



# Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project

## **DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING MUTUALLY RESPECTFUL ALLIANCES BETWEEN SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AND TRANSFORMED TEACHERS UNIONS**

**POLICY BRIEF #1**  
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Commentary by Sally Lee, Executive Director, Teachers Unite, New York City

## **SUMMARY**

Currently teachers unions and education activists in communities of color in cities are often at odds about reforms that are enacted in the name of equalizing educational opportunity. Yet, each group has resources the other lacks and they share many common aims. Working together they might achieve considerably more than either can alone, especially if differences of tactics or substance turn them into foes rather than allies. This first Brief of the Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project explains the Policy Project's mission: supporting activists working to improve schools for poor youth of color to benefit from working with transformed teachers unions as allies and supporting teachers unions to develop mutually respectful alliances with school and community activists from historically marginalized groups struggling for social justice and equality. The Policy Project bases its work on the assumption that creating and sustaining these alliances requires that teachers unions change how they operate and conceive of what it means to defend their members' interests and all parties grapple with the differing and sometimes contradictory pressures on social justice groups and unions. Lois Weiner, Director of the Policy Project, explains the Project's aims and purpose and how Briefs can further those objectives. Sally Lee, Executive Director of Teachers Unite, a grassroots membership organization of teachers working to end the school to prison pipeline and democratize New York City, comments about the challenges for activists who work with teachers unions, suggesting how the Policy Project and Briefs can be of use. The Brief ends with a short bibliography of materials that inform the Policy Project's unique mission and vision.

## **CONTEXT FOR CREATION OF THE POLICY PROJECT**

Two mostly parallel social movements are developing side by side: a new generation of teacher union activists committed to social justice is winning leadership in their local and state unions, while a new civil rights movement is also emerging. Both movements are responding to economic, political, and social policies that have devastated communities of color in the cities and diminished possibilities for public education to serve all students well. Activism on social justice issues in education among and for communities of color has been acknowledged in mass media, after years of little-recognized movement-building, but the contestation of power within city teachers unions by reform caucuses that are organizing on the school level has received scant attention, except in a few publications and outlets that examine labor issues. The history and transformative leadership of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which has heralded and supported emergence of a new generation of teacher union activists who are challenging the premises on which teacher unionism has operated for a half-century, is a highly significant political development that is an actual and potential "game changer" in urban education.

As academic research catches up with policies put in place based on economic beliefs about the "free market" and "choice," we see evidence of how policies like school closings, charter schools, and privatizing services, justified rhetorically as "putting kids first," have been harmful. Even when policies are not accomplishing what was claimed, such as use of vouchers in Milwaukee, advocates contend the weakness is in implementation rather than the premises of the reforms.

The Policy Project bases its work on the assumption that collaboration between city teachers unions and communities long under or poorly-served should emerge from shared understanding that stark inequality in US public education has been present since its creation. Though teachers and teachers unions did not create systems of public education, they share responsibility along with the rest of educational establishment for an unjust, unequal status quo. Though there have been important exceptions, teacher unions have more often than not shown complicity and silence about systemic racism in education.

Educational reforms of the past thirty years did not introduce inequality in schools but they have increased it for the vast majority of children who most need improved schools. Scholarship examining the global transformation of education illuminates how schools and the teaching profession are being shaped to fit the needs of transnational corporations and a “new mindset” that supports privatization. The wealthiest individuals in the world, funding foundations and private networks of advocacy groups, have reshaped what is taught, how, and by whom, contending that these reforms are the only way we can respond to inevitable changes in the global economy.

