



Fighting for the Right to Rise

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

I WRITE THESE WORDS after hearing oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Janus v. AFSCME, Council 31*, but before any decision has been issued. The case is the latest attempt by a web of conservative donors—the National Right to Work Foundation, the Koch brothers, and others—to consolidate their economic and political power. Given the vitriol from two of the justices (*New York Times*' columnist Linda Greenhouse observed that Justices Samuel Alito and Anthony Kennedy acted not like jurists but anti-union “advocates and even ... close to bullies.”), it appears the court’s five Republican-appointed justices are poised to undercut the interests of millions of workers by depriving their unions of the funds they need to function. That’s not an unintended consequence—it’s the entire point of these assaults on unions. Indeed, Justice Sonia Sotomayor told the lawyer for the National Right to Work Foundation, “You’re basically arguing, ‘Do away with unions.’”

Unions help make possible what would be impossible for individuals acting alone. It’s how we were able to lift teachers’ salaries in New York City by double digits before the 2008 recession, so they were in line with surrounding suburbs, and how teachers in West Virginia are fighting for a living wage and to stop skyrocketing healthcare premiums. Unions advocate for good public schools for all our kids, affordable higher education and healthcare, and a voice at our jobs and in our democracy. After yet another school gun massacre, we are redoubling our efforts to make schools safe sanctuaries, not armed fortresses. And we are fighting with special urgency against arming teachers and for the school safety and mental health funds that President Trump’s new budget eliminates.

We have daily reminders of the voice and agency that public employee unions afford their members so they can do their jobs well and support them-

selves, their families, the people they serve, and their communities. There are numerous examples within the pages of this magazine.

If the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT) had not researched the deficiencies of using value-added methods in teacher evaluations, and built political strength to elect a school board that was responsive to the evidence, students in Houston would still be losing good

teachers tarnished by this indecipherable test-based formula. Beyond teaching and learning conditions, after Hurricane Harvey, I saw firsthand how Zeph Capo and members of the HFT doubled down to care for union and community members who suffered terrible losses.

Also in this issue, Jon Shelton examines the powerful connections between teachers unions’ interests and the needs of the broader community. As he writes, the Chicago Teachers Union bargained for “the schools Chicago’s students deserve”—negotiating for smaller class sizes; wraparound services for students; relevant, high-quality professional development; and an end to institutional racism in Chicago schools. And Emily Gasoi and Deborah Meier write eloquently about how teachers uphold the vital importance of public education as a keystone of American democracy.

You don’t hear any of that from the billionaires backing the *Janus* case. They simply want the unions that public employees belong to out of the picture.

I am not prone to hyperbole, but we face a clear and present threat to American democracy by those who want to

further rig the system toward the already powerful. They’re going after unions, public education, and the right to vote. Why? Because those are the vehicles for regular folks to secure a better life.

Janus is just one part of this. The conservative State Policy Network has pledged to spend \$80 million to “defund and defang” unions. The Kochs, after receiving the Trump tax cut, upped the ante with \$400 million to undermine

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public education and “break” the teachers unions. Why? Because unions fight for a better life for working people, and the right-wing sees that as a threat to their political and economic power.

When Mother Jones, a schoolteacher turned labor and community organizer, began organizing workers during the so-called Gilded Age, employers’ power was virtually unchecked, the economic supremacy of the elite was entrenched, and the aspiration that Abraham Lincoln had advanced—“the right to rise”—was routinely denied to working people. The labor movement helped tilt the scales of oppression, and, by midcentury, American workers enjoyed safer workplaces and far better standards of living. That’s the movement the right-wing wants to “defund and defang.”

“Never again” has been the *cri de coeur* for many—those opposing genocide, of course, and, more recently, those decrying mass gun violence. It is also fitting for those who insist that our country must not revert to a time when workers were systematically denied even the most fundamental rights—a voice and a better life.

Union Strong Before and After the Storm

Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.



BY ZEPH CAPO

In August 1992, I began my teaching career at an elementary school in South Florida. On that first day in the classroom, I felt both excited and nervous. I looked forward to a rewarding year in my new profession. But days later, Hurricane Andrew hit, closing schools and destroying my home. I lost everything I owned.

Twenty-five years later, another storm would play a defining role in my life. In August 2017, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, where I serve as the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT).

For several days, the storm and its aftermath ravaged the Gulf Coast. Severe flooding took lives, destroyed homes, and closed

schools. This time, my own house was spared. Others were not so fortunate. The homes of many of the 6,000 teachers, school nurses, counselors, and other support professionals the HFT represents were damaged or destroyed; their lives were completely upended.

Immediately, our local began helping members in need. We coordinated volunteers who spent countless hours delivering food and bottled water as well as cleaning and repairing damaged homes. We showed that, together, we were stronger than the storm.

I truly believe that our strength resulted in part from the battles the HFT fought, and ultimately won, in recent years. These battles centered on hot-button issues such as teacher pay and evaluation. After more than three years without a salary increase, we launched a successful pay-raise campaign for our members. We also filed a federal lawsuit against the use of value-added measures (VAM), securing a victory for the right of educators in our school district to be fairly evaluated.

Zeph Capo is the president of the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), an AFT vice president, and a trustee for Houston Community College. A former middle school science teacher, he previously served as HFT vice president and legislative director.



For videos of HFT members helping others in the community, visit www.aft.to/HurricaneHarvey and www.aft.to/TeachingInShelters.

It's no secret that organized labor and public education face a time of great uncertainty. Our country's current president and secretary of education have made clear their intent to support corporate greed at the expense of working people and their unions and to champion privatization schemes that undermine public schools. I hope that, by sharing the HFT's recent successes and our ongoing efforts to rebuild in the wake of Harvey, other local unions facing challenges just as daunting can apply what we've learned.

