set out capitalism's limitations:

Even when the market is not, as it commonly is in advanced capitalist societies, merely an instrument of power for giant conglomerates and multi-national corporations, it is still a coercive force, capable of subjecting all human values, activities and relationships to its imperatives. No ancient despot could have hoped to penetrate the personal lives of his subjects - their life chances, choices, preferences, opinions and relationships - in the same comprehensive and minute detail, not only in the workplace but in every corner of their lives (p. 254).

In this article I explore how scholars of critical education and teachers unions might collaborate to imagine and advance an alternative to capitalism, one that is ecologically sustainable and thoroughly democratic in political, social, and economic relations, and within this alternative set of social relations, schooling that develops human potential. My analysis is informed by my work as a teacher educator; by my research on urban teacher education and teacher unionism; and by life-long experiences as a teacher union activist who now assists a new generation of teacher union activists to transform their unions.

I contend that critical education and teachers unions ought to have a more vibrant relationship than they currently do, and that supporters of critical education have a huge stake in the transformation and regeneration teachers unions. As one labor historian has noted, the erosion of democratic institutions is "organically linked, at work and in the political arena, to the evisceration of the labor movement (Lichtenstein, 2013: p. 221). Unions are accurately viewed as a potential threat to neoliberalization's economic and political project to ensure conditions for capital accumulation and the power of economic elites (Harvey, 2005; Panitch & Gindin, 2012). Teachers unions, with all of their flaws - and there are many - are quite correctly seen by capitalist elites as being the most stable and potentially powerful opponent of the neoliberal project that is transforming education globally (Compton & Weiner, forthcoming).

Neoliberalism's project in education are fueled by three inter-dependent premises:

1. Workers in every country will be competing with one another for jobs that require only a basic education.
2. Since most workers will require only a basic education, educating them to higher levels is a waste of scarce public money.
3. Workers who are minimally educated require only minimally educated teachers. Educational quality can be controlled through use of standardized tests. Therefore, a highly-educated teaching profession is a waste of scarce public resources.

The footprint of the neoliberal project in education is now essentially the same throughout the world though it has important national variations (Robertson, 2008; Verger & Altinyelken, 2014). Key components are privatization of the education market; eliminating civil service protections and pensions for teachers so as to convert teaching to contract labor; destroying collective oversight of schools, fragmenting control; use of standardized tests to control education outcomes; and destroying the power of teachers unions (Compton & Weiner, 2008). Sometimes I am told that what I am describing sounds like a conspiracy. But conspiracies are, by definition, secret and the elements of the project are easily found - when one looks in the right places, research and reports in finance and World Bank reports. The World Bank's 2014 report, *Great Teachers: How to raise student learning in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Bruns & Laque) identifies poor teacher quality as *the* major obstacle in reducing poverty in Latin American and the Caribbean. Teachers unions are described as blocking government efforts to raise educational quality and thereby eradicate poverty by opposing policies identified with the neoliberal project, primarily those associated with teachers' working conditions (salary, pensions, evaluation linked to standardized testing, performance related pay, and tenure) and privatization (charter schools and outsourcing of educational services). *Great Teachers* argues for various tactics to weaken teacher unions and by doing so advance educational policies termed GERM, the global education reform movement, the educational arm of neoliberalism's economic and

political project (Robertson, 2012).

Understanding the divide between critical education and teacher unionism

The savagery of the attack on teachers unions relates to a number of factors that have converged. Education is a huge market that capital thirsts to exploit; public education is often the most unionized sector of the economy. As union density has declined in the private sector, public employment has become the primary foothold for organized labor. Within the public sector teachers unions often have the highest union density. Moreover, capitalist elites realize better than do most teachers that their work is potentially dangerous because it is “transformative labor” that influences what the next generation thinks (Connell, 2009). In light of the powerful potential of teachers unions that capitalist elites recognize, it is worth considering why a divide exists in much of the world, except Latin America, between teachers unions and critical education. In publications of critical education one finds little about teachers unions.

