

Proletarians or Professionals?

A History from Below of Teacher Unionism in the United States, 1897-2022



By a proletarian pedagogue



“To change everything, where do you start? Everywhere!...Each their own historian. We’d be more careful about the way we live. Me, you, him, her, them, us, all of you....Class struggle!”

Why Teachers Organize

Teachers have occupied a contradictory place in the class hierarchy of the United States since the concentration of the first teaching workforces in the 1840s. On one hand, teachers are offered the psychological status of a professional, potentially allowing them the social mobility to rise into the middle class. On the other, teachers are treated like incompetent, disposable cogs and are constantly at the whims of the rich and powerful. Fifty percent of teachers now leave within the first five years within the profession. Low pay, unbearable working conditions, and impossible expectations are causing disastrous turnover in our schools.

Teachers have experienced a premeditated erosion of their pay, working conditions, and autonomy after decades of direct assault through privatization and Neoliberal austerity against unprepared mainstream teachers' unions. For instance, one of the two major teachers' unions: the National Education Association (NEA), found that as of 2018 almost twenty percent of teachers work a second—or third job—to survive. Younger, less experienced teachers bear the brunt of this trend, with a full third of teachers under thirty years old working second jobs during the summer or school year just to pay the bills. Teacher salaries declined 4.5 percent nationwide between 2008 and 2019 (Rosales 2019). With the price gouging by corporations during these post-normal times, the situation has escalated to crisis proportions. Hundreds of thousands of teachers said 'fuck this' and quit.

Teachers are flung into the trenches of every social problem. Teachers simultaneously confront issues such as poverty, familial and relationship abuse, lack of access to childcare, homelessness, addiction, and individual violence. Teachers are expected to manage classrooms full of traumatized and sometimes dangerous children with little to no support. Teachers are expected to provide top notch classroom instruction, grade assignments, consistently attend professional development, and deal with all types of abuse from administrations. Teachers need to take work home to keep up with lesson planning requirements. Teachers, on average, work twelve hour days.

Believe it or not, teachers have suffered under even worse conditions and pay than they do now. The current assault on public school teachers is yet incomplete, since teacher unions retained high membership rates and endured the long defeat of Neoliberalism far better than private sector unions. But as the pandemic heralded the dawn of post-normality, it's become clear that the public education system is in free fall. Only we, united with other education workers, can save it. We hold in our combined hands the very power of social reproduction.

Numbers are on our side, too. There's less than two million administrators/managers across the whole education industry, and fourteen million of us workers. Three million teachers and three million support staff work in US K-12 schools (National Center for Educational Statistics 2019). Five million people work in post-secondary education. Teachers, we can play a key part in saving public education and building a new, revolutionary society. It's an unbearable responsibility to throw on top of all the other ones, but it's one we must take up. No one else will.

So what is to be done?

Teachers have drawn from the same toolbox as industrial workers to force school boards and the public to address their grievances and repair some of the structural issues within the US public education system. Especially during times of economic and social dislocation, teachers show a willingness to trigger confrontations calling to question the core structures upholding American capitalism. When organized, they can play a revolutionary role.

During the Great Depression, teachers' unions, particularly in New York City, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia, used social movement unionist strategies. This meant that teacher-organizers embraced Civil Rights activism, built community coalitions, pushed for economic justice, and called for transforming public education. The failure to stamp out social movement unionism entirely explains the survival of the movement in the dark days of the Early Cold War Era repressions. In the 1960s and 1970s, teachers launched historic strike waves to improve their salaries and benefits that, along with the recognition of collective bargaining rights, reshaped the public education system. Their relentless drive caused significant and rapid improvements to previously dismal salaries, benefits, tenure, and working conditions. Teachers' unions, through their actions, are partially responsible for preserving one of the few remaining redoubts of democratic and egalitarian intention within a nation built on genocide and slavery. They are perhaps the only reason why a comprehensive system of public schooling, as flawed as it is, remains in existence today.

A second, contradictory trend in struggles of organized teachers is collaboration with the Boards of Education (BOE) and the wider hegemonic institutions of white supremacy and capitalism in exchange for survival or "bread and butter" concessions. Trade unionist philosophies of organizing permeated teachers' unions—and still maintain a strong hold. The Strike Wave Era began to unmask the limitations of organizing by trade or skill. Anti-communism and the 'professional' 'middle class' self-conception of many teachers, especially those aligned with the leadership of the NEA (NEA), attracted them to certain conservative strategies that disconnected them from wider social

causes and excluded other school staff. Short term gains came at the expense of longer-term worker power.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, organized teachers alienated urban Black families as they struck against neighborhood community control of poor Black school districts to preserve their newly won ‘professional’ gains. Complicated battles between frequently racist white teachers and urban Black communities corroded solidarity between white and Black workers in major cities across the country for decades to come. Black communities then often collaborated with the same capitalist philanthropic foundations that had long served to keep Black communities and their education systems segregated to advocate for charter schools and voucher programs. Teachers, in certain cases, even allied with explicitly white supremacist formations like police unions, segregationist politicians, and vigilante groups. As they fought, the newly self-conscious Silent Majority turned against both. The results have been disastrous.

Arising from the ashes in the 2010s, industrial social movement unionism again represents a viable path upwards for teachers to protect their own interests and unite with the communities they serve to revolutionize education and society. Only by readopting social movement unionism based on an industrial organizing model broadly can teachers hope to weather a projected \$555 billion in austerity and assaults on public education after the pandemic (Burnette 2020).

To organize unions across such a vast, diverse industry, unionism defined by craft and job role will not do. We need to organize industrially. Everyone who works in education, from teachers to paraeducators to janitors to librarians to nursery workers to tutors, should be in the same union locals. We need inclusive unions run by the membership, for the membership—with a structure that matches the rhetoric. By learning from the failures of the past, we can chart a course beyond the limits of mainstream teachers’ unions that have historically been vulnerable to being bought off with piecemeal reforms. Reforms that can be undone after the next election cycle. Through rejecting bigoted attempts to divide the working class, we can build a genuinely democratic society.

Teacher unionism, whether following a social movement unionist or a strict trade unionist model, is a potent force. Militant organizing by teachers exposes the artificial lines that distinguish ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’ folks for what they are: almost entirely ideological in nature. Workers have varying levels of income and privilege, but we all share in the fact that we have no choice but to labor while our bosses profit. While teachers’ political outlooks and pay historically line up with those of other workers, many view themselves as fundamentally different from—or sometimes better than—other working people. Meanwhile

average teacher pay hovered around \$13,000 in today's dollars for decades until the Strike Wave Era of the 1960s. Today, even with unions, teacher pay is notoriously low. Keep in mind teaching is one of the most critical jobs if you want to have a modern society. Yet, most teachers would probably hesitate to call themselves 'working class' or 'proletarian.' It's time we got past that hangup.