There's a long-standing joke in nonbargaining states, such as Texas, that we don't have collective bargaining—we have collective begging.

Although the HFT operates in a "right-to-work-for-less" environment, the success of our union still depends upon active and engaged members who are politically strong and savvy.

Despite not having a collectively bargained contract, most of the benefits you would find in one (the duty-free lunch period, the right to planning time within the school day, and due process rights) are found in our state law. In a sense, our state law really serves as our master contract.

As for salaries, state law sets a minimum salary schedule in each local school district, and then each district augments or sets its own salary schedule. Besides salaries, everything else not included in the master contract, such as our insurance provisions and our day-to-day work rules, is handled by local districts and school boards. Because we don't collectively bargain and contracts don't have expiration dates in the same way they do in the bargaining states, teachers have individual contracts ranging from one to five years, or they have what is traditionally known as the continuing contract, which is basically one that renews every year without an ending term.

Two years ago, the state legislature passed a law allowing school boards to waive, with a two-thirds vote of the board of trustees, many of our state law provisions. Such a vote could negate longheld teacher rights such as guaranteeing a planning period and duty-free lunch. As a result, it's become even more important to encourage our members and the wider community to stay abreast of school board activities, because district regulations could end up changing with each board election.

Every year, we negotiate with the district in terms of budgeting, and we fight a different battle. In 2016, our focus was on maintaining our members' jobs. Because of a provision in our school finance law called "recapture," the HFT went through a significant number of reductions in our teaching force. This was the first year that the Houston Independent School District (HISD) was considered a "property wealthy district," and the recapture provision meant the HISD had to send money back to the state of Texas for reapportionment. So we had less money in the budget, and the district began to cut jobs.

As a union, we focused hard on ensuring that all our members who were affected by reductions and wanted to maintain employment with the district could return to work. And we succeeded in

getting every one of these members back to work. Initially, around 400 people were going to be laid off; after some attrition of those who did not want to stay, we got to the point where no one was laid off.

Last year, we pushed to backstop insurance increases, since we were hit with a 7 percent increase in our insurance premium in 2016 and were expected to take a 14 percent increase over the next budget cycle.

In January 2017, we then moved into the salary-raise campaign to help stem the turnover rate in our district; around 25 percent of teachers had been leaving each year. Turnover of our new teachers was even higher, with nearly 50 percent leaving the district after one year.

For the campaign, we talked to teachers about what a raise would mean to them. Each week, we published online the stories of three of our members, and we printed hard copies to use in one-to-one conversations with our members, district officials, and school board members. We also shared them by e-mail and posted them on social media to engage parents and community members. We told roughly 160 stories in all.

We also included information comparing salaries in the HISD with those of neighboring school districts. The research clearly showed that our compensation lagged far behind.

Putting a face on the need for a salary increase was effective because these stories were not anonymous. They were about Sheryl Hogue, a teaching assistant, or Jackie Anderson, a special education teacher. Our members spoke to the school board, and they wrote op-ed pieces. It wasn't just me or the union. It was about individuals who make a difference every day telling their stories.

One particularly compelling story involved a teacher at Westside High School. She shared how she incorporated role play to make history come alive for her students. While she found her job extremely rewarding, she struggled to support her family on her salary. She also described how she had considered moving to a neighboring school district because it would give her a \$5,000 to \$6,000 raise. Her story helped parents and community members understand the hard choices teachers faced.

We also produced some video clips, including one of a teaching assistant in a special education classroom. The teacher herself has a disability: she's hard of hearing. She has spent her career working with students she can relate to. As a teaching assistant, she not only works with these children but also mentors the teachers who have come through her classroom over the years. She helps them understand what the classroom processes are, what they need to do, and how they can best help the students. She is the backbone of the classroom. Stories like hers showed that she and her colleagues are not just helping the teacher grade papers. Instead, they are professionals who must be fairly compensated for their work.

We campaigned for a 5 percent raise. The amount was nominal; it would not close the gap with teacher salaries in some of the surrounding districts. But it would be a healthy enough figure to help us move forward.

We ended up coming close to our goal. We won a 4 percent increase for our most experienced teachers, those with more than 16 years. And we won a 3.5 percent increase for teachers with 11 to 15 years of experience, 3 percent for teachers with six to 10 years of experience, and 2 percent for teachers with five years of experience or less. About 80 percent of our members have taught for at least



five years. School nurses are on the same salary schedule as teachers and received the same increases, and paraprofessionals received a 2 percent increase.

As a union, we are very pleased with what we negotiated. The salary increases will help the district decrease turnover among experienced educators, whom we need to mentor novices. We know that it's vitally important in a teacher's development to learn from seasoned veterans. Ultimately, the increases validated the fact that experience matters. It matters in stabilizing schools and in creating a culture that can acclimate and induct new teachers into the profession.

What helped set the stage for the salary fight—and the first real indicator the district wanted to partner with us in changing the culture—happened a few years ago. In 2015, the school board voted down the renewal of the teacher evaluation contract for a program called Education Value-Added Assessment. It was a draconian system that used a student's performance on standardized tests to predict academic growth and make decisions about teacher evaluation, bonuses, and termination.

The second major sign of the district's willingness to collaborate was the decision to choose Richard Carranza as superintendent. The HFT spearheaded a successful series of town hall meetings with parents and community leaders to decide together what type of leader would best meet the needs of our district. These town halls provided an important exchange of ideas among stakeholders so that they could better understand each other and begin to build trust. It was a beautiful thing to see educators, parents, and community leaders go into the official district search meetings speaking with one voice.

