

Oakland Forum on 'Lessons of the Red States Teacher Strikes' –A Report & Discussion

By Jack Gerson



Last Saturday (June 9), I attended the “Lessons of the Red States Teacher Strikes” forum featuring teacher leaders of the mass education strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky, and Arizona. The forum was held in Oakland, California at a local public high school (Oakland Tech) and was organized by the Oakland teachers union and co-sponsored by the San Francisco, Berkeley and Richmond (California) teachers unions. Here are my impressions and observations about this event (this is a first draft; I hope to polish and elaborate this, but probably not immediately.)

1. The speakers were inspiring, individually and collectively. The women – all four are women – were courageous, resolute, and

brilliant organizers. Most readers will probably already know this from the widespread coverage of the red state strikes. If not, I think that this summary, brief as it is, will make this clear.

2. The stated aim of the event was to learn how the red state organizers had carried out the most impressive labor actions in decades despite what had hitherto been considered insurmountable obstacles – weak state unions, anti-strike legislation, lack of collective bargaining, no dues checkoff – and to build on these to launch coordinated local and / or statewide actions in California. The organizers had anticipated filling Oakland Tech’s 800-seat auditorium, and hoped for a large turnout from younger teachers and community, based on the overwhelmingly positive response to the red state strikes. But only somewhere between 200 and 300 showed up, very few under 50 years old. The majority were veteran Bay Area leftists.



3. In any event, the talks by the red state teacher leaders were inspirational as well as educational. They each talked about how they were able overcome anti-strike legislation and build mass strikes despite the weakness of state and local unions. In all three states – West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona (and I believe that this was true in Oklahoma and North Carolina too) – the organizers worked outside of the formal union structures, using social media to reach out to, and build networks of, initially hundreds, then thousands, and now tens of thousands (For example: ongoing networks of 24,000 in West Virginia, and of 55,000 in Arizona.) Although the core of these organizations are schoolworkers and have developed networks of school leaders at the local and school levels, they don’t restrict their membership to teachers: The networks include both union members and non-members; public

school teachers and charter school teachers; certificated staff (teachers) and classified staff (clericals, janitors, food service workers, etc.). They don't restrict themselves to traditional union issues, or even to strictly educational issues – for example, the West Virginia teachers demanded and won a 5% across the board pay increase for all West Virginia public employees, not just teachers, while one of the key issues taken up by the Kentucky movement is how to address gang violence.



In these ways, these organizations are breaking out of the insularity, conservatism, and bureaucratic inertia of virtually the entire union leadership at national, state, and even local levels. It's reminiscent of Occupy in Fall 2011; of the Spring 2011 Oakland bank campaign (where Oakland teachers and community allies campaigned to "Bail Out Schools Not Banks and End Foreclosures, culminating in occupation of Wells Fargo's downtown Oakland branch, where seven teachers were arrested (I was one of those seven); of the June / July 2012 sit-in to protest school closures at Oakland's Lakeview Elementary, organized by teachers, parents, and community. (For those who remember, it's reminiscent of the "struggle group" concept in the old IS circa 1970, which was counterposed to the traditional rank and file union caucus approach.) Importantly: it's not just posing the need for teacher unions to "reach out to the community", but rather the need for alternative forms of organization that can work inside and outside the union, uniting union members with non-members and with the community around demands that cut across traditional parochial / insular lines. But apparently local teacher union leaders are not taking away this lesson (for example, Oakland teacher union president-elect Keith Brown, who chaired the June 9 forum, began

his concluding remarks by observing that the key lesson to be learned from the speakers is that “we need to reach out to the community”. I barely was able to restrain myself from yelling out “Oh come on Keith, you’ve known that all along.”)

Rather, to reemphasize at the risk of redundancy: the key lesson here is the importance of building what could be called “classwide organizations” – organizations that operate inside and outside the workplace, that include union members and non-members, teachers and non-teachers; that take up educational and non-educational issues (e.g., environmental issues); etc.