In one sense the divide is understandable, a result of characteristics of unions in general and the political pact unions made with capital in the welfare state (Panitch & Gindin, 2012). The factors that give teachers unions stability and economic and political power are also conservatizing influences (Weiner, 2012). Unions are independent organizations but are embedded in the state. Because of their special relationship with the state they face legal restrictions and at the same time they have unusual power. Unions are theoretically “owned” by members who pay dues and elect officers. When unions function democratically, union officers lead according to their political beliefs - and also do as their members direct. Unions have the potential of bringing democracy to the workplace, challenging hierarchical relations. At the same time, union democracy can be problematic: union members are not immune to social diseases like racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia that affect every society. Finally, even

when unions define their members' interests broadly (as I advocate they do) so that the social good is understood as being inseparable from members' immediate self-interest, unions have as their chief obligation representation of their members. However, as I explain elsewhere (Weiner, 2012) when unions define their members' interests narrowly, adopting a "business" or "service" model, they increase the contradiction between their social role and their responsibilities to members.

Modern teacher unionism emerged in the global north in the 1960s, configured by labor laws that were adopted as part of the welfare state. Labor unions and capital agreed to make unionized workers the core of a high-wage and high-consumption proletariat. Private sector unions ceded to capital the right to manage production, relinquishing the fight on "shop floor" issues in exchange for higher wages and government protections of unions' right to bargain for their members (Panitch & Gindin, 2012). While the social reforms of the welfare state were extremely important, they were "structured so as to be embedded in capitalist social relations...limited by the way they were linked to the spreading and deepening of markets amid the relaunching of global capitalism" (Panitch & Gindin, 2012: p. 9). This economic and political *quid pro quo* defined the political and economic context for legislation creating collective bargaining for public employees, including teachers unions.

While this legal framework gave teachers unions stability and the right to negotiate improved wages and benefits for members, in much of the global north the arrangement generally excluded many pedagogical issues from the scope of contract negotiations. Decisions about what is taught and how, as well as organizational aspects of school that directly impact how teachers do their jobs, like how school time is organized, are often excluded from negotiations. Thus teachers unions cannot negotiate many conditions that most affect teachers' work and students' learning. As neoliberal reforms have penetrated more deeply into the classroom, especially in regard to standardized testing and

evaluation of teacher performance, teachers have become less able to use union contracts - when they still have them - to protect their professional autonomy.

It may be that critical scholars and teacher union activists collaborate more in Latin America than elsewhere because many Latin American teachers unions did not embrace - were not offered - the social democratic trade-off between wages and pedagogical voice that teachers unions elsewhere in the world accepted. And as I will explain later, Latin America has much to teach us about bridging the divide between critical education and teachers unions.

Neoliberalism wins its ideological and material victories in good part because of capital's control of the state and media. However, I think we need to acknowledge the ideological success of its (utterly erroneous) argument that its reforms ameliorate inequality. Within nation states, neoliberalism targets those who are most exploited. Globally, the World Bank reforms use the rhetoric of making services work for poor people. To create an effective counter-narrative we need to discuss inequality and solutions to it before our opponents do. In this regard, we should recognize that neoliberalism has been abetted by the social democratic agreement that schooling would be used as a sorting mechanism for the labor market. In emphasizing education's service to the economy, unions and social democracy allowed schooling's other functions in a democratic society to be marginalized, in particular schooling's role in educating the next generation of citizens to be critical and its development of students' intellectual, artistic, and physical potential. Neoliberalism now effectively rejects any function for schooling beyond preparing students for the workforce. And by claiming that education can eliminate poverty, capitalist elites drop the state's obligation to address poverty through economic policy, for example by outlawing poverty-level wages and creating well-paying jobs that support a sustainable economy.

We face a global “race to the bottom” in wages and working conditions (Mason, 2007; Moody, 1997). As Daniel Singer (2009) explains, capitalism has sentenced the vast majority of the world’s people to a lifetime of economic insecurity and desperation, under its faulty premise that “There is no alternative.” GERM attempts to obscure this reality, to persuade parents and workers that individual accomplishments in education are the only hope for financial security in a global economy in which workers of every nation competing against one another for work that can be easily shifted to a nation that will most hyper-exploit its own people. International comparisons on standardized tests are key in this effort to make national systems of education adopt policies that remake their school systems (Kuehn, 2004; Robertson, 2012).

