

Outline for a Class-Conscious Educators Movement

Educational workers have traditionally been one of the most active and energetic sectors in revolutionary and progressive struggles throughout the history of capitalism. From Latin America to Africa, China to the Soviet Union, educators have been over-represented in the ranks of revolutionaries compared to other petty bourgeois professions for a variety of reasons. In our own country, class-conscious and revolutionary educators helped organize workers and community members in areas like Harlem, and controlled trade union locals in cities like Philadelphia and New York City until they were crushed by the Second Red Scare. On the other hand there is a contradiction here: as educational workers are public employees and agents of social reproduction, they can also be some of the primary perpetrators and enforcers of ruling-class social policy and politics. What is clearly needed then is a genuine attempt to outline what a class-conscious educators movement would look like in the US, and how we could go about constituting it.

To establish a few definitions, in the piece we will be using the terms “teachers”, “educators”, and “educational workers”. Teachers are traditional classroom teachers i.e. workers who are assigned to teach a particular course or classroom in a PK-12 school system. Educators is a slightly more broad term that encompasses university/college professors, day-care teachers, and certain categories of educational support staff as well. Educational workers is the most comprehensive term, and traditionally the best term to use when referring to who education-sector unions should cover, as it encompasses all workers within the broader education system such as counselors, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, etc. “Educational workers” and “teachers” were the most commonly employed terms by the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU) in their literature regarding labor work in the education sector, however “educator” has become a significantly used term in the last century or so as well in the classrooms and pedagogical works themselves.

1) Political Economy

To chart a correct political line for class unionism in the education sector, we first must understand the broad features of the sector itself, its conditions and division of labor, how it has evolved etc. Since the last time there was a structured and powerful class-conscious teachers movement (1930s) a variety of major things have changed. In no particular order, we might bring up:

- The vast expansion of the educational system, both in terms of participation and actual structure/time spent in the educational system. On the younger end participation in kindergarten, pre-school and day care has become much more prevalent, whereas on the older end, high school, college and graduate school attendance has increased ten-fold or more since the 1930s and 40s.
- The end of formal educational segregation with separate schools, and thus teaching staff, for white and non-white schools. There are obviously a lot of caveats here, given that de facto segregation continues in the school system, however there are no longer separate job categories for white teachers, for example. The major exception here being the school system on

reservations run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

- The creation of universal salary scales for all teachers or educational staff in the PK-12 system. Prior to this, elementary and high school classroom teachers were paid differing amounts for the same job, with high school teachers often being paid more due to sexism within the profession (high school staff have always leaned male compared to elementary) and the idea that high school staff were more “academically rigorous” when compared to elementary teachers.
- The unionization of almost all university and public school teaching staff, outside of the five states where public sector unions are banned like Virginia and North Carolina, under state unions. Educational workers who are unionized are primarily organized by either the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), or the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).
- The emergence of the National Education Association as the largest “union” representing educational workers nationally, after having had its origins as a professional association for principals and administrators. The NEA is the largest labor organization nationally, and is outside the AFL-CIO unlike the AFT.

After centuries of evolving educational policy and educational system structures, the school system has largely settled on the following general conditions for educators nationally.

In general, for the public schools, teachers, administrators, counselors, and professors are salaried on a *per diem* basis while education support staff and non-classroom, administrative or therapeutic educational workers are paid an hourly wage. These salaried employees generally have a complicated licensure system that they must navigate in order to work, which is regulated state by state rather than nationally. In terms of benefits and seniority, tenure is generally given after three consecutive years of work in the public school system, and is given by track and by committee in the university system. Prior to receiving tenure, in the PK-12 system teachers are liable to be subject to what's called “non-renewal” at the end of each school year, in which they can be unilaterally dismissed without cause. The education sector still has public pensions, although their benefits and solvency vary wildly state by state.