An equally important lesson is to not be constrained by the fear of strikes being labeled “illegal”. If the organization is strong enough, with enough support among school workers and enough support in the community, the courts and the legislature are likely to fold – as they did in the red state strikes.



4. I think that the very weakness of their unions was a key to the strikes’ success. In states where teacher unions are strong, dues check-off is used to build full-time, often highly paid, central union staff whose worldview is closer to that of management than it is to the everyday worker. The officials and staffers far more often than not act as a brake on struggle, urging and, when they can, imposing a passive, legalistic strategy (at best). Case in point, the 3 million member National Education Association (NEA) and its largest affiliate, the 300,000-plus member California Teachers Association (CTA). CTA has used dues check-off (“the agency shop”) to funnel the bulk of member dues to its highly paid and privileged staff and officers. The hundreds of CTA staffers are paid nearly double the

salaries of classroom teachers. For decades, they, argued that “we’re too weak” to organize effectively against charter schools; that we have to “collaborate” with big business and with school management; that strikes can’t win, so we have to “compromise” (read: agree to rotten contracts), etc. They stacked the deck, taking the lead in negotiating contracts that expire at different times in different districts, and then turning around and arguing that coordinated strikes are a non-starter because contracts expire at different times. Militants who argued for even building local strikes were labeled “strike-happy”. Most “progressives” and “progressive caucuses” fell in line. A few examples:

- CTA pulled the plug on its 2003 initiative to reform California Proposition 13 to tax corporate property more heavily (they caved to pressure from the Chamber of Commerce, who behind the scenes threatened to go after dues check-off).
- CTA staff and the Oakland teacher union president meekly and unilaterally called off a strike with a bad, last minute deal in spring 2006. Four years later, CTA staff and a different OEA president postponed striking for months, and then limited it to one day with no follow-up (despite its being over 90% effective, and despite the school district having imposed rotten terms on the union.)
- The “progressive” leadership of the Los Angeles teachers union called off a walkout of tens of thousands of teachers when a judge issued an injunction with fines of \$1 million / day if they struck.
- In 2009, CTA sent staff from district to district, warning local unions to accept downsizing, including layoffs, in order to “protect our contractual gains” – i.e., wages and benefits.

The red state strikes show that there’s another way, a better way: organize to fight, for a classwide fight, an inclusive fight around classwide demands, rather than meek, legalistic acquiescence.

5. Two more points:

a. Mass media contrasts teacher salaries in California with those in the red states, and implies – or states outright – that strikes occurred in those states because teacher pay was so low. But when adjusted for inflation, average pay in California is not much higher than in, say, West Virginia – and average pay in several large urban districts (e.g., Oakland) is actually lower than

the average in the red states. Moreover, the red state strikes were not just about teacher pay: a key unifying demand was more money for education. The mass media implies that California and other "blue" states put much more money per capita into education than the red states. Not so. California, despite having the fifth largest economy in the world (behind only China, the U.S., Germany and Japan) is 41st of the 50 states in education spending per capita – well behind, for example, West Virginia.

b. The red state strikes blow apart the "lesser evil" argument in multiple ways: First, many strikers actually were / are Trump supporters, and see him as shaking up the status quo that has brought them lower wages, insecurity, raised their rents, taken away their homes, left their family members jobless and their children with poor prospects. Second, in blue states like California, the Democrats – far from being the opponents of privatization, charter schools and downsizing that they've been made out to be in the mass media, have been its advocates.

Sat. June 9th 4-6pm

Lessons From The Red State Teacher Rebellion: What Can California Learn?

Come hear teachers who led the inspiring strikes this spring in West Virginia, Arizona, and Kentucky.