Three periods highlight the key confrontations and compromises teachers' unions have navigated. The first comprises the industrial social movement unionism phase, stretching from 1929-1941. The second shifts ahead 20 years to the "Strike Wave Era," running from 1960-1981 and ending with the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers' (PFT) strike. Third, since the Great Recession of 2008, industrial social movement, and even revolutionary, unionism has made a stirring comeback.

The Early Years, 1897-1929

Founded by "docile" Chicago elementary school teachers, the Chicago Teachers Federation (CTF) turned heads in 1902 when it launched the first documented strike by teachers in history (Ricker 1905) and affiliated with the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) and not the NEA (Lyons 2008). Women elementary school teachers who joined were facing overcrowded classrooms, sexist pay schedules, and the political control of schools by craven municipal political machines. The gap between how teachers expected to be treated and the reality stirred a militant minority to take up the politics and organizational forms of industrial workers (Shelton 2017). The genesis of this "industrial" mindset lies with the conflicting class position of teachers as a workforce.

Margaret "Lady Labor Slugger" Haley, one of the founders of the CTF, identified four intolerable conditions teachers would need unions to change in a speech to the respectable NEA's convention in 1904.

Greatly increased cost of living, together with constant demands for higher standards of scholarship and professional attainments and culture to be met with practically stationary and wholly inadequate teachers' salaries. Insecurity of tenure of office and lack of provision for old age. Overwork in over-crowded schoolrooms, exhausting both mind and body. And lastly, lack of recognition of the teacher as an educator in the school system, due to the



increased tendency toward “factoryizing education,” making the teacher an automaton, a mere factory hand, whose duty it is to carry out mechanically and unquestioningly the ideas and orders of those clothed with the authority of position and who may or may not know how to minister to them. (Haley 1904)

Haley’s words would resonate strongly with teachers today—showcasing that a perception of their own class position as workers goes way back in the history of the profession. In the same speech, she called the struggles of industrial workers for unions a part of the same struggle for true democracy that teachers were fighting. One that would overcome what she termed a predatory “industrial” ideal that, left unchecked, would consume public life. Surveys and studies levied over the course of the last century consistently demonstrate that teachers’ individual political beliefs line up with those of the industrial working-class, not middle-class professionals like lawyers, doctors, engineers, and so on (Thompson 2014) (Lyons 2008) (Shelton 2017).

Our struggle today is the same. The size, shape, scale, and composition of the industries has changed—as have the aesthetics and available material inputs—but the fundamentals of capitalism have not. Capitalists have a structural drive to increase profits through heightening the exploitation of their workers. Bosses always want us to work longer hours for the same, or less, pay. If you don’t take work home with you, come really early, or stay late, then you probably have plenty of coworkers and friends in education who do. That’s exploitation. And the politicians make the laws to facilitate it.

L.V. Lampson, an organizer for the AFT, left behind writing that offers insight into the contemporary class consciousness of union teachers. He wrote a 1919 article refuting anti-union talking points in the *Journal of Education*, where he claimed “Union teachers feel that they are employees”, not professionals. He noted how organized teachers had never struck, while some unorganized teachers had. Lampson promoted the AFT and AFL as respectable, and committed to cooperation between employees and employers while containing radicalism. For him, teachers’ unions worked to contain strikes and promote class harmony.

His attitude conforms with the general outlook of the AFL/AFT union leaders and officials of his time. One of the greatest weaknesses of their model is its tendency to seek labor peace over worker power. If the company isn’t profitable, or the state is struggling with funds, then workers might stand to lose, too. Unions, then, can become partners in managing exploitative capitalist systems because they refuse to recognize the fundamental class distinction setting the interests of workers and bosses completely against each other. Under Neoliberalism, the bosses

used that to outflank and destroy the unions until we bottomed out at just over five percent of the private sector workforce organized and public sector unions under assault like never before.

An example of the dual consciousness within the teaching workforce lies within the rivalry between the NEA and the early teachers' unions. The NEA "portrayed itself as a professional organization little interested in bettering teachers' wages or attaining collective bargaining rights" (Lyons 2008). Despite never fighting for its membership's collective interests, they counted 200,000 members, increasingly school teachers, by the end of the 1920s (Cain 2009). In 1954 membership topped 560,000 (Dewing 1969). This reveals how prevalent the perception of the teacher as "professional middle class public servant" was among school administrators, the public, and even teachers.

The NEA was not controlled by teachers, even though they overwhelmingly comprised the membership. Instead, "school administrators, the largely male group...clearly maintained control of the association" through 1972 (Urban 2001). The NEA had a centralized organizational structure on the national and state levels, while the AFT used autonomous branches like the mainstream labor movement. While greater in numbers, the NEA played little role in the history of teacher unionization until the 1970s, following a rank-and-file revolt that purged administrators throughout the 1960s, and their definition of professionalism was not unanimously or even widely accepted.

Contrasted with this attitude, the supposed "professional" status of teachers spurred many to defy employer and 'public' authority to fight for what teachers defined as a professional status. Teachers coveted the material and psychological status of a middle-class professional—when school boards failed to give it to them, they rebelled. Growing up in or around working class families with traditions of blue-collar unionism, teachers were frequently already familiar with collective organizing and union culture (Lyons 2008). Second, some teachers organized to protect their classroom autonomy and academic freedom from the prying hands of politicians and corporate interests. These two reasons orbit each other and point to a desire to transform the conditions of society, not just education. Even with the obstacles they faced, tens of thousands of teachers joined with organized labor before the Strike Wave Era.

So, are teachers middle-class professionals? Or are they working class proletarians?

Advance and Retreat

At the turn of the 20th century, seeking to boost the quality of public education, school administrators nationwide raised qualifications

to teach (Lyons 2008). Pay was still low (Goldstein 2014). Teachers, now expected to have a Bachelor's or Master's degree, dealt with all the conditions Margaret Haley detailed in 1904. Bubbling up from below, eight localized teachers' unions amalgamated into the AFT in Gary, Indiana, on April 15, 1916 (Martin 1999).