So-called “professional” or “classroom” autonomy has largely been eroded over the last century, particularly in the era of standardized testing, No Child Left Behind and reactionary “education reform”. Curricula, pedagogy, grading policy, etc. are largely pre-determined by district and building administration, and the push to have uniform “classroom culture” and protocols has often entailed an unprecedented era of micromanagement and worsening educator-administration relations, with this push being lead by the charter schools. Similarly charter schools have lead the way in expanding work hours beyond the typical school day, either by extending the school day, adding more school days and obligatory “professional development days” into the calendar, or making mandatory tutoring or extracurricular duties for staff, normally without any corresponding increase in pay.

The exceptions to this broad labor force structure are educational worker contractors and educational workers outside of the public schools, that is, those in the parochial and private school system. While for contract workers there is often great variety in terms of conditions, in general the salary versus hourly wage category system still holds in the private schools, although the tenure and pension aspects

do not. The charter schools are incredibly variable, having very different regulations and patterns even state by state, and it is difficult to categorize them outside of their common macro-role in achieving the increasing privatization of the public school system.

Educational workers are also governed by municipal, state and federal laws to an extent other occupations are not. How they work, what they are allowed to do, and their hours and working conditions can change drastically depending on the policies and laws pursued by their local governmental jurisdictions. Because of this, the state unions in the teacher sectors are involved in political lobbying and electoral politics to an extent not seen in even most of the other state unions, outside of perhaps the SEIU. The AFT officially spent \$46,995,680 on lobbying in 2023 alone, while the NEA spent \$50,145,612, meaning both the AFT and NEA spent almost \$100 million dollars in political lobbying in an off election year (see our article [Political Economy of the American Labor Movement](#) for more information).

Educational workers are also noteworthy insofar as they are composed of both petty-bourgeois and proletarian job categories. While certain jobs are petty bourgeois, insofar as they are licensed and salaried workers (like classroom teachers), other jobs like bus driver or cafeteria worker or educational assistant are more proletarian as they are wage workers, not licensed or subjected to as stringent licensure or educational attainment “professional” requirements, and subject to far lower pay and worse working conditions. This also tracks with the class background of the job categories in question, with educators often coming from the middle classes and the proletarian job categories coming from working-class backgrounds, although this is not always the case.

There are around four million teachers in the entire workforce, not including other job categories of educational workers more broadly, thus making it one of the most common petty bourgeois professions. It would be categorized as a lower petty bourgeois profession however, due not only to its low pay compared to other PB sectors, but also due to the so-called “factory lines” and lack of autonomy present in the modern educational system, in comparison to other sectors in which there is still more remnants of “professional expertise and autonomy.” Furthermore within the different broad job categories, there are further categorizations by contract language, license, time in service, tenure track, and position in relation to administration. Thus, while the average salary for a public school teacher is \$72,030 and the average wage for an educational assistant is \$37,097 according to the NEA, and the average salary for a professor is around \$117,000 according, this can really only tell you so much about actual pay and salary state by state, district by district, or school by school (See AAUP’s FCS FT Faculty Salaries <https://data.aaup.org/fcs-ft-faculty-salaries/>, and the NEA Research 2025 Education Statistics and Rankings Report).

Demographically, education is still a disproportionately female and disproportionately white sector. For example, while according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) only 47% of public school students were white in the 2018-2019 school year, 79% of public school teachers identified as such. According to the NCES, in 2015 only around 23% of all elementary and secondary teachers were male, which is actually a decline from decades prior.

In terms of their social and economic function, obviously there is a lot that could be discussed as regards schools and the public school system in particular. Briefly, a given country’s education system functions as its primary mechanism for reproducing that society. The Chinese revolutionaries explained

this well in a People's Daily editorial from the Cultural Revolution period explaining the decision to cancel and transform the old bourgeois state examination system:

"It is through schools that the proletariat trains and cultivates its successors for the proletarian cause and through schools, too, the bourgeoisie trains its successors for purposes of a capitalist comeback. There is sharp class struggle here, between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, to win over the younger generation.

[...]