Endorsed by: Berkeley Federation of Teachers, United Teachers of Richmond, Nevada Federation of Teachers, United Teachers of San Francisco

Sponsored by: OEA

Oakland Technical High School Auditorium
300-340 42nd St, Oakland, CA
Free Admission/ Wheelchair Accessible

Take the example of Oakland, where I taught and was active in the teacher union. For the past 20 years, Oakland has been a laboratory for privatization: in 2003, the state put the Oakland public schools in receivership, a move orchestrated by Eli Broad (supported by his billionaire friends Reed Hastings and John Doerr) and his long-time ally, then-Oakland mayor and now California governor Jerry Brown; Broad, Bill Gates and company turned the Oakland schools into a laboratory for privatization: under the state takeover enrollment in charter schools more than quadrupled while enrollment in public schools fell by one-third; the state moved in ostensibly because of a \$37 million budget deficit, and left seven years later after tripling it – turning it into a \$110 million debt, which to this day the state insists that the district must repay in full

with interest; more than half the schools in Oakland were closed or reorganized, the libraries were shut down in nearly all middle schools and in several high schools, custodial workers were laid off, etc. Under the state takeover, Oakland had per capita double the rate of outsourcing to private contractors and double the administrative overhead of the average California school district.



While Oakland was a laboratory, the Democrats nearly everywhere supported the policies of downsizing, charter schools, test-based accountability, school closures, outsourcing, and privatization. The assault on public education was bipartisan – its most ardent advocates included Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy and California Congressman George Miller (the two leading proponents of the No Child Left Behind legislation), and President Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan.

It's also important to consider that in the "red states" Republican legislators responded to mass pressure by at least partially caving, fearing that they'd lose their jobs and their legislative majorities in the next elections. But in "blue" California, the Republican Party has nearly collapsed in the most populous parts of the state. The Democrats have lockdown control of the state legislature as well as the governor, and they have little fear of losing same. So they feel little constraint to do more than pay lip service to education, and can be expected to continue the same policies that they have for decades: providing inadequate funding for education (again: California ranks 41st of the 50 states in that regard); supporting charter schools (or whatever comes down the pipe in place of charter schools, should the bloom come off that rose); supporting test-based accountability (or whatever repressive variant comes

down that pipe); supporting state takeovers of local school districts, thus taking control out of the hands of the public (just as charter schools do – they receive public funding but are privately controlled). Is it any wonder that so many working class folks have been repelled by the Democrats' austere neo-liberalism, and that at least some have turned to Trump?

6. Problems: Where do they go from here? They know that they need to consolidate their gains and to spread them nationally. But who can they reach out to? They look to who they see – ostensible “progressive” locals, like Oakland and San Francisco and Los Angeles. But the teacher leaders in the sponsoring locals have a past and present connection to CTA and its policies. And their own records.



It's important to see things as they really are. That can be a downer. So far too often, far too many leftists act as cheerleaders and, willfully or not, wind up contorting and distorting facts to fit their desires. Thus, Jeff Mackler, national secretary of the group Socialist Action, recently wrote an article hailing the Oakland teachers union (OEA) as the most militant teacher union in the country, saying that the union has launched five strikes over “the past decades”. Well, yes – if you go back far enough. But over the past 22 years, OEA has gone out for exactly one day, and the OEA officers and CTA staff resisted even that.

And OEA has been far from the worst – inadequate as it’s been, it’s still far better than most. Now, I don’t want to write off the newly elected OEA leadership out of hand. But they – and the other local union officials – are not going to act much differently than in the past UNLESS there’s an eruption from below. We certainly shouldn’t look to CTA or NEA or AFT to take the lead – quite the opposite, as we’ve argued above. And I’m not hopeful about the local leaders, either. Maybe some will be on the right side – but I think that will happen because they will be reacting to motion from below, not taking the lead in unleashing it.



7. Meanwhile: How to proceed in places like Oakland, where the teacher union has been out of contract since last June. And in other California school districts – especially large urbans.