But before that collaboration, the union took the lead on defeating value-added assessment. In May 2014, the HFT and seven of our members filed a federal lawsuit to end the policy. And in October 2017, the school district agreed in a settlement not to use value-added scores to terminate teachers. It also agreed to create an instructional consultation subcommittee focused on teacher evaluation. The panel, made up of representatives from the district and the teacher workforce, will make recommendations to improve the district's teacher appraisal process. The settlement also required the district to pay \$237,000 for expenses, such as attorneys' fees, related to the lawsuit.

It's funny, but before becoming an educator, I wanted to be a lawyer, and I maintained an interest in legal issues after I began teaching. That interest has helped in my work as union president. I moved from South Florida to Texas in 1997, because, unlike Florida (at the time), Texas had several public law schools. Tuition there would be cheaper than at private law schools, so I established residency to defray costs.

Before applying to law school, though, I decided to teach high school biology in Austin. While the cost of living was less than in South Florida, the salary was too. I had done a lot of financial calculations before making this move, but I hadn't factored in that, in Texas, I would need to pay for my own insurance and supplement my retirement.

I started going broke really fast. So I moved to Houston and took a job as a union organizer recruiting and representing members for the HFT. I worked my way up to management positions, and in

2015, after longtime HFT President Gayle Fallon retired, I was elected union president.

Before Gayle stepped down, the Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) program, run by the AFT's Union Leadership Institute, was crucial in helping our union think through the leadership transition. The program enabled the union's executive board to engage with our members to set goals and create the buy-in needed for achieving them.

Well before her retirement, Gayle and I focused on increasing our political strength around school board elections and researching value-added measures. Our eventual victories didn't happen overnight. We worked closely with Audrey Amrein-Beardsley, a professor at Arizona State University who studies teacher evaluation. I had read a peer-reviewed journal article she had written that was among the first critiques of value-added measures. As soon as I read the article, I e-mailed her and said, "We're living through this stuff." Then I called her, and we talked about how she could partner with the union on this issue. She was happy to have access to the teachers and the district staff to continue her work. I knew I was going to make district officials a little nervous, but we gathered focus groups with our teachers in certain areas where we were seeing impacts and helped do large-scale survey work.

Amrein-Beardsley published her findings on the inherent flaws of value-added measures in *Educational Leadership*, a magazine put out by ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), and she incorporated her research from the HISD into her presentations before the U.S. Senate. Her work, and that of others such as Linda Darling-Hammond, eventually led the American Statistical Association to caution school districts against the use of VAM.

In recent years, our union's work on multiple fronts—from research on testing and evaluation to engaging members in campaigns—has helped to change the narrative around public education. In November, that work resulted in the election of two school board members whom the union endorsed because of their support for frontline educators and community-driven solutions for strengthening schools.

In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, we are continuing to advocate for our students. We have asked state education officials to cancel this year's standardized tests and spend the money that would have gone toward implementing them on rebuilding damaged schools instead.

Nothing we do in education happens in a vacuum. Our students are part of our cities and our neighborhoods—structures that go far beyond the schoolhouse walls. And so we must continue to engage families and community members and forge the partnerships necessary to ensure that together we can weather whatever storms may come. □

The success of our union still depends upon active and engaged members who are politically strong and savvy.

Teacher Unionism in America

Lessons from the Past for Defending and Deepening Democracy

BY JON SHELTON

In 2017, I published *Teacher Strike!: Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order*.¹ The book was my scholarly attempt to understand how the hundreds of teacher strikes in the United States in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s affected American politics. I argued that, even in an era more favorable to public employee unions than ours is today, teachers' activism still collided with misguided labor law, institutional racism that sometimes pitted teachers against the communities in which they taught, and a tragic wave of fiscal crises. Activist teachers' critics—mostly on the Right but sometimes on the Left—often used these conflicts to try to discredit teacher unions. I used historical examples to develop my conclusion, where I argued that to transcend these legacies, organized teachers must forge powerful connections between their interests in the classroom and the needs of the broader community.

I made my final edits in October 2016. When I wrote the conclusion, I did not yet know what would transpire on November 8. Given President Trump's first year in office, it is not hyperbole to say our democracy faces its biggest crisis since at least the Great Depression, and perhaps since the Civil War.*

In a deeper sense, however, the forces behind Trump's election have simply exacerbated the efforts by the Right over the past 40 years (the roots of which I document in *Teacher Strike!*) to undermine broad economic opportunity, workers' rights, and

public education. Had Trump lost the electoral college vote, I would still have argued that forging member-driven unions and a broader coalition with our communities is more important than ever. As we face the racism, sexism, and unmitigated class warfare of the Trump administration, however, it is quite possible that teachers' efforts to wage successful political action represent the fulcrum through which we will either revitalize our democracy or slip even more drastically into authoritarianism.

To rebuild our democracy, working people must organize. And teachers, as professionals central to instructing our future citizens, share a special responsibility. By becoming more active in their own unions, they can build alliances with other working people in their communities.

Unfortunately, the framework in which most teachers have organized over the past half century—a framework that was already under threat—is likely to be dealt a severe blow as a consequence of Republicans' theft of a Supreme Court seat. For years, the National Right to Work Committee (NRTWC) and other shadowy organizations have tried to stop public employee unions from negotiating "fair share fee" or "agency fee" arrangements in which workers contribute to the costs of representing them. This argument has often been in the name of the First Amendment rights of a handful of workers who oppose the union (even though these workers only pay for representation costs and not for the campaigns of politicians).² Indeed, outlawing fair share fees would be like making federal income taxes optional. The conscientious would pay them out of a sense of obligation, but many others



would receive the same benefits of citizenship without contributing.