This revolution in the educational system, beginning with the change in the system of enrollment, is a tit-for-tat struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, between the road of socialism and the road of capitalism. It is a revolution that will destroy the bourgeoisie's "nursery" and eradicate the poisonous roots of revisionism. As the letter from the revolutionary pupils of the Peking No. 4 Middle School declares: 'What we are out to smash is not just an examination system but the cultural shackles imposed on the people for thousands of years, the breeding ground in which intellectual aristocrats and high-salaried strata are nurtured, the stepping stone to modern revisionism. This revolutionary action of ours will deal the bourgeoisie a fatal blow.' The transformation of the educational system in the final analysis affects the question of what sort of successors we shall produce, the question of whether we shall pass on Mao Tse-tung's thought from generation to generation, the question of whether our Party and country will change colour." - *Carry Out the Cultural Revolution Thoroughly and Transform the Educational System Completely*, People's Daily, June 18, 1966, in Peking Review, Vol. 9, #26, June 24, 1966

Thus in a capitalist society, our education system is designed to train capitalist successors and continue capitalist cultural and social practices that will reproduce the exploitation, inequality, ideology, political structures, and other divisions and forms of our society. This is in part why there is such mass disillusionment among the nation's educational workers: they are fed this idea that teachers are the agents of social progress and upward class mobility, but when they see the reality on the ground (that they and they schools play a key role in actually enforcing and reproducing the issues they are supposed to solve), they become frustrated with the situation.

Because of its role in reproducing the social and economic features of society, all states and governments typically play a major role in the regulation and function of the educational system. In capitalist societies this results in a series of major contradictions which we will highlight below. Similarly, the education sector is profoundly affected by issues like national oppression and poverty in the country, which again produce contradictions and problems in the day to day work of many educational workers around the country.

2) Community-Student-Labor Nexus

Because of the unique place of schools, and thus educational workers, in modern capitalist societies, we must consider revolutionary work among educators from the perspective of the students and community members as well. An educators movement which fights for the narrow self-interests of

educators while being antagonistic to the students and families involved in the school system broadly is not a progressive or class-conscious movement. This played out very dramatically in the 60s and 70s such as during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis, when the nationally oppressed masses, in their struggle for self-determination, fought for greater control of their community schools and for a less chauvinist and racist teaching staff. In this case, chauvinist and racist teachers were defended by the AFT under the slogan that their professional autonomy was more important than the well-being of the students and the community the school was in (for a basic overview of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville case see Chapter 12 of *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980*).

While teaching is certainly a difficult job, and educators have been demonized by reactionary politicians since the era of revolutions began so that states can better discipline and control their school systems, it is also true that the state unionism (and business unionism before that!) has encouraged a narrow professionalism among the educators which has resulted in many educators' isolation from working-class, poor, and nationally-oppressed communities in particular.

The issue with this approach is self-evident, even to non-class-conscious educators. The day-to-day problems educators face are directly tied to the health and function of the broader society in a way not all sectors are. Pay is directly tied to the amount of funding districts provide, which in the US is in turn tied to the revenue and tax base of the community at large, as well as state and federal education policy. Questions of classroom behavior, student physical and mental health, curriculum, and pedagogy are in turn reflections of broader trends in the social and economic context an educator is working in. None of this is even to mention the fact that the literal student population itself is obviously a product of the state, local and even national social context an educator is working in.

The state unionist response to this nexus of interests was to double-down on political lobbying and electoralism on all levels. This leads to the endless backroom dealing and back and forth on the hamster wheel of school committee politics most teachers unions find themselves stuck in. Who is the favored candidate for the school committee, which former teacher is running, which candidate we used to like but now don't, which gets in power and then goes back on their promises, which is a friend or relative of who within the different factions and cliques jockeying for power both in local city politics and the teachers union. Educators unions nationally spend the most out of any of the other unions by far, as already mentioned, and that money comes directly from the dues, and thus wages, of teachers across the country.

The revolutionary alternative to this is to engage directly in community organizing as an educator, to commit to the struggle for a new education system on all levels, because even when it comes to simple demands such as wages in the education sector, it becomes necessary to mobilize, politicize and organize parents, students, and the broader community in this struggle. Whether this is with an already existing class conscious neighborhood/community organization, or through the independent work of those educational workers themselves, revolutionary and class-conscious educators must involve themselves in organizing the community, study and explain how their work is tied to the broader ills of our capitalist society (which many educators spontaneously understand), and must include common demands with the students and families when possible. There is a long history of such work even in the United States, which has been lost, and which must be taken back up by class conscious educational workers in the here and now.

