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Blackboard Unions: The AFT And The NEA, 1900-1980

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Introduction

In some ways this book is a standard account of unionization. That the workers are teachers and the industry is education, however, makes the study a bit unusual. Teachers are primarily women, and education is public employment. Teachers are also not well paid. These facts affect us and our children in profound ways. So this history is not so standard, because it is about a union movement in which gender difference had to be confronted; it is about an organization of public workers who first tested prohibitions against public employee strikes; and it is about a group of workers who were "scientifically" selected to fit a new norm of "professionalism." The union's problems in organization differed from those of blue-collar unions because the teachers' union was a new type of union for a new type of worker. Women white-collar workers are now underrepresented in the trade-union movement, but the failure to unionize is not entirely a failure of women workers. In this book I hope to set forth the historic obstacles to the unionization of public school teachers, to show how difficult organization was, and to illustrate the contradictions faced by public employees in unionization.

The growth of cities and the centralization of public school systems provided the basis for teacher unionization. Teachers faced a host of obstacles in achieving their union and collective bargaining strength. These obstacles dissipated as the century progressed, and there was an explosion of teacher unionism in the late sixties. The first and most enduring among the obstacles was the adjustment to centralization, which required a "professionalized" teaching force. The ideology of professionalism in education grew into a powerful antiunion slogan that effectively paralyzed and then slowed the unionization of teachers. Only in the last twenty years have teachers effectively challenged the confining definitions of professionalism to declare that their own personal well-being was in fact a professional

concern. Of the two teacher organizations—the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—the former claimed exclusive jurisdiction in professionalism while the later held stubbornly to its trade-union heritage. Finally in the late sixties, under pressure from union competition, the NEA entered the arena of collective bargaining and today rather prides itself on being called a union.[1]

Recurrent seasons of red-baiting were a second obstacle to teacher unionization. They created an atmosphere of fear that destroyed militant teacher activity and stifled teacher advocacy. Likewise, a chronic fiscal crisis in education, beginning at the close of the Progressive Era and continuing to the

1. Three dissertations discuss the issue of professionalization and public school teachers in Chicago. Robert Reid, "The Professionalization of Public School Teachers: The Chicago Experience, 1895–1920" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1968), ignores the trade-union language of professionalization to interpret early teachers' unions as preliminary to professionalization. Cherry Wedgwood Collins, "Schoolmen, Schoolma'ams, and School Boards: The Struggle for Power in Urban School Systems in the Progressive Era" (Ed.D. diss., Harvard University, 1976), accepts Reid's interpretation except that she considers the inherent sexism in traditional professionalism and explains how feminist teachers came to professionalism through the use of Amitai Etzioni's notion of compliance in bureaucratic structures. My dissertation, "From Artisan to Semiprofessional: White-Collar Unionism among Chicago Public School Teachers, 1870–1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis, 1981), pp. 1–9, refutes both Reid and Collins, arguing that they ignored teachers' efforts toward unionization and that professionalism was imposed from above by superintendents and educational managers in an antiunion campaign. Furthermore, I argued that by reading professionalization into the early history of teachers' unions, Reid's analysis badly misdirected Robert Wiebe's *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967), which traces the rise of a new middle class through this new professionalization project. This misinterpretation was further confounded when Magali Sarfatti-Larson, in her *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley, 1977), argued that American class formation was profoundly affected by the rise of professionalism and that this "strategy of professionalism holds sway on individuals and occupational categories which are inspired elsewhere by the political and economic strategies of the labor movement." Professionalism, Sarfatti-Larson correctly concludes, is ideological, but its history in the United States has been read outside the context of the history of the political and economic strategies of the labor movement. What we have is a history of professionalism that emphasizes outcomes and not struggles. Two new works in the sociology of professions give a new perspective on the history of professions: J. A. Jackson, ed., *Professions and Professionalization* (Cambridge, 1970); and Andrew Abbott, "Occupational Environments and Occupational Structure: Professions and Their Audiences in France and the United States" (Paper presented at the Social Science History Association annual meeting, November 1987). Abbott discusses not just the prerogatives claimed by professionals but the audience they appeal to in the process of negotiating more control. Appeals to local authorities, the public, and workplace colleagues constitute a dialogue of self-definition, Abbott maintains, which have different degrees of flexibility. Legal and public realms are more fixed and less conducive to change than those negotiated in the daily setting of the workplace. Taking this argument further, JoAnne Brown, in "Professional Language: Words That Succeed," *Radical History Review,* 34 (January 1986), pp. 33–51, examines the ways that professionals use language to legitimize their position in the division of labor. Professional work, she argues, needs some interpretation in order to gain the respect of its clientele. The need to popularize the professional service and at the same time monopolize it causes professionals to rely on metaphors to explain and simultaneously obscure the knowledge of their trade. This specialized vocabulary gives professionals a way of separating themselves from others. Brown criticizes sociologists and historians for not paying enough attention to the legitimizing function of professionalization's language, since "most of the action carried out by professionals is linguistic." Unionization for teachers, however, required direct action, the antithesis of professionalism's linguistic monopoly. In the history of teacher unionism, teachers give into the self-definition of professionalism only to discover that it is not merely a linguistic concession but a profound ideology that separates them from the community.

present time, has been an important obstacle. As the energies of teacher advocates were drawn into various schemes to develop national remedies, tax-conscious organizations blocked any attempt to move school funding away from narrow, local taxation. Within these confines, teachers managed to win more concessions but remained tied to a fiscally conservative tax system. These three obstacles—the ideology of professionalism, the recurrent red-baiting, and the also recurrent and not unrelated fiscal crisis—help explain the slow pace of unionism.