First: Build a network, if possible with contacts in every school in your district. This has been a foundation for building towards strikes in the past: in Chicago in 2012; in Arizona earlier this year; etc. In the past, this has been best done by releasing several teachers from classroom duties temporarily to go from school to school, holding school meetings, making contacts, identifying teachers who can act as shop stewards / representatives for their schools, etc. Based on the red state teacher experiences, this probably ought to be combined with social media outreach.

Second: Don’t base everything on waiting for the state and local union leaderships to act. As one of the red state teacher leaders said on Saturday, “They’re not our bosses. We’re their bosses.” Outline steps towards building a strike – including building a network with contacts in as many schools as possible, and reach out beyond union lines to non-members, teachers in other districts,

classified school workers, community members, etc. Reach out beyond narrow bread and butter issues, and even beyond simply educational issues. And be ready for state, national, and local leaders to get in the way, unless / until you've built sufficient strength. For example, they may say that coordinated strikes would be illegal when many districts are still bound by contractual no-strike clauses (CTA, NEA, AFT, etc. have for decades had a passive, legalistic approach. That's why there have been hardly any teacher strikes in California over the past twenty years. To repeat a point made earlier: Oakland, hailed as a model of teacher militancy by some "progressives", has struck for exactly one day since 1996.)



8. Finally, it's time to draw some hard conclusions about the state of the unions, and not just teacher unions. For decades, the unions have operated on the "team concept" – collaboration with management and the state. The international union leaderships have, for the most part, supported – even participated in – U.S. imperialism's exploitative international policies. At home, they have urged labor peace, acquiescing meekly to the bosses while turning a mailed fist towards rank and file militants. AFT President Randy Weingarten states this clearly in an open appeal to the ruling class to take the side of union leadership on the impending Janus court case, which if it carries would outlaw dues checkoff. Weingarten said:

"The funders backing the Janus case and the Supreme Court justices who want to eliminate collective bargaining with the hope that such a move would silence workers need only to look at West Virginia for what will happen if they get their way. A loss of collective bargaining would lead to more

activism and political action, not less. Collective bargaining exists as a way for workers and employers to peacefully solve labor relations.”

That’s a pretty clear statement of class collaboration, isn’t it? Weingarten says to the ruling class: “Look out, below. We union bureaucrats are what’s standing between you and the wrath of the masses.” In that regard, we should recall that the storied labor mass militancy of the 1930s was largely carried out, successfully, without collective bargaining and often “illegally”. And now the same is true for the red state teacher strikes. That should at least give us pause, and cause to think further about the deal that brought about labor peace at the end of the 1930s, exchanging collective bargaining and a piece of the pie for no-strike contracts, no-strike pledges, and permanent state intervention and regulation of labor.



Dues checkoff is double edged: the Janus case is part of a virulent right wing attempt to destroy unions, period. And this is something that we all need to oppose. But we need to be aware that if Janus is defeated, the union leaderships will continue with their course of using members’ dues to strengthen their bureaucratic stranglehold and to try to keep their foot on the neck of potential militant struggle. I think that the red state teacher strikes, and particularly their alternative forms of organizing and organization, inside and outside the unions, and their classwide membership and demands, poses an important alternative model. It’s one that we need to try to work with and deepen. We need to all look at ways to broaden and sustain such a model – hitherto, the model has been inspiring

during the upsurge (e.g., the first few months of Occupy) but has not endured. Unions, on the other hand, have been able to consolidate the gains won in strikes and other contract struggles – but have done so by strengthening a central bureaucracy and by more and more collaborating with management and integrating with the state.

Discussion

July 20

All,

I found Jack's essay to be an excellent review of the recent teachers' strikes and a look at where we go from here. I am in agreement with his general assessment of the situation and in particular of his criticisms of the mainstream unions and their increasing willingness to collaborate with school administrations. I had a couple of points I want to raise in response.