We in education need to explain that schooling is not and cannot be the cure for poverty, in our own countries and globally (Klees, 2002). At the same time, rejecting the claim that education can end poverty is not the same as presuming that schooling has no influence on an individual’s economic future. Decades of critical empirical scholarship reveals how social reproduction of inequality occurs in education, for example through organizational practices such as tracking between and within schools (Lipman, 2014; Oakes & Ginton, 1995; Oakes et al., 1997); “parent,” that is, mainly mothers’ involvement (Reay, 1998; Laureau, 1989); disciplinary practices (Gregory et al, 2010); and because of teachers’ and schools’ taken-for-granted assumptions about students’ “ability” that are inseparable from race and class (Oakes et al., 1997; Hatt, 2012). At the same time we have abundant evidence describing “schools as places where social reproduction occurs but also where human agency matters and makes a difference in students' lives” (Wells et al., 2004: p. 49). In revisiting her earlier seminal research on the hidden curriculum of work, Anyon (2006) concluded that schooling has become increasingly stratified and therefore provides less prospect of social mobility for individuals. I suggest it is still the case that through its credentialing function, schools in liberal capitalist society still serve (although to a far smaller extent)

simultaneously as a vehicle for mobility for (a diminishing) few and reproduce social class for most, justifying poverty, low-wage work, and unemployment, as Shapiro (1990) explained.

Neoliberal reforms resonate with many parents precisely because they are frightened by the economic prospects for their children (and themselves). Many members of groups who were not served well by public schools respond positively to reforms like charter schools and testing because they want the same opportunity for their children to compete for good jobs that children of affluent parents have. Neither calls for schooling that educates citizens for democracy, as radicals argue (correctly I think) nor demands for education that makes children happy and develops creativity as liberals and progressive education demand (correctly I think) can assuage parents' fears about their children's ability to be strong competitors for jobs in an increasingly punishing labor market. Therefore, demands about the content of schooling have to be accompanied by an economic program that gets at the heart of the present economic crisis - creation of well-paying sustainable jobs. To argue effectively against standardized testing, nations measuring their educational systems with international tests, by standards set far from the school by international finance organizations (Robertson, 2012), we need to address the underlying economic and political rationale for the tests: Workers throughout the world must accept international competition for a shrinking number of well-paid jobs.

Although the ideological underpinning is not - yet - explicitly anti-capitalist in much of the world, increasingly we see growing resistance among teachers, led by their unions, to demands of the neoliberal project. Almost daily one can learn about instances of strikes and popular protests, reported on www.teachersolidarity.com, not in the mass media. For example, in one week, 2-9 June, teachers in Rio de Janeiro mounted street protests about government spending money on the Olympics and not schools; teachers in Liberia went on strike for a living wage; British Columbia Teachers' Federation members undertook rolling

strikes to limit class size and the number of special needs students placed in regular classes without additional support; teachers in Lebanon voted to strike for promised pay raises they have not received, demanding that the government raise taxes on the wealthy and reject the “advice” of the International Monetary Fund to increase the regressive VAT (Value Added Tax).

Unions have until now been on the defensive. To shift to the offensive requires putting forward a new narrative of what we want from schools, as well as new forms of resistance. Though the strike has long been and can still be a powerful weapon, its effect is limited when the state is willing to weather the loss - which is now the case in much of the world. Alternative tactics are emerging: parents occupying schools in Chicago, Newark, Madrid; teachers boycotting standardized tests in individual schools, school systems, and countries. One of the most exciting developments has occurred in Mexico, as Aboites (2015) describes:

... coupled with the demonstrations and marches teachers in several states organized “congresses” as they were called, which reunited hundreds of parents, in one occasion; large numbers of students in another; also communities and parents. From all this, new proposals for education started to emerge. This led to a re-appreciation of many projects organized by teachers and communities founded years before. In one of these projects, pre-hispanic languages were rescued as well as the culture they belonged to. Teachers and communities also organized projects of production and services to benefit students and the whole community. In some states, full-fledged alternative schools were created, and all the schools of the state rejected standardized testing (p. 6).

Most national confederations of teachers unions belong to an international confederation, the Education International, (EI) which is controlled by the two US unions (Weiner, 2012). Discussion of the EI takes me beyond the focus of this paper but I should note that the EI has pursued collaboration rather than confrontation with the World Bank, despite World Bank policies

destroying teaching as a profession and public education. Unions from various nations are challenging this collaboration (Compton, 25 July 2015) . Two nodes are emerging that challenge the EI's politics and hegemony. One is the alliance of activists and several teachers unions in the Americas, anchored by the British Columbia Teachers Union (BCTF), CNTE, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), and the Chicago Teachers Union. Another node is developing with the support of the UK's National Union of Teachers, which has helped push the EI to adopt a position of non-collaboration with the World Bank (Compton, 29 July 2015).