In 2016, the Supreme Court seemed poised to overturn the constitutionality of agency fees in the case of *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*, but when Justice Antonin Scalia died, the court was left deadlocked. In spite of the long-standing custom of moving forward an opposition party's nominee for the high court (Ronald Reagan's nominee Anthony Kennedy was confirmed, for example, by a Democratic-controlled U.S. Senate in his last year in office), Senate Republicans refused to allow President Obama's nominee even a hearing. Trump instead nominated ultra-conservative Neil Gorsuch to fill the seat. With Gorsuch in the fold, the NRTWC and another right-wing group—the Center for Individual Rights—have fast-tracked a similar case, *Janus v. AFSCME*, in the hopes that the court will eliminate agency fees.³ Unless teachers redouble their efforts to organize and build membership, teachers and communities alike will suffer the consequences of weaker teacher organizations.

Trump's vision for public education, reflected in his appointment of Betsy DeVos as secretary of education, is singularly threatening, too, as DeVos represents the most anti-public-education figure to occupy

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*For more on this topic, see "Hope in Dark Times" and "History and Tyranny" in the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2017.



The Chicago Teachers Union on strike in 2012. Inset: Margaret Haley, a leader of the Chicago Teachers Federation.

Democratic politicians not doing nearly enough to arrest it, a trend scholars have referred to as “neoliberalism”—organized teachers, as unfair as it might be to expect it, must do even more. I concluded in the book that “two examples of teacher unionism, one hundred years apart ... show that teacher organization is at its best when it is part of a larger social movement and when it can show how intimately related are teacher working conditions, student learning conditions, and social equality.”

Organized teachers must forge powerful connections between their interests in the classroom and the needs of the broader community.

the top post in the Department of Education’s 40-year history. Since her confirmation, DeVos has proposed diverting an enormous amount of federal funds to private schools.⁴ What she (and by extension Trump) threatens is perhaps the most important innovation in American history: public investment in common education.⁵

The good news is that, in spite of the many things working against democracy nationally, politics is still mostly local. In my book, I document some astounding efforts by teachers across the country to build and wield collective power. One of the most important reasons for these successes (and why DeVos has been mostly frustrated so far in radically overhauling public education)⁶ is that our education system is still highly decentralized. Further, schools—from elementary schools to public universities—are highly visible institutions that form a crucial piece of a city’s or town’s identity, and thus give teachers a phenomenal amount of political agency.

Indeed, as I began to consider my book’s conclusion, I couldn’t help wondering about the present and future of organized teachers. Given the grander scheme of American history—in which corporate America undertook an assault on working people beginning in the 1970s, with most

The two examples I used were both from Chicago: Margaret Haley and the Chicago Teachers Federation (CTF—a founding union of the American Federation of Teachers in 1916) in the early 20th century, and Karen Lewis and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in the early 21st. In this article, I explain what we can learn from each and share what my union (situated just a bit north of the Windy City) is doing locally to follow in their footsteps.

A Feminist Union Fights for Chicago Children

Margaret Haley was born in 1861, the daughter of an Irish immigrant mother and Irish American father. Like many working-class women at the time, she sought the relatively stable wages of a public school teacher. In 1884, Haley took a job teaching sixth grade in Chicago. Her school was in “Packingtown,” the neighborhood made famous by Upton Sinclair’s fictionalized account of the brutal conditions immigrant workers faced in the meatpacking industry.⁷

Haley taught classes of 40–60 students, many of whom were malnourished and often sick, spoke little English, and would leave at age 11 or 12 to go work in the packinghouses. By 1897, the vast majority of

elementary teachers (virtually all of whom were women) “were working under practically the same salary schedule that had been in force in 1877,” while the salaries of male administrators had been increased significantly.⁸ Female teachers in Chicago were discouraged from marrying. And without any retirement provisions, they typically relied on charity when they stopped working.

Teachers first organized for a pension plan and, in 1897, formed the Chicago Teachers Federation, the nation’s first real teachers union.⁹ Haley and another teacher, Catherine Goggin, emerged as leaders. Goggin was appointed the CTF’s first president

and, concerned with both their own welfare (the new pension provision immediately faced political threats) and their students’ about half of the city’s 5,000 elementary school teachers signed up for the union in its first six months. Haley, the firebrand who would soon be dubbed “Labor’s Lady Slugger,” was elected vice president in 1898.

Teachers had no collective bargaining rights or professional organizing assistance at this time. In this climate, two key things made them effective: members themselves did the hard work of organizing, and they worked with the broader community when they did it.

Teacher Strike!, by Jon Shelton, is published by the University of Illinois Press, which is offering *American Educator* readers a 20 percent discount off the purchase of the book through June 15, 2018. To order, visit www.press.uillinois.edu and use promo code SHELTON.



Just a year into its formation, the CTF presented a 3,500-signature petition for increased pay to the school board, which convinced the board to provide salary increases. In 1898, a commission was established by the mayor to look into reforming the education system. Headed by William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago—a university founded by the nation’s wealthiest person, John D. Rockefeller—the commission opposed blanket salary increases for teachers and instead recommended merit pay and much more control for administrators. The state legislature introduced a bill based on the recommendations.