1. Jack is right that teachers have to move beyond a narrow perspective of demanding higher wages and better benefits to a broader social approach that can attract the support of the wider society and of parents in particular. The demand for smaller class sizes could be an important part of such a broader program. This is a demand that immediately helps teachers and students and should be widely popular. Of course, teachers need to demand substantial pay increases to make up for years of stagnant pay and falling real wages.

2. Smaller class sizes and higher pay for teachers cost money. Teacher militants need to start talking about the urgent need to tax the rich. Tackling the enormous income and wealth inequalities that characterize this system will lead directly to testing the limits of capitalism and the imperative necessity of creating a new society.

3. Jack mentions the need to bring charter schoolteachers into the network of grass-roots militants. This is probably correct but it raises a difficult question. Certainly one of the demands of militant teachers must be an end to all charter schools and their absorption

into the public school system. How do we square this with bringing teachers in these schools into the network of militants? Perhaps there should be a demand that teachers employed in the charter schools are given priority for jobs in the public school system.

4. The right to strike is a fundamental right and an important one. Of course, the recent strikes in West Virginia and elsewhere show that just because strikes are illegal does not mean that teachers cannot go on strike. It is certainly important to make that point and to push for strike action in states like California where strikes are banned. Nevertheless, laws do matter and a prime demand should be to make it legal for all public sector employees except those engaged directly in emergency work to go on strike without hindrance.

5. This leads to Jack's point on the Oakland local leadership. Given his description, I am very doubtful that this set will be significantly different than the previous ones. Taking office in a large local is a tricky proposition for radicals but for sure it should only be done when its members are ready to vote for and support a radical program. One point in such a program would be a refusal to endorse any candidate for public office who does not support the right of teachers and other public employees to strike.

Eric

July 20
Eric,

Thanks for these comments on Jack's essay. I agree with most of your points, but have questions about two of them:

1) You say, "...one of the demands of militant teachers must be an end to all charter schools and their absorption into the public school system." I understand that there are many problems with charter schools, including ways in which they undermine traditional public schools. That said, I am not convinced that an across-the-board insistence on making more uniform our deficient 'one-size-fits all' public school system is the way to go. I recognize that you would favor coupling this demand with other demands and proposals that would aim to create higher quality public schools, but I am

nonetheless unsure whether I support what might be an overly categorical approach. Further comments from you and others would be helpful here.

2) You raise that taking office in large (union) local is a tricky proposition, and should take place only when members are ready to support a radical program. You then say, 'One point in such a program would be a refusal to endorse any candidate for public office who does not support the right of teachers and other public employees to strike.' I recognize there is an implicit 'united front' approach here that I assume goes: "You may support voting for and working for the election of Democratic Party (and other) candidates, but let's at least agree that there should be no support for such candidates unless they support the right of teachers and other public employees to strike." I'd like to see some more discussion of this as well.

In solidarity,

Rod

July 20
All,

First of all, I want to thank Eric for his comments on my report on the Red State teacher strikes forum. I think that the points he raises are good ones, and worthy of further discussion. I'm going to try to take them up, and in the process of doing so to respond to Rod's response to Eric too.

I agree with Eric that we want to eliminate charter schools, and I have pushed for this for many years. I suspect that some on this list don't have detailed knowledge of charter schools and their impact, so I'm going to provide a brief summary here:

Charter schools receive public money but are privately run. In effect, they are backdoor vouchers — getting public money without public control. And charter schools are exempted from large parts of state education codes — from both bureaucratic regulations and from regulations protective of students and teachers. They have been a favored vehicle of the assault on public education and