3) Major Problems of Unionism in the Education Sector

When considering the development of a class conscious line in the educational workers movement, there are various major issues we must consider. Issues which have deep roots in the history and political economy of our sector, and which continually come to the forefront in our day to day struggles.

There is the problem of the major inequalities and divisions in our society as they are reflected in and reproduced through our school system, in particular the widespread and *de facto* national and economic segregation in our school system. Traditionally in the United States, public schools were primarily funded through local towns and cities' property taxes. This funding scheme by and large still exists throughout the country, although it is now supplemented via additional state and federal funding schemes. This funding system leads to a clear and obvious problem: in capitalist societies working-class communities are poorer, and thus generate less property tax revenue, and thus are unable to consistently and adequately fund their local public school systems in comparison to bourgeois and upper petty bourgeois communities or charter/private schools. This can be seen very physically, in the school buildings and facilities themselves, which are often over-crowded and in very poor condition in the working class districts. In the poorer communities within many major cities in the older areas of the United States, the public schools are sometimes located in poorly maintained buildings that literally have not had major renovations since the 1800s. Similarly, the literal availability of teaching staff changes based on class and nation, with the schools of poorer and more nationally oppressed communities often being viewed as less desirable teaching locations, in part because of the wage and administrative issues often present in these districts.

These funding issues and issues of school quality play out most dramatically in the Black Belt, on the Indigenous reservations, in Puerto Rico and the colonized Pacific Islander communities, in the Chicano belts in the US Southwest, and in the urban national minority-majority neighborhoods. These schools are systematically poorly served by the education system by design, so that the oppression and super-exploitation of these communities can be maintained, and are affected also by the legacy of colonial and assimilationist educational policies such as the native boarding school system, or the English-only school laws which governed Puerto Rico from 1902 to 1948.

It is in these districts, the working-class and nationally-oppressed districts, the revolutionary and class conscious educators should place themselves, as it is here that they have the biggest role to play in terms of labor organizing, mass work, and general political tasks for our revolution.

There is the problem of the complex web of legal repression and State counter-revolutionary work in the education sector which largely developed out of the First and Second Red Scares. The prohibition on economic action (Strikes, walk-outs, sick-outs) by public school educational workers in most states is the most significant problem that arises out of the US Imperialist State's intervention into and regulation of the education system, however there are a variety of other measures which must be challenged and defeated. Many states still have laws on the books, or measures in waiting, that prohibit educational workers from holding or teaching "anti-American", "anti-Constitutional, or "subversive" ideas. These laws, which were often enforced with accompanying "loyalty pledges" during past waves of repression, exist as a warning and limit on the spread and advocacy of class-conscious and revolutionary ideas among educational workers themselves, as well as by educational workers among students and community members.

These twin measures, no-strike clauses and prohibitions on "subversive" ideas, serve as a battering ram for reactionary politicians and forces in our society. In the Republican-controlled states, the Imperialist

State's ability to regulate the political speech and limit academic freedom for educational workers has manifested in the current "anti-Woke" campaigns which have caused immense issues for educational workers in different parts of the country from the elementary to the university level, and when combined with no-strike clauses or even outright prohibitions on unionization, educational workers are left without any real ability to resist these measures or defend their interests. In the Democrat-controlled states as well these laws are used to target pro-Palestine and socialist educational workers, such as the case of Park Slope, NYC vice-principal Jill Bloomberg. Furthermore, because educator dismissal and non-renewal laws are incredibly loose prior to receiving tenure, which typically is bestowed after three full years of service in the same school district typically, this issue is used to particularly target new and entering educational workers for their political beliefs and organizing as they can be non-renewed without cause.