In 1899, the CTF held a series of community meetings to explain how schoolchildren would be affected by the new law, and teachers amassed signatures from parents opposing the bill. Haley deftly tied the reforms to Rockefeller in ways teachers today must do with proposed education reforms. As historian Kate Rousmaniere explains, “By highlighting Harper’s link to the millionaire Rockefeller and to moneyed interests, the debate over restructuring the city public school system was deflected to a debate about power and class interests in a democratic society.”¹⁰ The legislature voted down the bill.

But Haley and the CTF did not stop there. When, later, city officials told them Chicago did not have enough money to increase teacher salaries and pensions, Haley spent four years investigating the city’s finances. She consistently updated the public on the investigation, crafting a common understanding in Chicago around why school finances were so dire. The investigation ultimately revealed that some of the city’s largest and most prosperous corporations had been dramatically underpaying their taxes. Teachers ultimately won pay increases, and Haley and the CTF made a powerful argument that education represented a key part of a modern American city. As Rousmaniere puts it, “Haley saw the economic advancement of teachers as an intrinsic part of broad social reform. Improving the education of future citizens would lead to an improved society, and improving the working conditions of teachers would help improve that education. If teachers gained, all society gained.”¹¹

Though it faced opposition from the Chicago Board of Education, the teachers

union continued to build power, and teachers across the United States wrote to Haley and Goggin asking them for help organizing their own locals. The CTF forged connections with the wider labor movement in the city, joining the Chicago Federation of Labor in 1902, and in 1916, the Haley-led CTF became a charter local of the AFT. Haley and the CTF were important advocates for women’s suffrage, too, arguing that the troubles teachers faced stemmed from limits to their political agency.

In thinking about Haley’s legacy, we should note that she “resolutely ignored” the needs of the African American community that had begun to grow in Chicago in the early part of the 20th century. Even though such a stance was typical of some of the most progressive Americans at the time, historians must nonetheless acknowledge this important limitation.¹² Still, the example of Haley and the CTF is instructive: it shows that by building strength through membership, and allying with the community (even though Haley, clearly, did not include *all* members of the community) against corporate reformers, teachers could improve their own lives in addition to the lives of many of their students and their families. Just as importantly, Haley’s work provided a critical example for teachers elsewhere, building the foundation for a national movement of teacher unionization.

Chicago Teachers Organize a Movement against Neoliberalism

Chicago teachers eventually gained bargaining rights in 1966, getting much improved salaries, benefits, and working conditions in the two decades that followed. Unfortunately, since that time, efforts to weaken the rights of working people and public education in the name of market forces have changed the trajectory of public education and other public services in Chicago for the worse.¹³

Chicago’s history illustrates how recent Democratic politicians have seen their own political assumptions shifted by the growth of neoliberalism. Though Harold Washington (1983–1987), the city’s first black mayor, was elected by a multiracial coalition with strong roots in labor, in the years since, Chicago has been administered by Democratic mayors—Richard M. Daley (1989–2011) and Rahm Emanuel (2011–present)—who have mostly favored corporate development. School “CEOs” appointed by Daley and Emanuel have closed neighborhood schools, especially in African American and Latino neighborhoods, while opening scores of charter schools, which are less accountable to the public.¹⁴

Haley and others calling for the resignation of John D. Shoop, superintendent of the Chicago Board of Education, in December 1913.



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AFT President Randi Weingarten, left, and CTU President Karen Lewis, right, stand together during the CTU strike.

35,000 teachers and their supporters marched through downtown in a massive show of solidarity.²⁰ Given the longer history of teacher strikes in the United States—particularly the relative unpopularity of the last Chicago strike in 1987—the well-documented public support for teachers in September 2012 was staggering indeed.²¹ After seven days, Mayor Emanuel and the school board agreed to a deal in which teachers won raises and defeated efforts to curtail tenure and increase the use of test scores to evaluate teachers. The effort became a model for other unions across the country.

LEE BALGEMANN

Perhaps the most iconic example of Chicago's shift toward a more unequal city is the dramatic increase of what is known as "tax increment financing." In order to subsidize downtown development for wealthy investors, Chicago has siphoned off tax dollars from public education, leading to the justification for closing schools and reducing services for the city's neediest children.¹⁵ Given this financing scheme, combined with the fact that the state of Illinois subsidizes every other school district at far higher rates (particularly regarding pensions; until very recently, the state contributed almost no funding for Chicago teachers' pensions while significantly funding the pensions of teachers everywhere else in the state),¹⁶ teachers in Chicago increasingly felt they lacked the necessary resources to teach the city's children.¹⁷

In the late 2000s, a chemistry teacher named Karen Lewis worked through a group of insurgents called the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) to fight the school closures and ally the union's goals more closely with the goals of families in the community. The result: in May 2010, CORE's slate of officers successfully won election to lead the union (a reminder that unions remain one of this country's most democratic institutions). The newly elected leaders started listening more to parents and pushed back against the neoliberal order that deprived their schools of funds. In 2012, Chicago teachers went on strike and won labor's most important victory in the past quarter century.

As soon as CORE took control of the CTU, it began to mobilize for upcoming contract

The CTU's success stemmed from members putting themselves on the line to organize and mobilizing the community behind them.

negotiations. The legislature passed a law in 2010 that forced Chicago teachers to garner the incredibly high threshold of 75 percent of all teachers to authorize a strike. Assuming that teachers would have very little leverage in the upcoming contract negotiations, the school board unilaterally canceled a scheduled pay raise.

The board next sought concessions from the teachers: increasing the school day while effectively cutting teachers' pay by forcing them to contribute more to their benefits, limiting tenure, and tying teachers' performance even more closely to student test scores. The CTU had expressed its demands in a report released in February 2012 called "The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve." The report outlined the need for smaller class sizes, wraparound services for students, professional development, and an end to institutional racism in Chicago schools.¹⁸ In addition, the teachers sought a modest pay raise, limits on student standardized test scores in teacher evaluations, and improved physical spaces in which to teach.