Two key assumptions that underlie the Policy Project’s work distinguish it from other think tanks producing materials that critically scrutinize the claims and outcomes of reforms associated with privatization. First, the Policy Project does not assume that US education must be changed to conform to the needs of transnational corporations. While academic credentials remain essential for individuals to obtain well-paying jobs, it is also true that most jobs being created in the US economy do not require advanced academic skills, are not secure, and do not pay well. In this new labor market, corporations shift jobs to whatever country pays the lowest wages. The number of “good jobs” is shrinking, and only a small fraction of the population will be able to obtain them. A persuasive explanation, though one that contradicts the conventional wisdom about the need for reforms carried out in the name of “higher standards” and “excellence,” is that schooling and the economy are being resynchronized to explain increased economic and social inequality. Education is being refashioned to diminish the number of students who obtain the sophisticated thinking and skills needed in highly-paid white collar or professional jobs. And as proponents of policies that are dismantling the old system of public education correctly observe, it is most often students of color who live in communities that have been poorly served by public schools who are excluded from this competition for the shrinking number of well-paid jobs.

This analysis of the labor market and the economy has complex implications for city teachers unions that want to push back on educational policies that diminish opportunity for poor students of color. On the one hand, education cannot create jobs and reverse economic devastation many communities face, though that is an essential issue teachers unions must raise within organized labor. At the same time, schools and teachers that are better supported can help more students to succeed academically. Often the reasons for students’ lack of academic success and the means to address it are cast as an either/or: Either schools and school systems are to blame or factors beyond the school walls are responsible. In fact, social justice activists and teachers unions, working together, might see their goal as improving schools and teaching practices as well as struggling for economic and social policies evidence demonstrates reduce poverty, unemployment, and social oppression.

The challenge for teachers unions is to acknowledge that some schools (and teachers) do not serve kids well while also exposing realities like child hunger, homelessness, and unemployment that undercut what even the best schools and teachers can do.

## DEVELOPING STRONG ALLIANCES AND TRANSFORMED TEACHERS UNIONS

The other assumption that makes the Policy Project unique and that configures the Briefs is its contention that teachers unions need to be transformed to be more effective in defending members and the public good. The effort to weaken and eliminate teachers unions is based on an accurate insight of governmental and economic elites that are managing the global transformation of public education: Despite their weaknesses, unions are the most stable, best organized opposition to policies that increase competition and the role of the market, and in so doing diminish educational opportunity for the vast majority of students. Teachers unions can bring resources advocacy groups seldom can. Just as important, unions are based on the idea that working people need to act together, which contradicts the push for individual initiative and competition, a “survival of the fittest” philosophy. A union is able to draw on a regular source of income, membership dues, and often the legal right to “sit at the table.” These characteristics give teacher unions an organizational capacity seldom acquired or sustained over time by advocacy groups or parents.

Despite their potential, teachers unions as they exist in many cities are not reliable allies for social justice initiatives or strong defenders of the working conditions that support learning. Often the union is hierarchical and undemocratic. It operates like a business that exists to provide services for its members. Members are passive and expected to do as officers or staff direct. In this kind of unionism, which still predominates, the union’s mission is protecting members’ immediate economic concerns, which are viewed as only indirectly related to social justice struggles. Politics is defined as electoral politics, not social justice. The union’s involvement in community matters is often limited to donations to local charities, though during times when the union faces a hostile school board or government, friendly parents or community activists may be asked to show support.

A movement of activists is rebuilding teachers unions on different principles, just as reformers in other unions have been doing for decades, often supported by meetings and publications of Labor Notes. They may call their aim “social justice” or “social movement” unionism, but they share a commitment that union power needs to come from the bottom-up, as it does in social movements. Union leaders offer direction and support for organizing, rather than telling members that their role is to let union officials set policy. Just as important as the union’s organizational form is its definition of the union’s purpose. In social movement unions, members’ self-interest is defined as including but being much broader than immediate economic and contractual issues. The union struggles for its members’ stake in a creating a more democratic, equitable society, and the union allies itself with other movements that are working for social justice, peace, and equality. A social movement teachers union is committed to democracy at the school and in the school system. It is this commitment to democracy that opens the door to building authentic alliances and coalitions with community groups, parents, and students, as well as other unions. Leading transformed teachers unions is demanding in a way that heading a traditional labor union is not. Arlene Inouye, an officer of the United Teachers of Los Angeles and a Policy Project advisory board member, observes union democracy and power from the bottom up for us has required extensive communication and collaboration with our governance bodies. But in a paradoxical way, it has also required more leadership from the top, in putting forward our goals and plans for the coming years... In engaging with union leadership, we open up a dialogue and space for feedback, and we alter our plans accordingly. I’ve learned that carrying out social justice unionism requires stronger leadership but in a collaborative and collective spirit.

The Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project aims to support this new generation of social movement teacher unionism activists to stretch the union’s definition of “what counts” for members. Using research and insights from scholars and activists for social justice, the Policy Briefs will try to help transformed teachers unions understand their role as connective tissue, linking struggles for a just, equitable society - and world - to teachers’ immediate concerns about their pay, their work, the profession, and their schools.

Union democracy is essential to improve what occurs for students who most need better instruction and supportive school environments because policies adopted by union officials negotiating with others “at the top,” without the understanding and endorsement by members “on the bottom,” generally results in flawed implementation. As much research on teachers’ professional development and urban school reform show, when reforms are imposed by legislators or school authorities without “buy in” from teachers and without the budgetary support that allows the reform to be done well over time, the main outcome is discrediting the theory and ideals driving the reform. If union officials agree to policies that are good in principle without consent by the majority of the members, both the ideas and the union leadership are discredited.

Even social justice/movement teachers union leaders will likely feel pressure to narrow the union’s focus, take up “bread and butter” issues that may be more popular with some members than social justice concerns. Moreover, teachers are not immune to bigotry and prejudice that are epidemic in our society, even though these ideas contradict the union’s ideals and members’ own self-interest. Teachers unions have longed formed coalitions with other unions and with community groups. However, most often these have been superficial and dominated by union officials. The kinds of alliances that are needed now are based on a willingness to learn from and with social justice activists, parents, and students. A major challenge for transformed teachers unions is to use the union’s strength to expand democracy at the school site and in the school system. We see in the work of Teachers Unite how the process of building alliances with community can begin in the school, a process that encourages teachers to educate other teachers about an issue of injustice or inequality that harms students.

Another challenge teachers unions and social justice activists confront is deciding who speaks for parents and students in building alliances. One perspective is that the unions should push to strengthen and implement laws that require school-based leadership teams or school-wide councils, with all constituencies represented. What are other methods of creating meaningful, respectful alliances outside of this legal, formal framework?

Some of the most destructive problems students, teachers, and parents face cannot be solved locally. Even the best union leadership and democratic union are beset by national and global factors beyond their immediate influence. Because of diminished union membership in the private sector, as well political attacks on public employee unions, in many locales teachers unions are the most politically powerful union. Yet a single union cannot accomplish by itself many of the broad, deep changes in government and politics that a stronger, progressive labor movement could tackle successfully. How can teachers unions navigate these conditions while retaining and building local alliances?

## INTERROGATING WHAT IT MEANS FOR A POLICY TO “WORK”

Generally a “policy brief” produced by a think tank or advocacy organization is directed toward legislators or lobbyists and therefore contains prescriptions that can be realized through governmental action. Other think tanks produce “working papers” that explore a problem more abstractly. In contrast, Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Briefs will explore policy controversies by scrutinizing fundamental assumptions about what we want from schools, teachers, and our society, applying these understandings to analyze how policies already proposed or enacted fit with those assumptions.

Increasingly teachers, parents, and community activists are forming study groups, separately and jointly. The Briefs are intended to support these and similar collaborative considerations of educational injustice that demand attention and solutions. To encourage readability, the Briefs do not contain endnotes or footnotes. However Briefs contain a traditional bibliography of references that inform the analysis. When possible, publications of advocacy groups that may provide useful specifics are included. Before publication on the Policy Project website, Briefs are sent to Advisory Board members for suggestions, although they are not responsible for its content. Briefs can be reproduced for non-commercial use as long as the Policy Project and authors are credited. For commercial use, including publication of Briefs in books or journals that are not open-access, please contact the Project Director.