Though the central focus of this book is on unionization, it is not confined to the first teachers' union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The origins of the union movement are found in a small, rebellious group of urban school teachers. They not only affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) but they also attached themselves to, and attended meetings of, the National Education Association. The history of teacher unionism, then, is a history of both the AFT and the NEA.[2] This book concentrates on the AFT only because the NEA has partially directed itself toward teacher interests; the book is not a comprehensive history of the NEA and the AFT as organizations but a study of the history of unionism itself: the idea of unionization and how it was carried forward by those most interested in it. The book is unique, then, in that it examines two rival organizations as they embrace and articulate the principles of teacher unionism.

There is another caveat in this history that may seem strange to the uninitiated reader. The NEA and AFT are organized in two distinct ways. The NEA has been a national organization with a visible presence in Washington, D.C., for over sixty years. Originally the NEA was organized along lines of separate departments, some of which grew quite powerful and dominated the organization's national affairs. Later, in the twenties, the NEA began to emphasize state associations. Only in the late sixties did the association pay attention to the strengthening of local chapters. The AFT, on the other hand, was organized on the basis of local unions. Its state organizations were weak, and it had little presence on the national scene. It moved its headquarters to Washington only in the early fifties, thirty years after the NEA. It was the beginning of collective bargaining in the early sixties that

2. The standard accounts of teacher associations and unions include Mildred Sandison Fenner, *The National Education Association, Its Development and Program* (Washington, D.C., 1950); Edgar G. Wesley, *NEA, The First One Hundred Years: The Building of the Teaching Profession* (New York, 1957); Carter Alexander, *Some Aspects of the Work of Teachers' Voluntary Associations in the United States* (New York, 1910); Celia Lewis Zitron, *The New York City Teachers Union, 1916–1964* (New York, 1968); William Edward Eaton, *The Social and Educational Position of the AFT, 1929–1941* (Washington, D.C., 1971); Eaton, *The American Federation of Teachers, 1916–1961: A History of the Movement* (Carbondale, Ill., 1975); Philip Taft, *United They Teach: The Story of the UFT* (Los Angeles, 1974); Timothy M. Stinnett, *Turmoil in Teaching: A History of the Organizational Struggle for America's Teachers* (New York, 1968). The first book to analyze the unionization of teachers in the context of educational change is Wayne J. Urban, *Why Teachers Organized* (Detroit, 1982). Mark H. Maier, *City Unions: Managing Discontent in New York City* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), directs attention to public employee unions in the context of urban politics.

gave it prominence. For the most part, the history of the AFT is a history of the locals, the strongest of which were in Chicago, New York, and (until 1957) Atlanta. Originally the Chicago locals were the most powerful; they kept the seat of the national union until after World War II; in the thirties the activities and size of the New York locals began to shift union power from the Midwest to the East. The organizational structures of the AFT and the NEA reflect the two traditions that teacher unionism drew on in its origins: centralized advocacy in support of the traditional professional mystique embodied in the NEA and the master-craft tradition of the American Federation of Labor, embodied in the AFT. In this book I hope to give the reader a sense of how very different these organizational traditions were and how, in the pursuit of unionism, teachers had to create a broader vision from both.

A final proviso concerns the very nature of the rivalry of the two organizations. The NEA, from its inception in 1857, was an organization of educational leaders, most of whom were school administrators. It was not until 1912 that classroom teachers were recognized with their own department and not until after the AFT was formed in 1916 that the NEA began actively to recruit rank-and-file teachers. In contrast, the AFT was an organization of rank-and-file teachers opposed to administrative hierarchy and close supervision. A few locals allowed school principals to join them, but the national consensus remained firmly against school administrators in leadership positions. Collective bargaining softened the lines between organizations. In the NEA members of the Department of School Superintendents left and formed their own independent organization of school administrators, and in the AFT, locals of school principals have been chartered. Although real differences have diminished with collective bargaining, the slogans of the past have become a shorthand signature for organizational difference. The NEA, while not denying that it is a union, often boasts that it is the "professional" organization, implying that the AFT is at a less-than-professional level; the AFT retorts that the NEA is the "administrator-dominated" organization. The intensity of this rivalry often obscures the real differences. The two organizations grew from two very different traditions but have grown in relationship with each other. The history of this relationship is the essence of the story of teacher unionization.