By 1920, the AFT ballooned to 10,000 teachers in 180 locals. Following the high tide, several factors cut the AFT from 10,000 members to under 5,000 by 1930. Above all was "strong opposition to teacher unionism by local school boards, school administrators, some teachers, and especially the business community" (Martin 1999). The 1915 Loeb Rule, designed to kill teachers' unions, forced the CTF to officially disaffiliate from the CFL in 1917 (Lyons 2008). On top of that, "yellow dog" contracts forcing teachers to pledge not to join unions, the AFT "no strike" pledge, and low salaries hobbled organization efforts (Martin 1999). While the first 20 years brought victories for the CFT as lawsuits and lobbying recovered hidden corporate tax revenue, the 1920s brought reversal.

While the movement began entirely in cities, it had quickly spread across the countryside east of the Mississippi (Cook 1921). Teacher unionization became a national movement that sharply divided contemporary academics. Their opinions are important because these high-level academics help form a bulwark of the managerial class that shapes education policy from above. Some, such as William Cook, advocated reform to undercut the need for unionization and prevent class conflict in a public-school system he claimed serves "all classes" and noted how divisive teachers' unions were for his contemporaries.

The attrition rate for AFT affiliated unions was high. Small, rural branches struggled to survive staff turnover and push-back from Boards of Education and local elites after the Loeb Rule. From 1920-21, the number of operating locals dropped from 180 to 122 (Cook 1921). The AFT clung to urban strongholds, with Chicago still serving as the movement's center. When the Great Depression hit, teachers' unions exploded back onto the scene. Chicago, while still powerful, no longer dominated like before. Locals in New York, Philadelphia, Newark, Detroit, and Chicago helped rank and file educators usher in an era of industrial social movement unionism.

Industrial Social Movement Unionism

The broad reaching, militant, direct collective action undertaken by many teachers during the Depression was decades in the making. Teachers' unions mobilized with community groups and middle class reform movements to improve their lot in an era when moderate teacher

union leaders eschewed strike tactics. Even without striking, teachers wielded power through a diverse array of tactics. Organized teachers everywhere before 1929 drew on connections with feminist activists, settlement houses, and other reformist organizations (Lyons 2008). This rooted them in the communities they served, and teachers often suffered the same deprivations and challenges their working-class neighbors and students did. On the ground, face to face organizing, proved key to building locals and contesting power in educational and industrial workplaces alike (Toloudis 2019). Letter writing campaigns, mass mobilizations, lawsuits, and lobbying were established tools in the proverbial teacher union toolbox by the end of the Progressive Era.

Women teachers, more likely to be single and lack dependents, channeled their anger against the systemic issues which immiserated them and the people they served into organizing. These same Chicago teachers, infuriated by sexist salary schedules, pursued the single salary schedule with great zeal during World War II. Meanwhile, teachers in the Chicago Federation of Men Teachers focused solely on wages and benefits. By the end of World War II, industrial social movement unionism was defeated in the AFT as a power struggle between social movement unionists in communist led locals and a national leadership focused on “bread and butter” issues erupted (Lyons 2008).

New York City:

Founded in 1912, Local 5—the New York Teachers’ Union (NYTU)—became a lightning rod in confrontations within the national union from 1934-1941. The NYTU took on a radical character after 1929, though communists were present in the union by 1923. Communist teachers like membership secretary Benjamin Mandel began to sway the union left with the *Research Study Group* in 1923 (Taylor 2011). By 1925 local leadership accused communists of using “disruptive” tactics to hijack the union. Henry Linville and Abraham Lefkowitz, NYTU and then AFT leaders, were constant antagonists to Communist Party USA (CPUSA) aligned teachers. These teachers, known as the Rank and File Caucus (RFC), were led by Isidore Begun, Alice Citron, Bella Dodd, and others. The RFC, despite conflicts with rival leftist groups like the Progressive Group (PG), pioneered a new direction for the union during the Depression (Taylor 2011).

With massive educator unemployment and precarity accompanying the Great Depression, the NYTU faced a historic question. By 1932 the RFC was the strongest faction in the NYTU and seriously challenged a complacent leadership. The RFC and PG made union democracy a focal issue and supported the CPUSA industrial organizing model. One

inclusive of the unemployed, Works Progress Administration (WPA) teachers, private school teachers, and substitute teachers (Taylor 2011). The leadership of the NYTU dug in and defended the professional side of teachers' unions. Their obstinacy nearly shattered the AFT. The climactic 1941 expulsion of AFT Local Five and Philadelphia Local 192 had a "devastating" effect on AFT organizing (Cain 2012). On the surface, these disputes revolve around political ideology, but the truth runs deeper.

At the center of this conflict lay anti-communism and respectable professional norms weaponized to defeat social movement unionists. Linville and Lefkowitz hinged their union careers on a definition of professionalism at odds with the RFC's. Isidore Begun articulated the opposition of organizers to the mainstream craft union model as he testified to the Rapp-Courdet Committee in 1941 (Taylor 2011). He claimed that the CPUSA supported anyone who wanted to:

broaden out the union, not to keep it a little bunch of people that thought themselves intellectual aristocrats, I mean, school teachers and all that kind of stuff, but really wanted a union to include the profession, which is what a union is [suppose] to be, and that would mean people of every kind and shape. (Taylor 2011).

Communism was a constituent part in a wider debate over craft versus industrial organizing models, which communists supported and worked to empower. Begun spoke for a vocal and passionate minority that rejected the respectable middle-class definition of professionalism and threw their lot in with the organized working class, the unemployed, and colonized Americans. Teachers in rural areas had greater faith in the traditional definition of professionalism. Even then, AFT activists fanning out from the cities constantly discovered already existing informal unions (Toloudis 2019).

Communist aligned industrial social unionists built member power and increasingly won election onto the local Executive Board by 1934. Linville and Lefkowitz then escalated their tactics from restricting union democracy to prodding the AFT to revoke their own charter at the 1935 convention (Taylor 2011). Branch growth figures during the early 1930s indicate the militant, industrial turn of the NYTU boosted membership and democratic participation. Opposing substitute organizing tangibly hurt the union, but leadership blocked it because they knew substitutes "loyal to the left" would vote for the Rank and File who had built solidarity with them (Taylor 2011). Linville and Lefkowitz failed: the AFT national voted 100 to 79 to keep Local Five (Taylor 2011).