Implications for critical education: The role of "critical friend"

A new generation of teachers is embracing a "social movement" orientation for unions that breaks with the model of "business unionism" that accompanied the pact with capital (Ross, 2007). Teacher union activists realize that they need the support of parents, students and community to protect teachers' jobs and professional obligations and rights. As www.teachersolidarity.com chronicles, throughout the world, resistance to neoliberal education policy often begins with student protests, taken up by teachers and their unions. Sometimes the unions are themselves taking the lead.

Ferment in the unions has created opportunities to engage in pointed discussions about the unions' assumptions and operations. I describe this form of involvement as being a "critical friend," (borrowing a term used by educators in the progressive "small schools" movement in the US, before it was swallowed by the Gates Foundation and neoliberalism). As a critical friend, we provide support when the unions struggle to defend public education and the dignity of teachers as workers, including traditional labor demands of wages and benefits. At the same time, a critical friend points out that the neoliberal project has made pursuit of these economic demands problematic because widespread popular support no longer can be assumed

for public employees to receive wages that are higher than the people they serve.

To win support of people who rely on public education, unions must embed economic demands in a vision for public education, as the Chicago Teachers Union did in developing its program for the schools, "The schools Chicago students deserve" (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013) or as the National Union of Teachers has done in its national "Stand Up for Education" project (<http://reclaimingschools.org/>). The state is increasingly willing to weather strikes, and unions need to come up with new forms of struggle that extend popular support, as the Mexican teachers movement has done. One popular tactic is the rolling strike. But what if teachers unions also organized a one-day occupation of the schools with parents and students, making schools sites of liberation?

The critical education movement offers teachers unions help in making sense of the *political* nature of the neoliberal project, which is not so much about corporations as it is about class power (Harvey, 2005). Ideas count in this contestation of power. Critical education contributes understandings of how contesting neoliberalism's advances requires struggle over what is taught, how, and by whom, as well as the ways that schools and school systems can operate as sites of struggle over political power to decide these questions (Apple, 2011). As critical friends we can support teachers unions to develop a new grammar and vocabulary to discuss education, one that rejects capitalism's insistence that education is the same as vocational training. Democratic unions need to challenge paternalistic, hierarchical relations at the school site. But in doing so, they need to push against the constraints of collective bargaining, which generally allows for only teacher voice. Democracy in the school has to include parents, students, and community. Moreover, when unions cast issues in terms of teachers' rights, critical friends need to push them to configure the struggles as being in defense of teachers' responsibilities to defend children's needs and the social good. Finally, critical friends will push the unions to create

spaces for teachers to engage critically with parents and community about what good teaching looks like, which in turn relates to what we expect of a society.

In the past three years I have worked as a critical friend with young union activists who are building reform caucuses to transform their unions. I also collaborate with teacher's union officials who want to adopt a "social movement" union approach and have to navigate between this goal and their responsibilities to members in the real existing union. I have learned that unions and union leaders need us, but are simultaneously apprehensive about adopting our ideas because of our position as outsiders and tensions that emerge as the new vision and practices push against the status quo. A border is inevitable, at least as long as unions are membership organizations that are immediately responsible to their members, who elect officers and pay union dues that support its maintenance. But we can influence what occurs on the other side of the border if we are simultaneously supportive and critical, learning with and from teacher union allies.

Much of what I bring as a critical friend to teacher unionism I have learned as a teacher educator from researchers and teacher educators who come from oppressed groups and are profoundly committed to serving these communities. Often these teacher educators are hostile to teachers unions, viewing them as blocking needed school reforms. I have also grappled with the anti-teacher union attitudes of education students from minority communities, often the first in their families to attend college. Many attended schools that were substandard and had teachers they perceived as uncaring and lazy. Some were scarred by racist remarks teachers made to them. As we discuss neoliberal reforms, their ambivalence emerges. On the one hand they believe that standardized tests provide a needed baseline because schools and teachers cannot be trusted to educate all kids. On the other hand, they are the products of the neoliberalized education system, do not feel they test well, and can see how the tests made school even more boring. They see

too how testing is narrowing the curriculum.