With an impasse on the horizon, the union got 90 percent of all teachers (and 98 percent of those who submitted a ballot) to authorize a strike.¹⁹ On the strike's first day,

The CTU's success stemmed, as it did for the CTF in the late 19th century, from members putting themselves on the line to organize and mobilizing the community behind them. As sociologist Jane McAlevey points out, CORE's most important innovation was devoting its efforts to organizing—among the teachers and in the community—and doing so in a way that forged a broader argument about the undermining of public education: "If the labor movement's instinct has been [in the recent past] to reduce demands in order to sound reasonable, the new CTU took the opposite approach: they led every meeting with school-based discussions of billionaires, banks, and racism. (*Note to other teachers unions: they got reelected.*)"²²

Certainly the timing of the strike mattered: striking during the 2012 presidential election campaign motivated Emanuel, a key ally of Obama, to negotiate in order to end the strike. But the strike was clearly also successful because the union had worked hard to mobilize members; with contract negotiations on the horizon, the CTU held a "structure test"—a mock vote—in order to ensure it could meet the high threshold needed to authorize a strike.²³ Further, the



In February 2011, thousands protested inside the state capitol in Madison against Governor Scott Walker's Act 10, which hobbled public employee unions in Wisconsin.

BRENT NICAstro

The fight to reclaim our country and restore democracy must come from the bottom up. Those who teach represent the crucial linchpin in this struggle.

final contract negotiations serve as a model for democratic unionism. In spite of a push from the school board to end the strike as soon as Lewis and the negotiating team had agreed to a deal, union officials postponed the strike vote for two days so that all members could read the entire contract before voting.²⁴ It is also important to note that the union garnered the support of the community by organizing around the issue of school closings and making student needs a substantial part of its contract demands.

The CTU has continued to be an outspoken critic of neoliberalism in Chicago since 2012. Lewis became so popular that many urged her to run against Emanuel for mayor in 2014, and she planned to do so until being diagnosed with brain cancer. Lewis ultimately chose not to run, and Emanuel was reelected in a very low-turnout election. The battle is far from over for the CTU, but the union successfully leveraged its widespread popularity to defend its gains in contract negotiations in 2016.

Teacher Unions as Central Agents of Modern Democracy

The overarching lesson from Chicago's two pioneering unions is that what works in organizing, especially in teacher unions, transcends time. Haley and the CTF won collective victories in the face of a hostile city government around the turn of the 20th

century, as did Lewis and the CTU in 2012.

In both cases, however, these wins required patient and sustained effort. Educators must play the long game, meaning that we should think carefully about how to organize and build power in our locals, especially since it is widely expected that the Supreme Court will rule in the upcoming *Janus* case to impose "right to work" on all of America's public sector workers.

The way to combat the likely loss of fair share fees is to ensure we undertake the hard work of engaging every new teacher in a one-on-one organizing conversation. But we can't stop there. The best way to inoculate our workplaces against right to work is to organize those who are already members to become activists—both at school and in the broader community. It may be unfair to ask our colleagues to add these tasks to their already full plates of work and home life. But developing scores of new activist teachers is the only likely way to combat the efforts of DeVos and the many "reform" organizations out there hoping to privatize public education.

Further, as our economy has moved toward the centrality of service and education (and as many industrial jobs have been either outsourced or made obsolete by technology), schools and universities are the places around which we must build political organizations that ensure everyone

has access to economic security and the chance to have a fulfilling life. Education is now the pivot point on which our identity as a people is connected: it is foundational both to the civic knowledge necessary for a democracy to function and to the skills necessary for economic opportunity in a global economy, as well as a key driver of jobs in its own right.

And, above all, education is accessed locally. Teachers *not only* must organize but also should work to ensure that everyone in their town, city, county, and even region has equal access to jobs, education, healthcare, and the other opportunities—like museums and other cultural activities—that make life fulfilling.

In my home state of Wisconsin, we've been dealing with our version of Trumpism for some time now. Republican Governor Scott Walker, elected to represent the state's wealthiest citizens, used collective bargaining rights for public employees as a political wedge, revoking them in 2011, while slashing taxes for the wealthy and defunding public education. Not only did teacher unions in Wisconsin lose the possibility of fair share agreements (the subject of the *Janus* case), but Act 10 went even further. Also known as the Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill, Act 10 hobbled public employee unions in Wisconsin. We no longer even have the option of negotiating automatic dues deduction for members, and unions are not allowed to legally bargain for salary or wage increases higher than the cost of inflation. University faculty members are barred from any collective bargaining at all. These stipulations represent massive challenges to organizing strong educator unions.

The legislature also has diverted funds from K-12 education to expand the state's voucher scheme, and has gutted public higher education by imposing nearly \$800 million in cuts since Walker took office. Walker and the legislature also went after private sector unions, forcing right to work on the rest of the state's workers in 2015. Finally, Walker has provided a preview of what Trump's new tax law will do to our country, as he has offered massive tax credits to the wealthiest manufacturers in the state.

Walker no longer even restricts the giveaways to local millionaires. His recent deal to convince the manufacturer Foxconn to open a facility in Wisconsin currently offers the largest corporate subsidy any state has ever offered a foreign company in American history: \$3 billion in direct payments to a company led by a Taiwanese billionaire.²⁵ Each of the next 10 years, the taxpayers of Wisconsin will pay Foxconn around \$250 million—the same amount the legislature cut from higher education in a drastic round of cuts in the 2015–2017 biennial budget that has devastated our university system.