The delegation from the NYTU leadership walked out and formed the rival Teachers' Guild (TG). Most teachers saw the walkout by the NYTU delegation as "undemocratic" (Taylor 2011). A militant,

uncompromising attitude pervaded the NYTU, for a time. Some 6,000 teachers and 1,000 estimated communists, with no effective opposition, solidified radical and industrial social movement unionist strategies.

The RFC brought the TU to the height of its power, and started the process of unifying the fractured mosaic of teachers' unions in New York into one union capable of winning collective bargaining (Taylor 2011). Communist teachers, siding with industrial workers, pioneered "intercultural" education to counter fascism and promote Black American civil rights, built connections with working class communities, and used mass demonstrations to confront school boards and the entire capitalist structure of society. After Mayor LaGuardia reached an agreement with bankers to keep the city solvent in exchange for drastic pay cuts for teachers and general austerity, RFC activists held demonstrations and constantly attacked the mayor, BOE, AFT and AFL leaderships, and banks (Taylor 2011). With the 1935 split, social movement unionist teachers controlled the union, and leaned into the Popular Front tactics spearheaded by the CPUSA across the country to fight fascism through political education. To understand how this shift fed into the second 1941 confrontation, one must look to Chicago and Philadelphia.



Chicago:

In 1929, Chicago teachers belonged to a fragmented tapestry of teachers' unions and professional organizations. Separate unions existed for high school teachers, dominated by higher paid men; women elementary school teachers constituted the CTF (Lyons 2008). Like most AFT locals of the time, they were also segregated by race. In response to enormous pressure stemming from the Depression and the Great Migrations from the South, these organizations formed the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in 1937. Unlike New York teachers, few communists joined the union, and CTU leadership carefully patrolled for communist influence. Under president John Fewkes, the union shifted from militant, riotous action in 1934 to removing the industrial social

movement unionist dominated branches in 1941. Then, the CTU ingratiated itself to Mayor Kelley's political machine until the late 1950s. Anti-communism, a surrendering to racism, and a tunnel vision on salary increases and political negotiation explain this seemingly surprising change.

To understand the 1941 expulsions of AFT Locals 5, 192, and 537, turn the clock back to 1929, when a rapid and severe deterioration of working and living conditions of Chicago teachers began, exposing their real status under a capitalist economy. A 1938 study argued that teachers "despite...their belonging to a 'profession,' they are workers" (qtd. in Lyons 2008). All teachers were affected, but older teachers, with higher salaries and tenure rates, faced the worst pay cuts and layoffs. Meanwhile, janitors earned more than elementary school teachers simply because they were better connected politically (Lyons 2008). Janitors deserve much higher pay, but it shouldn't come at the expense of other workers.

After decades of tax evasion by corporations and a patronage based spending glut by the Chicago BOE since consolidation in 1917, the city and school system verged on insolvency by 1929. Then, Black Friday rode in on a pale horse, and overnight it seemed resources for public education had vanished. In response, the Citizens' Committee on Public Expenditures (CCPE), comprising the "leading bankers, merchants, and industrialists", formed in 1932 (Lyons 2008). With a ravenous fixation on cutting public-school expenditures, they usurped large functions of city government (Lyons 2008). Meanwhile, other public sector workers received job and salary protections thanks to the spoils system of the city, and corporations still dodged tens of millions in taxes. The horrendous consequences became clear as teachers went months with no pay (Lyons 2008). Rank and file teachers fought back, organizing as masses of workers around the world did. Conditions and punitive actions by the Chicago BOE forced teachers to band together or sink even further.

Chicago teachers unleashed fiery mass direct action to force city authorities to meet their demands. While Chicago teachers were not communists or aligned with communists, they saw themselves as the "sole defenders" of public education against corporate interests and repressive political tampering (Lyons 2008). Banks became targets as male high school teachers finally united with women teachers. In 1933 and 1934, thousands of teachers and community members ransacked banks, fought the police wielding school textbooks, and demanded the end of political control of schools (Lyons 2008). While not communists, this willingness to identify broader political targets outside the workplace demonstrates the radical nature and potential of teacher unions.

However, they did not strike, and remained in their classrooms out of moral obligation and the rules imposed by their middle-class

dominated AFT union leadership. This remained the ultimate weakness of teachers' unions in the industrial social movement unionist phase of their history. Without going on strike, teachers gave up access to the labor movement's most powerful, and dangerous, tool: withholding labor at the point of production. Workers usually do not join unions for strictly ideological reasons. They join them to build power for themselves and to win tangible gains in pay and benefits. Political education and a robust participatory democracy can then sharpen the workers' commitment to wider causes. Unfortunately, there was still strong, overwhelming public opposition to strikes by public sector workers (Lyons 2008) (Shelton 2017)—discouraging teachers from taking the type of militant strike action that would build real teacher power, decades later.

John Fewkes emerged as leader of militant Chicago teachers, eclipsing the CTF as he and the Volunteer Emergency Committee (VEC) consolidated Chicago teachers into the CTU. Without the factionalism plaguing New York teachers, Chicago teachers faced fewer obstacles to unification (Lyons 2008). New York teachers faced dire conditions and austerity but failed to unify until the 1960s (Taylor 2011). In Chicago, anticommunism prevailed from the beginning. Communists could not gain a hold in such smothering conditions.

The CTF and Haley never joined the CTU, and eventually disbanded in the 1960s (Lyons 2008). John Fewkes ran the CTU until 1966. As the Depression wore on and the CTU cemented partial victories on school year length and back pay, Fewkes steered the union towards a moribund complacency. Even on issues rising to the top of rank and file concern, like academic freedom, Fewkes and his supporters showed little interest (Lyons 2008). Kermit Eby and a militant minority disagreed, leading to a last spate of community based activism in the 1940s.

This set off a confrontation between supporters of Eby and Fewkes, with Fewkes winning and booting Eby from the union. The CTU waged a notable campaign for equal pay through the single salary schedule during the 1940s, but mainly it helped the war effort while leadership integrated into Mayor Kelley's electoral coalition. Eby's path, while not impossible, would have faced a difficult struggle with Kelley's machine, which included the CFL. Nationwide public opposition to public sector unionism made Eby's vision seem impractical (Lyons 2008). The leadership's moderation and persecution of industrial social movement unionists by anticommunists in Chicago soon led to the 1941 showdown.

Philadelphia:

The Philadelphia Teachers' Union (PTU) is another demonstration of how the presence of radical, communist workers enhanced fellow

workers' commitment to industrial social movement unionism. Their commitment to racial justice and academic freedom empowered the rank and file, and laid the groundwork for the more successful teacher organizing in Philadelphia during the Strike Wave Era (Toloudis 2019) (Toloudis 2019). In the end, though, anti-communist sentiment overtook the AFT. The PTU was expelled from the AFT in 1941 along with the NYTU and Local 537.