In talking with teacher unionists, I remind them that any position the union takes on reforms linked to testing has to take into account the reasons parents may trust the tests more than they trust teachers and unions. I have urged the unions to engage with parents in respectful discussion about what good teaching looks like, and in these conversations point to the reasons the testing is harmful. While no unions have yet done exactly this, I think we see unions being more mindful of how parents view these issues. When the Chicago Teachers Union polled parents on testing, the union found parents and teachers disagreed about its usefulness. The union then launched an educational campaign - as did the BCTF - informing parents about problems with testing.

When teachers and parents in a few Chicago schools boycotted the state test in 2014, the teachers union did not encourage other teachers to join the boycott, because of legal constraints; however the union leadership did issue a statement of support to the boycotting schools and asked faculty in teacher education to write and circulate a petition demanding that the teachers not be punished, as the Chicago school authorities threatened. After a vigorous debate within the union, the union voted officially to oppose use of high-stakes standardized testing, and in publicizing its new policy, Karen Lewis (2014), the union president, wrote a powerful column explaining the origins of standardized testing in the eugenics movement.

Elsewhere I explain the “trifecta” (Weiner, 2014) on which there can be no compromise: building the union’s presence at the school so as to challenge power relations; democratizing the union’s operations and culture; and forming mutually respectful relations with parents and community. Often activists think that electing a new leadership, replacing one set of faces with another, is equivalent to transforming the union. As critical friends we can suggest otherwise, questioning how contract votes are conducted or bargaining demands are developed; asking

whether contract demands that take up only economic issues are in the members' (and students') best interests.

We in the critical education movement also face the contradiction created by education's credentialing role, its ostensibly meritocratic function. In preparing students to become teachers, I have found their desire to make a difference in students' lives co-exists with their ambition to have a secure job. In some students personal ambition is more powerful than idealism. For others, commitment to be in service to children or communities is more pronounced. Teachers unions need to live with the contradiction of serving their members' immediate interests while simultaneously fighting for a more just, equitable society that improves life for all. Critical educators have to live with the contradiction that our beliefs about neoliberalism and critical pedagogy are not shared by all of our students or by all teachers (Brantlinger, 2013). In my opinion a commitment to democracy in schools and in teachers unions requires that neither we in critical education nor teachers unions should insist that teachers adopt one particular pedagogy. Instead, our role is to create space for teachers, scholars, community, parents, and students to decide together what good teaching looks like.

One reason I urge this stance rather than advocating a particular pedagogy, including critical pedagogy, is that I have seen too often how teaching principles and materials are corrupted in their implementation within bureaucratic, undemocratic school systems. In my experience any curriculum or teaching strategy can be destroyed by its being forced on teachers or students. Moreover, the best teaching, which I want for all students, is far too complex, too changed by context and relationships for one pedagogy to be used by all teachers equally well with all students in all schools. Therefore I encourage teachers unions to educate members to think critically, to understand the injustices and contradictions of capitalism, but not insist that all union members agree with a critical perspective or adopt critical pedagogy. Unions can and should insist that teachers support all students to develop their full potential and to teach the truth. One can

achieve that through many different pedagogies and political orientations.

As coordinator of a program for experienced teachers, I see how space in schools for critique has been diminished, replaced by a climate of fear and obedience. The most powerful ally the critical education movement has for making room in schools for teachers to think freely, to question, is teachers unions. For teachers unions to do what they must, they need the support and ideas of intellectuals who understand that capitalism in this epoch of neoliberalism does not want well-educated workers. It wants slaves. Our role in critical education is to work as critical friends with teacher unions to create schools as sites of liberation that will support development of the alternative to capitalism powerful elites want us to think is impossible.

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Author's bio

Lois Weiner is a professor of education at New Jersey City University, where she directs the Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project and coordinates a Master's in Urban Education for experienced teachers. She taught for fifteen years in public schools in California, suburbs of New York, and New York City while being a teacher's union activist. Her newest book is *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice*, published by Haymarket Press. She serves on the editorial board of *New Politics*, an independent journal of socialist ideas.