Predictably, unions in both the public and private sectors have lost members in our state, and the economy has largely stagnated. But we are fighting back, and we are using the model Haley and the CTF pioneered in the first Gilded Age. I know because I serve on the executive council of my own AFT local, UW–Green Bay United, which represents University of Wisconsin–Green Bay faculty and staff, and I’m also vice president of higher education for our state federation, AFT–Wisconsin. Last year, AFT–Wisconsin, led by President Kim Kohlhaas, committed to a long-term member-to-member organizing plan. Our overall membership has now stabilized, and locals that have committed to organizing are growing their memberships and exercising greater power in their communities.

Here are a few examples: The Hortonville Federation of Teachers responded to intimidation from administration by working with community members to elect two new school board members in April 2017. Of

course, AFT locals have been working to elect school board members who support public education for decades, but this effort is particularly inspiring since it took place in the shadow of the infamous National Education Association local-led strike of 1974, when the school board fired and replaced 88 teachers.²⁶ The Milwaukee Area Technical College local, AFT Local 212, annually recertifies, most recently with 98 percent of those who voted affirming it as the bargaining agent²⁷ (under Act 10, public employees can still certify a union as a bargaining agent, and doing so continues to give workers a more unified voice). However, each year, the deck is stacked against the union, since under Act 10, to maintain bargaining rights, a local must receive 51 percent of the votes of the entire bargaining unit, not just those who turn out to vote. How does the local do it? Its union activists commit to organizing other members, and they have built a reputation on campus as advocates for their students by facilitating programs to support them. For example, Local 212 raises money for a program called Faculty and Students Together (FAST). FAST gets money into the pockets of students when they have a financial emergency so that they can stay in school, filling the void left by federal and state austerity.²⁸

Just last spring, the higher education local at UW–Madison, United Faculty and Academic Staff (UFAS), led a successful “fair pay” campaign to properly compensate faculty assistants, a small category of campus instructors underpaid relative to their workloads. In their campaign, UFAS activists stressed that instructor working conditions *are* student learning conditions. When administrators declined to renew the contracts of several of the activist faculty assistants, UFAS organized a statewide petition drive to reinstate them.²⁹

Finally, on my own campus, UW–Green Bay, our local voted in the AFT as the bargaining representative just before Act 10 rescinded the rights of university faculty and staff to collectively bargain in 2011. Since then, our union has become a visible advocate for all workers and students on campus and in our community.

Working with other locals through our state Higher Education Council, we led a state-level campaign to “Fund the Freeze” last year, arguing that while the tuition freeze the legislature has imposed since 2013 benefits our students, it must also be accompanied by the restoration of state funding that has been stripped from the University of Wisconsin System. In the most recent state budget, Walker proposed, and the Republican-dominated legislature passed, a modest increase in funding. It does not go nearly far enough to compensate for the savage cuts made since he took office in 2011, but it is a start. In just the past few months, our union has also worked with the local-led racial justice group Black Lives United to march for women’s and indigenous people’s rights and to run a back-to-school backpack drive so that all of our community’s schoolchildren can have the school supplies they need.

We have also invited members of the Somali community to campus in an effort to combat the toxic speech they sometimes hear from those who hold anti-immigrant views in Green Bay. Most recently, activists from our local collaborated with activists across the state to craft a member-driven UW Worker Bill of Rights.³⁰ The Bill of Rights envisions a university that works for all; it includes demands for academic freedom, pay equity, access to high-quality health-care and child care, and stable working conditions for adjunct faculty and other contingent workers. Our higher education locals are successfully using this powerful statement as an organizing tool.

This work is far from over in Wisconsin, and it won’t be easy to advance our democratic vision. But to do so, we must tread the path of Haley, Lewis, and others who have been on the front lines of advancing the notion that everyone is entitled to a good job, a good education, healthcare, and a fulfilling life. We must also ensure that no one is excluded from this vision based on race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, or other characteristics.

Our nation is at a crossroads. The fight to reclaim our country and restore democracy must come from the bottom up and must be rooted at the local level. Those who teach, now more than ever, represent the crucial linchpin in this struggle. □

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More than 70,000 public employee union members and protesters took part in a February 2011 rally in Madison.

BRENT NICASTRO

To Strengthen Democracy, Invest in Our Public Schools



BY EMILY GASOI AND
DEBORAH MEIER

Who could have imagined that, more than 150 years into this bold project of preparing successive generations for informed citizenship, our system of universal education would be as imperiled as it is today? One of the original ideas behind establishing a system of “common schools”—as one of the early advocates for public education, Horace Mann, referred to them—was not that they would all be mediocre, but that children from different backgrounds, the children of

workers and the children of factory owners, would be educated together. As Mann wrote in 1848, “Education ... beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”¹

Of course, Mann’s own understanding of equality and citizenship was surely limited, as he wrote these words at a time when only white men had the vote, the Emancipation Proclamation was yet to be signed, and the children of workers were more likely to be working in factories themselves than they were to be attending school. And while schools have historically mirrored society’s inequities as much as they have inoculated against them, our public institutions nevertheless have at their foundation the ideals set forth in Mann’s quote and in our most soaring rhetoric about individual freedom and the common good.