Public animosity to government workers going on strike—along with many teachers' misunderstanding of their own class position—prevented the PTU and its counterparts from using labor's ultimate weapon. But the local 192's industrial social movement union model helped it build for the future. In 1937, local 192 secured the most robust state tenure law in the country at the time (Toloudis 2019) (Shelton 2017). It represented a momentous change: “the union's victory with the tenure law empowered the state's classroom teachers with due process rights” (Toloudis 2019). Before the tenure law, teachers in Pennsylvania could be fired for any reason without any recourse. For example, like “in much of the country, it was normal in Pennsylvania for school districts to dismiss teachers when they married” (Toloudis 2019). These women were then abandoned to dependence on their husbands for survival—husbands that were often violent and abusive—and encouraged to be that way by a patriarchal society.

Teachers' unions, then, are a prominent vehicle for feminist struggle historically. Once again, teaching workforces are over 80 percent women. That means teachers' unions have the same feminist potency they've always had.

Not only did the union's political and street level actions transform the lives of its overwhelmingly woman membership, its focus on academic freedom opened the space for future labor organizing across the entire education industry. Philadelphia teacher unionists accomplished much on this front—building on the accomplishments of the CTF earlier in the century. Protecting and expanding academic freedom for teachers ensured the “promise of professionalism” would be enforced, and “combined with legal protection from political molestation” the tenure law “opened the door for the union's participation in political organizing and freer work with the labor movement” (Toloudis 2019). Without far reaching tenure laws in Pennsylvania and other states across the country, the gains of the Strike Wave Era might not have been possible. Put in context, arguments against teacher tenure, which even many teachers parrot, seem downright sinister.

The PTU used the tenure law to defend the civil rights of Black teachers and students, even outside the city lines. Jesse Holmes, the union president, was a socialist Quaker who strongly and consistently

denounced racism. Local 192 waged a prominent struggle to prevent the dismissal of 54 Chester, Pennsylvania teachers in 1934. Through a “barrage” of letters, they won (Toloudis 2019). In 1938, the union reversed the dismissal of Allan Freelon, who was effectively in charge of all art instruction in the city’s junior high schools. He was the first Black American appointed to a supervisor position in the school system. His dismissal was obviously racially motivated. On top of calling out the racism of the school board, the union forced the board to place multiple Black Americans on the same jury that not only reversed the firing, but gave Freelon a promotion, as well (Toloudis 2019).

Local 192 remained committed to radical, industrial social movement unionism through its entire existence. Even as conservative forces in the AFL and the AFT conspired to kick the communist locals out, the PTU continued its activities without hesitation. In 1938, social movement unionists lost ground even within their own local, with the election of anti-communist Mary Grossman as president. After its expulsion in 1941, it would join with the CIO until the Second Red Scare killed the union in 1956 (Toloudis 2019).

The 1941 Convention:

From 1935-1941, the communist leadership of the NYTU raised membership to over 6,000, but an anticommunist crusade in the AFT isolated them. The CTU played an essential role in purging it and two other locals, lending the key of votes in favor of revocation (Cain 2012). The charges against the three locals—dual unionism, attacking AFT leadership, “disruptive” tactics, and subversion—were rooted in anticommunism (Taylor 2011). Key here is a paranoid fear of communist “domination” of labor.

Communists proved themselves to be dedicated and homegrown labor activists (Kelley 1990). Yet, Fewkes, AFT president William Green, PTU president Mary Grossman, and organizers like L.V. Lampson saw communists as fringe outsiders to the labor movement who wanted to hijack it for their subversive causes (Lyons 2008) (Taylor 2011). Lampson, for instance, claims teachers’ unions were the “strongest bulwark” against “Bolshevism” (1919), demonstrating his view that communists were unnatural to the labor movement. Some historians even contend that communists didn’t even really figure into the debate at all, and that the whole conflict was actually about whether or not the AFT should ditch the AFL for the CIO (Newman & Urban 1994). All of these viewpoints miss the mark.

Debates over communism and the CIO both played subordinate roles to the conflict over social movement unionism. Expulsions followed

the rising power of social movement unionists advocating for industrial organizing models, who were often not even in the Communist Party (Taylor 2011). In the case of Chicago, communist presence was negligible in the militant years before Fewkes consolidated power. Communists did not have the numbers to “dominate” teachers’ unions (Newman & Urban 1994). Instead, they played the general role of communists in the 1930s by empowering—and holding accountable—social movements of all kinds (Kelley 1990). Corporate and political elites did not like that. Neither did conservative elements of the working classes. Radical teacher unionists today still have to navigate those same labyrinths.

By 1940, pressure mounted to expel the three “communist dominated” locals of Philadelphia, New York, and the New York College Union (local 537). In the midst of anticommunist attacks since 1935 launched by CTU leadership, the NYTU made decisions that played into the conservative faction’s communist domination narrative. Part of the story is disingenuous conflation of principled social movement unionism with communist domination. When the NYTU allied with antifascist organizations to help safeguard against a waxing fascist movement, AFT and CTU leadership exploited connections to CPUSA to justify their push to expel the locals (Taylor 2011).

Conservative elements in the union were interested in wages and benefits, not broader political causes. Their anticommunist rhetoric was cynically designed to mobilize the membership of certain branches against others in order to extinguish organizing strategies the leaders deemed incorrect or un-American. Communist teachers were specifically targeted, of course, because they helped foster existing union strategies that militant teachers had already crafted and which naturally aligned with a communist program. Communism and anarchism are outgrowths of proletarian workers’ own emerging class consciousness during the rise of capitalism. Teachers were no exception.

Communists did wield disproportionate power within the union, and unfortunately did not always use it wisely. The NYTU consistently aligned with the Comintern—the Soviet’s body coordinating various national level communist parties like the CPUSA. This led to typical accusations of “foreign” domination. During the Popular Front Era starting in 1935, the NYTU joined CPUSA in partnerships with social democrats they’d formerly denounced such as LaGuardia and FDR, socialists, and mainstream labor unions in “collective security” against fascism (Taylor 2011). When the Popular Front ended with the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement between the USSR and Nazi Germany, the NYTU shifted to anti-imperialist rhetoric and anti-war mobilizations. Accusations with some truth of vote tampering by communists in the

NYTU further isolated it. Even so, growth of communism in the NYTU was organic, and AFT accusations were disingenuous, hypocritical, or exaggerated (Taylor 2011).