heavily funded by Bill and Melinda Gates (Gates Foundation, Microsoft), Eli and Edythe Broad (Broad Foundation, Kaufman and Broad and AIG), Doris and Donald Fisher (Fisher Foundation; the Gap), the Walton Family (Walmart), etc, John Doerr (New School Venture Fund; Doerr is the leading venture capitalist in the Silicon Valley, and organized the initial funding for, among others, Google and Amazon); Reed Hastings (Netflix; Pure Software); etc. Oakland, where I taught for years, has been a laboratory for privatization of education in general and for charter schools in particular. Thus, when the state of California put the Oakland school district in receivership in 2003, the number of charter school students was quickly quadrupled (from 2,031 in 2003 to well over 8,000 by 2006), while the enrollment in public schools declined sharply (from 54,000 to 37,000). Charter school enrollment in Oakland has since increased to over 12,000, or about 1/3 of public school enrollment. Meanwhile, many public schools have been closed; many programs and services have been eliminated (libraries were closed in most middle schools and in several high schools; vocational programs were shut down in most high schools; adult education was cut by *95%* (not a typo), etc. It's generally acknowledged that the growth of charter schools has negatively impacted economies of scale for public schools, resulting in a negative downward spiral. In some cities, charter schools have become dominant (e.g., Detroit) or have even completely replaced public schools (New Orleans).

Here's the difficult part: So long as public education fails a significant number of students — and there is no question but that it fails many students of color in high poverty communities (especially black students, but also many white students, especially in rural and semi-rural areas) — then parents will look for anything that provides hope for their kids. Parents whose children are assigned to schools which are under-resourced, crowded, dirty, and unsafe (e.g., where their kids are bullied and where staff respond inadequately if at all) will be attracted to the nearby charter school that is reputed to be clean, safe, and give kids a better chance of success. Never mind that overall, public schools have been shown to on average outperform charter schools. Never mind that the above-average charter school almost surely cherry picks students for admission and/or forces out struggling students, is given heavy, one-off funding by the billionaires' foundations (funding which isn't

and won't be replicated at most charter schools, and therefore this model doesn't scale), etc.

How do we deal with the above? I think in three ways: First, we need to argue that public schools need to be freed of the arbitrary bureaucratic parts of state education codes that constrain authentic learning. And we have to insist that the protective parts of state education codes should be extended to students and staff at all schools — including charter schools (so long as they exist). Second, we need to argue — as Eric does — that all students need the opportunity to go to clean, safe, well-resourced schools with small class size and competent teachers. Finally, we need to reach out to charter school teachers, to draw them into common struggle (as was done successfully in the red state teacher strikes) — and as part of this we should not only advocate organizing them into teacher unions, but we should call for parity in compensation, benefits, working conditions and due process between public school teachers and charter school teachers. If charter schoolteachers' pay, benefits, and working conditions were on a par with public school teachers, much of the billionaires' enthusiasm for them would rapidly diminish. Then, we can campaign for converting charter schools to public schools, with all (qualified) teachers in those schools remaining in place.

I also agree with Eric that it's important to campaign for funding. In California, the most obvious target is to amend Proposition 13, making it into a split-roll tax that eliminates the huge tax loopholes afforded corporations without increasing taxes on homeowners. This could provide funding to decrease class size (by hiring more teachers) and overall improve school facilities and resources. But I think that we need to be clear and "say what is": while public education can be significantly improved — and we fight to improve it — we can't solve the problems of public education for all under capitalism. Student achievement, as has been repeatedly shown, is strongly correlated with family affluence level, and this remains a function of class and race. Poverty won't be eliminated under capitalism, and as a group poor students will always be at a disadvantage. We need to be clear on this and to explain to those who struggle alongside us that, unless we fight to reorganize all of society, no solution will work for all (and, as we have seen time and again, those parents whose kids remain in failed schools will be

susceptible to the next schemes that the corporate “reformers” send down the pipe.)

On taking office in teacher unions: this requires a full and separate discussion. I will say: there’s a lot of similarity here to the problem of electoralism in general. How does a radical leadership administer the union day to day, once in power? The problems facing teacher unions, and indeed education as a whole, can only be confronted successfully by mass movements organizing from below. In case after case, groups that take over unions find themselves acting like just another leadership, despite their better intentions — similarly to what happens when reformers (aka sewer socialists) are elected to run a municipality under capitalism.