And yet, in our current reform climate, our system of public education is often referred to as a “monopoly” rather than a public good. As such, in districts around the country, public schools are being shuttered at an alarming rate, with more than 1,700

schools closed nationwide in 2013 alone.²

Nowhere is this trend more dramatically played out than in Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos’s home state of Michigan, where entire school districts are losing the battle against unregulated privatization through for-profit charter management entities and voucher programs. And while there is no evidence that school choice alone helps to create more equitable educational opportunities, DeVos seems determined to make Michigan a model for the rest of the country.³

With the very existence of our system of free, universal education hanging in the balance, there has not been much of a frame of reference for discussing the need to make our schools more democratic. However, in our recent book, *These Schools Belong to You and Me: Why We Can’t Afford to Abandon Our Public Schools*, we argue that the threat facing public education is a threat to our democracy writ large. Thus, if we are to take seriously our nation’s founding ideals, schools must remain grounded in the humanistic values underlying the original purpose of a system of education that aims

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to prepare all comers for competent participation in a country governed of, by, and for the people.

* * *

W. E. B. Du Bois laid claim to this original purpose in 1905 when he declared in a Niagara Movement speech: “When we call for education we mean real education. ... Education is the development of power and ideal. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people.”⁴ All societies educate a ruling class to make important decisions in their own interests, as well as for the society over which they rule. The history of our democracy is defined by the struggle to expand who is part of that ruling class. Du Bois’s quote highlights both the enduring shortcomings of our system of public schooling and the promise it holds out to provide all children—the future stewards of our commonweal*—with a ruling-class education.

There are multiple and complex reasons why, more than a century after Du Bois spoke these words, and nearly two decades after the aggressive and ineffective accountability measures of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), our schools remain as segregated and unequal as ever.⁵ Certainly one of the primary causes is systemic racism that continues to plague our society. While few schools, regardless of demographics, have ever done a good job at providing children or adults opportunities to engage in experiences with democratic life, in low-income communities of color, schools tend to be characterized by an authoritative school culture. In fact, the level of intellectual and physical freedom in schools tends to correlate directly with the socioeconomic status and skin tone of the student body.⁶

But another strong factor in perpetuating school inequality is our historic tendency to conflate free-market ideology with democratic ideals. The tension between economic

freedom—the right of individuals to enrich themselves—and the need for regulation, social services, and safety nets in the name of creating a strong civic fabric is longstanding in the evolution of our democracy. But over the last several decades, the ideas of free-market thinkers, such as economist Milton Friedman, who wrote the 1995 essay “Public Schools: Make Them Private,”⁷ have increasingly gained currency, in education reform and beyond.

Within the free-market paradigm, a one-to-one correlation is drawn between what

In democratic schools, teachers and families discuss, debate, and, as much as possible, make important decisions that affect the school community.

is framed as the “failure” of public schools and what is seen as the “failure” of economically disadvantaged groups to pull themselves up and out of their circumstances. If schools would just teach “those” students more effectively, then, the argument goes, they’d be as likely as their more advantaged peers to compete competently in the pursuit of material wealth and happiness.

But market-oriented reforms prioritize the interests of the already advantaged. This is evidenced in test-based accountability strategies used to leverage school equity, a centerpiece of NCLB. A quick scan of National Assessment of Educational Progress data reveals that white students perpetually do better on standardized tests than all other groups, ensuring their demographically less privileged peers a Sisyphean cycle of catch-up.⁸ And yet, closing this elusive test-score gap has become a proxy for addressing the very real gaps in privilege. Thus, even as reform rhetoric champions the use of tests and privatization as tools to level the playing field, such tactics actually move us further from that goal.

Although it may seem impractical, even naive, in our current reform climate to advocate for prioritizing democratic education, we argue that such a change in course is imperative if we are ever to get on track toward a more inclusive and, not incidentally, more productive and just society. Our work in democratically governed settings has taught us about the benefits, difficulties, obstacles, and ways forward for creating democratic public schools that prepare the young for engaged citizenship.

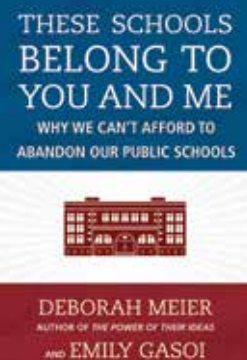


It was in working together with colleagues, students, and families that we learned more about the dilemmas a democracy inevitably runs into and how to get comfortable grappling with the inevitable flaws and tradeoffs that arose within the system we created in our school. And through such grappling, we were able to model democratic practices and values for students. In democratic schools, teachers and families discuss,

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*The word *commonweal* is not often used in writing, let alone common parlance. And yet the meaning, “the common welfare of the public,” should be more familiar, especially in schools, where, we argue, students should be taught to care about the commonweal, their place in it, and what contributions they will make to preserve and improve it.

These Schools Belong to You and Me, by Deborah Meier and Emily Gasoi, is published by Beacon Press, which is offering *American Educator* readers a 25 percent discount off the purchase of the book through May 31, 2018. To order, visit www.beacon.org and use sales code AFT.



Evidence-Based Writing

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Investing in Public Schools

(Continued from page 37)

debate, and, as much as possible, make important decisions that affect the school community. Similarly, in such settings, young people have the opportunity to be "apprentice citizens" of their schools, in order to practice becoming active citizens in the larger society.

Ultimately, the purpose of public education in a democracy is to get more Americans, starting in early childhood, to internalize the idea that they are part of the deciding class, as entitled as anyone else to voice an opinion and to make a mark on the world. That, of course, is the ideal—one worth striving for. Given the increasingly

precarious state of our public and democratic institutions, it is clear that we are paying a price for not making democratic citizenship an explicit and urgent goal of our national education reform agenda. For how can we hope to educate for democracy if children and the adults in their lives never have the opportunity to observe or practice it? And if such an education doesn't take place in our public schools, then where will it happen? □

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