The final straw was another push by the AFL and the anticommunist Rapp-Courdet Committee for the AFT to purge communists. The vote on expulsion happened right after the Committee began investigating the AFT (Taylor 2011). The AFT had already risked expulsion from the AFL in 1935 with refusal to revoke Local Five's charter. As their allies deserted them or lost election to anticommunist delegates, they went down to defeat 5,258 to 892; so the NYTU found a home in the CIO (Taylor 2011). While not the end of the NYTU, it slowly declined while the bread and butter strategy of Fewkes, the CTU, and the AFT replacements of expelled branches gained nearly complete hegemony. The 1960s saw a furtive wave of movements for democracy within labor unions, with teachers leading the way.



The Strike Wave Era, 1960-1981

After a spike of activity in teacher militancy and mass teachers strikes during the wider wildcat strike waves of 1946, teachers' unions sank into near dormancy in the ensuing decade and a half. Buffeted by the Second Red Scare, union leaders compromised and joined the "labor liberal alliance" that held the New Deal Coalition together (Lyons 2008) (Shelton 2017). CTU leadership under Fewkes ceded working conditions and academic freedom to Mayor Daley's political machine, but also highlighted teacher shortages. Broadly, the AFT nominally supported civil rights activism and offered possible defenses for teachers wrongly investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) (Goldstein 2014) (Lyons 2008). The AFT's Committee on Cultural Minorities was active and headed by famous teacher unionist and civil rights activist Layle Lane (Lane 1945). Otherwise, teachers' unions kept

quiet, and the AFT sank into the same torpor as its parent organization: the now united AFL-CIO (Lyons 2008). Accepting the rule of the owning class, they took a narrow focus on wages and benefits, thereby stifling social movement unionism across the entire labor movement.

In 1960, a rank and file upsurge against conciliatory union leadership ushered in 21 years of uncompromising teachers' strikes. It's an astonishing and overlooked period of American history. The number of strikes rose from three in 1960 to over 100 by 1967, and over 200 by the mid-1970s. Hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of educators participated (Covington 1971). Teachers struck in New York, Chicago, Newark, Detroit, St. Louis, Oakland, Philadelphia, Oklahoma City, Indianapolis, Eugene, Pittsburgh, Boston, New Haven, Bridgeport, and beyond—important to note since most strikes occurred outside the major cities, with most work stoppages involving between 100-200 workers (Shelton 2017). One year, teachers delayed school openings in 11 states at the same time (New York Times 1979). Even the conservative “company union” NEA was forged into a real labor union by insurgent members (Shelton 2017). Three distinct strike waves transformed the class status and consciousness of teachers, their unions, and the broader public school system as collective bargaining made teachers' unions “junior partners” in public schools (Shelton 2017) (Lyons 2008). Teachers attained their collective definition of professional status by the end of the first two strike waves. Their quick, partial integration into the education bureaucracy, along with racist attitudes, put them at odds with the very communities they were supposed to serve.

Rather than unite or compromise with Black students and their families, white teachers usually chose to pit their own professional interests against those of Black communities. They centered demands for higher salaries and freedom from “non-professional” duties like watching students and lunch while abandoning broader school improvements or Black community control during negotiations (Shelton 2017). Daley granted concessions to the CTU in 1969 during a strike to weaken the city's Civil Rights Movement (Lyons 2008). In New York City and Newark, racial tensions came to an infamous head in a series of strikes against greater community control of schools by Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods (Goldstein 2014) (Goldstein 2014) (Buffett 2019). By refusing to deal in good faith with Black grievances with the school system and white teachers—even the many who were not striking from racist motivations—were easily painted as hateful and selfish. Conservative, anticommunist varieties of militant trade unionism emerging from the ashes of a movement previously infused with industrial, social movement oriented tendencies bred these contradictions (Brier 2018).

The U.S. in 1960 had a tense federal labor peace and a Keynesian economic policy to fund a safety net. This set of alliances between liberal policy makers and organized labor has been post-posthumously termed “labor liberalism” (Shelton 2017). The budget for public schools rose from \$5 billion after World War II to \$70 billion in 1975. The public-sector workforce ballooned, with 2.5 million public school teachers in 1960 (Shelton 2017). They concentrated in expanding urban centers as education continued to industrialize in the Post-War years.

Out in the countryside hundreds of one room schoolhouse districts were consolidated into larger districts, usually situated in the orbit of cities (Scribner 2015). Teachers transitioned from scattered and isolated public servants to a centralized class of laborers with little power in their workplaces and pitiful salaries. Teachers could only contribute their labor power as transmitters of what state and local governments wanted taught (Scribner 2015).

In reply, teachers took up the perennial weapon of the working classes and launched the largest and longest waves of teachers strikes then seen in U.S. history (Shelton 2017). Because these strikes were usually illegal even after achieving collective bargaining, disrupted taxpayer funded services, and took place in a wider time of rebellion, teachers’ strikes finally forced their employers to grant concessions, but also were targeted in public commentary (Shelton 2017). “Other public sector unions expanded in the 1960s, but none saw as much militancy as teachers’ unions” (Lyons 2008). An article in *Times* from 1963 compared teachers’ militant strike actions to those of dockworkers (qtd. in Lyons 2008). AFT membership rose from 59,000 to 205,000 from 1960-1970, underscoring how militant struggle can convince workers to join. The NEA, after the rank-and-file transformed it into a union and launched strikes, saw membership rise by 700,000 between 1960-1970 (Lyons 2008). Events in New York City offer a helpful starting point.

New York City:

In 1958, New York Mayor Robert Wagner allowed collective bargaining for teachers and voluntary dues checkoff, so teachers could subtract dues from their paychecks (Taylor 2011). This ignited a showdown within the various teachers’ unions for the loyalties of teachers, each aiming at becoming the sole collective bargaining agent.

The NYTU, now banned from organizing in public schools, contended with Teachers Guild (TG) organizers like Albert Shanker and David Selden . The TG created the Committee for Action Through Unity (CATU) and enrolled the major share into the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). In 1964, the UFT overwhelmingly claimed victory in a

collective bargaining election, and the NYTU eventually disbanded. Organizers in the UFT kept a total focus on salaries, working conditions, and a craft union model, with little care for social issues (Taylor 2011). Militant tactics and the teachers' overriding desire for middle-class status in the golden age of the middle-classes ensured victory over an ailing NYTU.