We have had several examples of insurgent “rank and file caucuses” taking power in local unions, and sometimes even at the state or national level: the PEAC caucus had a majority of the executive board in the Los Angeles teacher union from about 2005 to 2011, and its successor caucus (Union Power) controls both the executive board and the presidency of that local. The CORE caucus has controlled the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) for the past seven years. Thirty years ago TDU briefly had a majority of the Teamsters executive board. Etc. In each case, the insurgent group moved rightwards, towards the center, after taking power. To take the most widely hailed example: the CORE-led CTU strike of September 2012 has been held up as a model of militant trade unionism ever since. But before, during, and after the strike, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel said that more than 50 schools would be shut down. Six months after the one-week strike ended, Emmanuel did indeed close over 50 strikes. CTU did nothing (other than a toothless march in the Loop). Today, CTU’s strategy seems to be to try to take over the Chicago City Council — by supporting, and in some case running as, Democrats.

I don’t want to claim that there’s a total equivalence between running for local union office and running for local government office. But there are strong similarities. In my own experience, I served in various local union positions (executive board, bargaining team, etc.) and concluded that I was spending all my time trying to push a boulder up a mountain, fighting the (class) collaborationist state union leadership and their allies in the local’s leadership, and that my time could be better spent trying to organize from the

outside in. And it was (maybe at some point I'll put up a post describing my experience with the 2009-2010 public education mass movement in the Bay Area; with the spring 2011 campaign to bail out schools not banks and end foreclosures; and with the 2011-2012 Occupy Oakland education committee which organized the 17-day sit-in at Lakeview Elementary to protest school closures.)

Jack

July 22

Jack and all,

Last night I reread your article on teachers' strikes. Very good. Comprehensive and comprehensible. I liked your emphasis on "seeing things as they really are" as we try to navigate the treacherous waters of capitalism.

I found the points about the sabotage of militant action by mainstream unions-- and the details about the alternative organizing model the red state strikers created-- particularly important. Being an IWW member, I appreciated the inclusive, non-hierarchical nature of their model, and the linking of teachers' issues with those of other public sector workers, and with social issues like gang violence.

Below is a link to a leaflet you have seen before that others on this list might be interested in. A local graphic artist and I put it together for the Scottish Education Workers Network, an organizing/outreach project of the Clydeside/Glasgow branch of the IWW. It is entitled Letting Go of the Status Quo... Teachers and Learners for a New Society.

I think the impetus for the leaflet was akin to what the red states teacher strikers were striving for: to encourage and enable greater solidarity within the working class. Too often workplace organizing and peace and justice campaigning seem to inhabit different worlds, with each thinking that their approach is the central and vital one for social change. Instead, we need each other, and the leaflet tries to show how our interdependence could be expressed. (Maybe I should see if one of the peace and justice activists around here would like to write a version from their point of view.)

It could be that similar attempts like this, along with discussions and ongoing outreach and mutual support, would be one path to broadening and sustaining organizing models that are independent of mainstream unions, and based on socialist principles and a vision of a new society.

We also need to build certain factors into alternative organizing, right from the start. These include clarity of purpose (principles and goals), networks, coalitions, and diversity and simultaneity of tactics. This last one is the hardest. But I think it is a useful concept, and guide to action—one that means keeping all these factors in our minds, hearts, and plans at the same time. Experimenting with structures for this would be interesting.

Susan

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ui=2&ik=60b4b74620&attid=0.1&permmsgid=msg-f:1606719951548271508&th=164c37487d914b94&view=att&disp=inline&realattid=f_is23mfrh0

July 25
All,

Rod raises an important but complicated issue in his response to what I wrote. To be clear, my own position is not only for a total break with the Democratic Party but a rejection of the program of the liberal Democrats as well as a rejection of the argument for a broad, non-socialist labor party or something along the lines of the Greens. As radicals, I believe wherever we are, including acting as teacher union militants, we should be taking this position..