To counter this issue, class-conscious educational workers need to defend their clear, unambiguous, and unlimited right to strike, to unionize, and to teach progressive, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary history and ideas. These issues are tied at the hip, as without the ability to threaten or carry out economic actions, educational workers will never be able to defend their academic freedoms nor their ability to unionize and organize.

There is the problem of the dominant current of reactionary and narrow-minded "professionalism" which dominates the establishment labor movement in the education sector. The mentality that separates the educational worker from their allies within the working class, and instead paints their "friends" as the police, the upper petty-bourgeoisie and the capitalist "public servants". The mentality that views students, families, and communities as the enemy, in particular working-class and nationally-oppressed students, which produced the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis which is still a black stain on the educational workers movement. This is the mentality that leads the state unions to defend the worst among us, the racists and abusers and reactionary educational workers because they have seniority, and attack the energetic and progressive among us because they pose a threat to administration and the labor bureaucratic cliques at the top. The mentality that views following the law as more important than protecting the interests of students and fellow educators.

We must expose and break down this pervasive mentality, and in its place impose the mentality of the new educator who is committed to the process of social change and the historical tasks of the working class.

There is the problem of the charter school movement and the so-called "privatization" of the public school system. While it takes many forms, this offensive takes the form of a generalized erosion of what little public control/involvement we have left in the educational system, both for educational workers, students and families/community members. It involves the consolidation and closing of neighborhood schools, the rule of "experts", consultants, and business people over education, the elimination of all remaining classroom autonomy, attacks on tenure laws, voucher laws, attempts to erode obligatory public education or replace it with home-schooling, all charter/private school districts, etc. It is the State which is carrying this offensive out, due often to its financial burdens and debts, while also creating new forms of commercialization and profit for the capitalists through the burgeoning education consultant industry and by allowing each mega-millionaire to have their curricula, school reform or charter school project (something which has a lot of precedent from the US's early Industrial and Gilded Age period). Thus the capitalists cynically use their own failures in creating a functional public school system to attack what remains of that system, undermine our democratic rights, and attack poor, working-class and national-oppressed communities' educational systems.

In the struggle against this we must defend the basic right to a free and high quality public education and draw a path towards a new democratic, popular and scientific education system that will replace and resolve the contradictions of both the failed capitalist public schools, and the new voucher/charter system that is gaining steam nationwide.

Taken as a whole, we are left with an educational sector that is beset by a profound crisis, which is well known even on the pages of establishment media. Working conditions are worse than they have ever been, and educational workers are leaving the industry in droves, and new people are not entering it in the number they once were. The crisis of education will only intensify and worsen as time goes on, as the general crisis of imperialism which is producing it also intensifies and worsens. What we are left within then is a single path forward, the path of struggle leading to socialist revolution, and thus by necessity also leading to a transformation in our social relations and educational system. This is the only way out of this crisis, the end of the exploitative and oppressive system which produces the crisis in the first place.

4) The Struggle for a New Education

The only path forward is for educational workers to struggle to create a democratic, popular and scientific education system. Part of this struggle obviously includes the economic demands of educational workers and an improvement in our working conditions, but it is much more than that. We need to elaborate a new pedagogy, which replaces the old individualistic, dehumanizing, and test-centric learning methods. We need to develop new forms of democratic control and participation in schools which combines student-educator-community working-class representatives in joint committees, organizations and teams to struggle for common demands, bargain with administration, and eventually organize and administer the schools themselves. We must pay special attention to our work as educational workers in the working-class and nationally-oppressed communities, and creatively combine our trade union work with the other tasks and needs of the revolutionary movement in those areas and sectors.

We need to combine the demands of New Labor with the educational workers movement and fight for the full and unambiguous right to strike and organize in the education sector. We need to fight for and defend the freedom of expression and academic freedom for educational workers and students alike in the face of an increasingly reactionary, fascistic, and thus repressive, society. We need to fight against the privatization of education, and we need to build a powerful united front with class-conscious student and community organizations towards these goals.

In addition to works from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution period on education, for more information on the educational workers movement in the US we recommend reviewing the books *Red at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union* and *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980*.