Teaching has been historically an avenue for social mobility. This book analyzes the meaning of that mobility in the context of unionization. I have argued, here and elsewhere, that teaching represented the aristocracy of labor for women workers; it was a high-status, low-paying job with the best available wages for women. For many entrants to teaching—women mostly in the Progressive period and ethnic men after the thirties—it was a step away from the blue-collar world of their fathers. Were teachers looking back to the system of social justice of their fathers and wending their way into white-collar work with trade-union values, or were they grasping at the values of their new social status, embracing middle-class ideals of respect-

ability? It seems in this history that teachers responded to both calls—often in contradictory ways but in a consistent pattern that reveals the painful adjustments such class transformation can demand.[3]

The book is organized chronologically, beginning with the centralization of school life at the turn of the century. Centralization and professionalism were two very important features of the modern school movement. Early teacher unions emerged in opposition to this movement and began to give voice to teachers' grievances. In the first five chapters I outline the original rivalry between the AFT and the NEA through World War I. In chapter 6 I turn to the small AFT as it struggled with the AFL in the interwar years. A union of "brain workers," as AFL president Samuel Gompers called them, the teachers received a cold reception from the AFL, and returned the sentiment as women took over the helm of the AFT. This distance and the worsening fiscal crisis in education, outlined in chapter 7, left the AFT in an oddly isolated position. Radical factions grew in importance until finally, beginning in the depression years, the union devoted an entire decade to factionalism and the eventual ouster of several Communist locals; this factionalism is the subject of chapter 8. In chapter 9 I cover the era of McCarthyism and its effects on the union. In the following chapter I look at the history of civil rights and its impact on education in the late fifties and the early sixties. This story is continued in chapter 12, which covers the events of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy and addresses the issues of conflict over race and class in the teachers' union Chapter 13 traces the competition between the AFT and the NEA in the drive for collective bargaining. In the postwar years, it became increasingly clear that both organizations would pay more attention to civil rights, especially after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 pointed the way toward profound change. The AFT seemed to have an advantage because its formative years had been firmly based in radical movements that sought to better the position of American blacks. In contrast, the NEA struggled with a casual alliance with a predominantly black administrative organization and maintained many segregated state associations. Both organizations merged their interests with black teachers and sought to push the cause of civil rights along with their own collective bargaining interests.

But civil rights was not a stagnant movement, ready to be captured by competing teacher organizations. It was a dynamic, community-based movement, and here is where the last theme of the book emerges. When

3. The issue of social mobility is summarized in the work of Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, 1973), and criticized by James Henretta. My understanding of class perspectives for public school teachers was largely shaped by the work of Daniel Calhoun, especially *Professional Lives in America: Structure and Aspirations, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1965). I have argued elsewhere that public school teaching was a privileged job for women that put them in the aristocracy of labor. See Marjorie Murphy, "The Aristocracy of Women's Labor in America," *History Workshop Journal,* 22 (Autumn 1986), pp. 56–69.

teachers first unionized against centralization, they had full community support because the language of centralization threatened neighborhood control. Teachers lost the battle against centralization and accommodated its terms, especially in regard to professionalism. In the late sixties centralization came under fire again as an obstacle to community control and the enfranchisement of an angry black community pressing for higher-quality education. Teachers' unions were by then organized and recognized by a centralized authority, so that teachers had a stake in the status quo of a system they once organized against. The unions were anxious to address the problems of quality in education but only through the centralized agency they negotiated their contracts with: the board of education. When parents of Ocean Hill–Brownsville asserted community control in the newly decentralized schools of New York, they were opposed by the United Federation of Teachers, AFT. The ensuing strike illustrated that the price of unionization—of overcoming obstacles created by professionalization, red-baiting, and consistently impoverished local tax bases—combined with the narrowing process of collective bargaining to alienate teachers from the communities they had originally intended to ally with.

Many books of considerable merit have been written offering various justifications on both sides of the issue of community control versus teacher unionism. None of them, however, has taken into consideration the sixty-year period of adjustment teachers went through to come to terms with administrative hierarchy in education. The union and the association seem to have switched political positions. Why does the union, which is the vehicle of progressive politics, seem now the agent of conservative thinking, while the association embraces the most progressive causes of the day? The explanation I offer here will disappoint a few who have partisan hearts in the matter, but I hope it will at least engage the issues of ethnicity, gender, and class in the politics of education. That teachers are both conservative and progressive in two different organizations seems appropriate from the perspective of the political economy of education.

What is striking in this history is the determination of teachers to gain a say in the educational process and the various avenues teachers tried before they were able to come up with the right combination for success. Many would argue that the success of unionism came at too dear a price, that teachers shed their radical politics and conformed to the worst of narrow self-interest. I think the readers of these pages will see that teachers took the only door that society held open to them. They explored other ways. Union leaders came on the scene and fought what they called "the good fight." They often gained a small foothold in the economic world, but in every encounter they lost ground on the political front until finally they had very little political ground to stand on at all. Teachers' unions, which are public employee unions, are narrow economic organizations because historically that is all our conservative society has allowed.