The hard part is developing a radical program that bridges the gap between our vision of a future society and the immediate situation. This is not an easy task. In this context, I suggested that one point of such a program for those involved in conflicts within a local teachers union would be the demand that the local not endorse any candidates who were not prepared to back the legalizing of public sector worker strikes. Many years ago, when actually confronted with this problem, I raised this issue and found that the candidate involved immediately dropped her plans to solicit our endorsement.

This was in Massachusetts. Jack knows more about the current scene in California, but my guess is that there would be very few Democrats interested in an endorsement on this basis.

In any case, this would only be one point of a broader radical program. Further points might be the demand for smaller class sizes, the ending of state wide tests for students prior to graduation and the end of all funding to charter and public schools. These are all demands that most progressive teachers would support so the push would be to say that as local leaders we will take these demands seriously by trying to win them through direct action but we will also not support candidates who do not support this educational vision. Needless to say, it will be obvious that this requires the rejection of the Democratic Party and we should explicitly say this.

Jack touches on a broader issue, our relation to the existing unions. I entirely agree with him about TDU. An entirely wasted effort that went nowhere. This is not just a tactical question. Underlying the TDU approach was the belief that the existing unions could be reformed, that electing a new leadership would resolve the problem. In reality, we need an entirely different form of workplace organization, one that is decentralized and where there are only a few full-time officials, paid at the rate of an average worker in that union, and where power rests with militants at the point of production.

The IWW in its heyday was such a union. Now it would seem that what is needed for a start is a network of militants acting independently of the union. The recent teacher strikes are an example but here in Britain we have recently had an even more organized protest within the higher ed union (UCU). Militants defeated a sell-out by the union leadership and then went on to form a network. This network discussed forming an independent union but for now remains within the existing framework but in total hostility to the leadership.

Again, in this context, militants need a program that goes beyond a more confrontational approach to management.

Finally, Susan raises another difficult problem. The Left is fragmented, with some activists working at the workplace and others on single-issue campaigns such as those opposing militarism. The two groups seem to work in a vacuum rather than as part of a broader movement for fundamental change. Susan's leaflet is a step in breaking down that fragmentation but there needs to be more networks such as the Utopian where we can talk together and try to overcome the fragmentation.

Eric

July 25

Eric and all,

I hope to reply more fully to Eric's thoughtful post soon. For now, though:

1. Public worker strikes aren't illegal in California. There's the usual ritual though: the union has to be out of contract and have gone through a ritual conducted by the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) — impasse, mediation, fact-finding panel — which is designed to maximize collaboration between management (the state) and the union leadership (especially the state union leadership), and note that the state has double representation (as management and as the 'neutral' mediators and fact-finding panel chairs). So strikes don't occur too frequently — although there have been several at the University of California (Tanya was instrumental in many of these). Five years ago there was a BART (regional rail) strike. The longest and most militant over the past several decades was the Oakland teacher union (OEA) strike in 1996, which lasted nearly six weeks and was responsible for statewide class size reduction in public schools. [Following the OEA 1996 strike, the Gates and Broad Foundations poured money and people into Oakland, facilitating the state takeover of the Oakland schools in 1996, a gross increase in charter school enrollment, cuts in public school programs and staffing, etc. The OEA leadership, under the guidance of the state teacher union (CTA), pushed back against militant response — OEA has struck only once since 1996, and that was a one-day strike in April 2010).

2. I agree completely with your characterization of TDU, and in particular with your observation that the goal needs to be a different form of workplace organization, rather than reforming the existing unions (I tried to get at some of this in my report on the red state teacher strikes).

3. One thing that I've been thinking about, and hope that others have thoughts about, is how to approach the fact that when we call for funding public education — or for national health service, or other public programs — it is usually done in such a way that it will be delivered by, and thus in the process strengthen, the role of the state (that is, the bourgeois state). I have some ideas here, but would very much like to hear what others think.

Best,
Jack