Readers are invited to propose topics and authors for forthcoming Briefs. Topics advisory board members have proposed include case studies of how different teachers unions have transformed and changed their culture and how community movements have come together with unions. Another Brief we hope to produce will examine how transformed teachers unions and allies might tackle the loss of African American teachers that accompanies privatization and creation of charter schools.

A commentary by Sally Lee, Executive Director of Teachers Unite, follows.

### COMMENTARY BY SALLY LEE

My understanding of a policy brief is that it summarizes a very specific policy issue and provides recommendations for decision-makers. When confronting these power brokers, organizers need larger institutions to help produce colorful factsheets with infographics, and other attention-grabbing documents. What Lois Weiner describes the Urban Education and Teacher Unionism Policy Project will produce is something different from this traditional brief. Call them think pieces, conversation-starters, assertions, or something else that gets at the idea: innovative, catalytic ideas to change the course of community and labor organizing around public education. However, I want to push on the Policy Project about specificity in the Briefs. From my perspective as Executive Director of Teachers Unite I want a Brief that interrogates assumptions AND also

1. Summarizes the policy issue
2. Provides overview of teacher unions’ current policy position
3. Counterposes alternative strategy/position that rank and file and community activists will support.

I can think of three policy issues that relate directly to the work of Teachers Unite that currently have momentum while having major gaps in the larger conversation:

Community Schools

Restorative Justice (RJ) programming in schools

Mayoral control of schools

The kind of specificity that Teachers Unite activists could use from researchers and a Policy Brief on restorative justice in New York City (NYC) schools would include

I. A summary of RJ funding in NYC (City Council) and other localities (school districts, etc.) that directs dollars to nonprofits for trainings, but also those that have hired school-based RJ Coordinators

II. Analysis of positions and practices of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the union bargaining for NYC teachers, and other relevant teachers unions’ position, support, or opposition to these initiatives.



III. Exciting alternatives that grassroots organizations are creating, for example Teachers Unite's work, including our leadership developing the Dignity in Schools Campaign –NY Pilot School Blueprint; Youth Justice Coalition's LA for Youth Campaign; and other projects that promote a broad social justice agenda that includes demands about using union labor, de-funding the police, etc.

IV. Specific recommendations of how

a. Teachers unions can support local communities to develop alternatives described

b. Policy makers with governmental power or access can make real these demands

Audiences concerned with all of these policy issues, who are also looking for suggestions include: mayor and mayoral agencies, union leadership, rank and file union activists, community organizations, organizers, legal advocates, parent leaders, state legislature, education reform organizations, etc. And what almost none of these actors are currently discussing is the role of privatization that furthers these projects, or the fundamental importance of defending democracy in public schools. I think that the movement fighting for “educational justice” has a lot to gain from engaging in these conversations, and I hope that with each of these think pieces there is a launch event, whether it's a webinar, a panel, a Twitter rally, or other dialogue to deepen our collective understanding of the issues.

Unions, as organizations of workers, are entities that require member engagement to realize their democratic nature. 501c3 organizations like Teachers Unite, can only act as a special interest group on the outside. Similarly, community organizations fighting for public education reforms that are not emerging directly from a school site, or possessing any power in local school boards, cannot build the power necessary to transform public schools. The disconnect between worker struggles and low-income urban and rural community struggles for better schools is diluting our effectiveness as organizers. The test for teachers unions will be to use their institutional power to midwife independent parent and student unions with school-based chapters. In this format, which will directly represent the millions of school stakeholders across the country, we can build strong partnerships centered in school communities.

I'd like to see conversations emerge from these catalytic prompts that tackle the larger concept of movement building. Groups working to fight injustice should be working to make themselves obsolete. Let's talk about what about we really need to do to transform public education, and society, and have our dialogue be the basis upon which we build our unity.

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