Shanker, playing a similar role to that of Fewkes, set off the first wave of national teachers strikes—culminating in 1968. Community issues took a backseat, leading to acidic confrontations between the city's Black and Puerto Rican residents and mostly white UFT during the second wave (Buffett 2019).

The years 1968-1973 saw a second wave of strikes, characterized by rupture with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. By 1968, amid riots in the wake of MLK Jr's death, militant young Black people fought for Black community control over their schools (Lyons 2008). In 1968, New York mayor John Lindsay granted autonomy to the Ocean-Hill Brownsville district. He did this to get around having to desegregate the school system against the opposition of the moderate whites who represented his voter base (Goldstein 2014). The capitalist philanthropic Ford Foundation bankrolled the experimental district (Shelton 2017) (Goldstein 2014). Shanker and the union were strongly opposed to decentralizing a school system they had just built into a centralized body that they could force to concede to their demands in negotiations. Then, the involuntary transfer of 19 white teachers set off the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teacher Strike of fall 1968. In defense of due process rights, 54,000 of 57,000 teachers went out on the picket lines in a confrontation that would make national headlines (Shelton 2017) (Goldstein 2014).

The High School Students Union (HSSU) mobilized tens of thousands in a radical campaign against racist white teachers and school administrators (Buffett 2019). Students created huge unions to coordinate strikes and direct actions against racist school systems and the police. These students had already been struggling for other political causes such as students' rights and anti-war activism, but what they saw as a racist strike galvanized the formation of the HSSU itself (Buffett 2019). While the HSSU organized sit-ins at UFT headquarters, Black parents/activists and the police battled with teachers. New Left activists nearly universally condemned the strike as a “hate-



strike” (Cannato & Podair 2018). Teachers eventually won, killing community control and restoring the status quo.

At the same time, AFT teachers in Newark, New Jersey, launched two strikes against Black nationalist attempts to reform the school system in order to defend largely white teachers’ newly won sense of professionalism. The Newark Teachers Union (NTU) fought against Black activist parents aligned with Amiri Baraka’s Committee for a United NewArk (CFUN). CFUN’s goal was to deconstruct the white leadership and take political power for the Black majority (Goldstein 2014) (Shelton 2017). They wanted teachers to return to performing “non-professional” duties like lunch assignments and other unpaid childcare. Teachers, who had just fought like hell to free themselves from such sexist labor regimens in the first strike wave, were ready to do it again. What followed were ugly confrontations at picket lines, mass arrests of teachers, brawls in the streets, and even gunfights (Goldstein 2014) (Shelton 2017).

Liberal labor alliance response to the profit crisis, Stagflation, deindustrialization, and rising radicalism angered key parts of its electoral base. White middle and working class communities, many in organized labor themselves, slid decisively from open to teacher and public sector unionism towards hostile calls for Neoliberal privatization schemes and explicit threats to leave the city and worsen white flight (Shelton 2017). A fascist, white supremacist, cross class coalition of white middle, working, and upper class white Neoliberal policy elites formed: the “Silent Majority.” Black and Puerto-Rican Americans also no longer trusted teachers and their unions, leaving them isolated from the communities they worked in—highlighting the need for anti-racism to be at the core of our union organizing efforts.

The third wave, climaxing in 1973 but running till 1981, was nationwide from the beginning as teachers in Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit struck early in 1973 (Shelton 2017). This was a major turning point. In the 1960s, illegal teachers’ strikes raised support for public sector unionization to a super-majority of the public (Lyons 2008). Now, teachers’ demands included more radical calls for greater teacher control over school systems themselves (Shelton 2017). Support eroded as the Silent Majority crystallized into a public boss class seeking to shed its tax burden. As a feminized profession without a social movement unionist strategy tying them to the public they served, the Silent Majority’s narrative painting teachers as selfish, privileged, and out of control dominated news coverage and public discourse (Shelton 2017).

This third wave raised uncomfortable questions over “salaries, class sizes, due-process rights, and even pedagogical techniques” normally monopolized by administrators (Shelton 2017). The Silent

Majority, identifying as “taxpayers,” demonized teachers and urban Black communities for the revenue crises in U.S. cities. Like New York, U.S. cities saw socially mobile whites flee to nearby suburbs to use urban services while paying cheaper taxes, compounding huge education budget shortfalls.

New York featured in the full-throated screeds published in newspapers against “unproductive” teachers and Black communities, serving as patient zero for the national replication of these “taxpayer” grievances. New York City embodied New Deal promises of a large, interventionist state playing some role to ensure equality and opportunity (Shelton 2017). That social democratic coalition unraveled as President Gerald Ford and media publications like the *New York Daily News* and *New York Times* lambasted striking teachers for demanding higher salaries as cities struggled (Shelton 2017). After a brief pause, teachers resumed militant action from 1975-1981. Conservatives and their Silent Majority then began formulating the market based privatization and “accountability” exam nostrums implemented in the 1990s through today (Rooks 2017).

White people, in letters to newspapers—and a bipartisan set of politicians—called for reevaluating the comparatively robust social services of the city (Shelton 2017). The bill came due, and no one who had the money wanted to pay. Through the establishment of collective bargaining, teachers’ unions could affect class sizes, curriculum, salaries, hours, and other aspects of school administration. Teachers’ unions saved themselves from the cruelest Neoliberal punishments but “allowed the unions’ opponents to argue more fervently that its employees did not care about the city’s future” (Shelton 2017). These opponents demanded discipline against teachers’ unions and other “unproductive” citizens. Teachers were expected to carry out “taxpayer” wishes, and nothing else. Events in Chicago help to flesh out an understanding of the racial and economic complexities of this period.

Chicago:

Black Chicagoans, bolstered by militant student action and a platform inside the CTU, reformed Chicago Public Schools (CPS) into more inclusive spaces for thousands of new Black teachers and administrators. Civil Rights and Black Power are the main fault lines here, as political realignments like New York’s appeared in most other American cities (Shelton 2017). At first, the CTU mirrored the UFT and other urban AFT locals by ignoring the demands of Black teachers for Black school improvements (Lyons 2008).

Black schools were overcrowded, underfunded, and staffed with mostly Black substitutes (FTB) denied full credentials by an infamously racist certification exam (Lyons 2008) (Goldstein 2014). The CTU was deaf to the cries of Black dues paying members. When the CTU struck in 1968 and 1969, nearly half of Black teachers crossed the picket lines (Lyons 2008). Mayor Richard Daley compromised with the CTU to shore up his political regime against Black Chicagoans, who he saw as a greater threat. The white teachers took higher salaries with little change in workplace democracy, funding levels of Black schools, or a promise that Illinois would raise its pitiful contribution to CPS as Chicago experienced the same crises other American urban centers did (Lyons 2008).

Groups such as Concerned Parents, Operation Breadbasket, and the Black Teachers Caucus in the CTU reformed it and CPS. These Black led groups exercised a leverage in the CTU that Black people could not wield within the UFT (Lyons 2008). With concrete power inside the union and militant community confrontations with white school administrators, the police, and white teachers over racism, the CTU and Board of Education hired black teachers, added Black history and culture courses, and gradually certified Black FTBs (Todd-Breland 2018) (Lyons 2008). Leaders like Timuel Black and hundreds of Black teachers prevented a potentially fatal split within the CTU and raised the percentage of Black teachers and administrators to significant minorities or majorities by 1980 (Todd-Breland 2018). When the CTU struck again in 1971, Black teachers proved overwhelmingly supportive (Lyons 2008). Cities with already majority Black teacher workforces, like Washington DC, avoided these conflicts in the first place.

White Chicago teachers often acted in racist ways. They quickly transferred from Black schools, provided poor instruction when there, and initially joined with the city's power structures to save their salaries at the expense of Black Americans (Lyons 2008) (Todd-Breland 2018). White teachers—and some Black ones, like Newark Teachers United president Carol Graves—believed community control meant a return to forced care work and the lack of academic freedom so recently escaped (Shelton 2017). While understandable, teachers are highly educated workers on the radical edge of American craft unionism, they should have joined in solidarity with Black Americans by compromising with their demands. Craft unionism itself proved a decisive factor holding them back from doing so.

Trust was broken between the two for decades, though the depths of this break vary widely. Pennsylvania featured less tension between teachers' unions and Black communities in the cities, but it was significant nationally. The anti-communist, craft unionist smothering of industrial social movement unionism cast a long, racist shadow.

Surprisingly, the AFT never wholly abandoned social issues, as Ronald Glass reported from the AFT 1970 convention for the *Monthly Review*. As the NEA membership revolted, an abortive attempt to unify the NEA and AFT was abandoned by an AFT rank and file who thought the NEA “undemocratic” and saw their adoption of union tactics as a cynical attempt to outmaneuver the AFT (Glass 1970). The CTU, thanks to Black faculty and radical white teachers, kept social issues on the table while the AFT equated higher salaries as an investment in school quality (Lyons 2008). Militancy and traces of industrial social movement unionism explain why teachers’ unions survived and expanded as private sector unions and Black communities suffered defeats. Starting in 2000, however, teachers’ unions faced extinction.

Washington D.C.

Militant trade unionism by teachers in the Strike Wave Era was rooted in earlier local social movement unionism from 1916 through World War II. Constellations of up to seven teachers’ unions locals secured a tenure rule in the District in



1919 (Easterling 2013). Union victories drew talented teachers to the city’s school system from the surrounding school districts throughout the 1930s. But without taking more militant actions, such as strikes, and through division by race, the teaching workforce of the city labored under harshly exploitative and patriarchal conditions (Easterling 2013). Diverse accounts from teachers in this period collected by teacher unionist Christine Easterling details the arbitrary clerical work, crushing daily lesson planning requirements (with no planning periods), and authoritarian rule by mostly white, male administrators over mostly Black, female teachers.

Desegregation within the AFT then brought two segregated teachers’ union locals—local eight for whites and local twenty-seven for Black Washingtonians—together to form AFT Local Six: The Washington Teachers Union (WTU). The WTU then rapidly grew in influence and membership under the leadership of William H. “Bill” Simons—president of the union from 1964 to 1991. Simons engaged his rank and file directly, and drew his strength as a tough-as-nails, no-nonsense negotiator from their energy and activism. He led the 6,000 District teachers to vote overwhelmingly for the WTU over the NEA

affiliate Washington Education Association (WEA), which unionizing teachers overwhelmingly still saw as a company union (Easterlin 2013).

Simons and the WTU confronted a unique political and economic landscape in the District. The city can be characterized as a colony of the federal government; its historically majority Black population is no coincidence. As a result, Congress set the teachers' salaries (Williams 1978). In 1968, teachers walked out for one day and marched on Congress. Teachers disrupted proceedings to lobby for higher pay—and won. The 1968 contract solidified in the wake of collective bargaining brought significant teacher control over grading and discipline (Easterling 2013).

Then, in 1972, District teachers went on strike for the first time to force the government to address a lack of personnel and underfunding that was leading to unbearable class sizes. After more than two weeks on strike “D.C. Public Schools hired 182 new teachers, repaired crumbling buildings, and increased funding to buy more textbooks and supplies for students” (Easterling 2013). The state exacted heavy reprisals. Union leaders were jailed and \$50,000 in fines imposed on the local. Simons eventually negotiated to turn this into a scholarship for District students seeking careers as teachers.

In 1978, however, the school board tried to replace the 1968 contract and brought the WTU in for negotiations. Simons and the union refused to negotiate for a new agreement—arguing for the continuation of the old contract instead (Williams 1979). They accused the school board of aiming to weaken the provisions of the 1968 contract, which was accurate: board members themselves openly viewed the contract as too pro-union (New York Times 1979). Teachers were intransigent on this issue. They remembered the days when principals could make them clean school bathrooms or spy on them through their intercoms (Williams 1979) (Easterling 2013). An attack on their union was an attack on their dignity as human beings (Williams 1979). Meanwhile, the board kept trying to ax the old contract, effective immediately.

Notable through both of these strikes is that pay is at the center of neither. Rather, teachers emphasized working conditions, job protections, and teacher power. The city's distinct political and demographic terrain shaped class struggle with a school board that many teachers said “[wanted] to “bust” the mostly black Washington Teachers' Union as part of a master plan to prepare Washington for suburban white families who are waiting only for the D.C. public schools to shape up before moving into the city” (Williams 1979). Black Washingtonians took pride in a public school system that had produced the largest Black middle-class community in the nation. The city's Black teachers largely came from its local schools, so the racial divisions between teaching workforces and the

public(s) they served present in other American cities were absent here. There was tension with parents and the broader public (Williams 1978), but these did not break along racial lines.

When the WTU went on strike at the beginning of the 1979-1980 school year, they were prepared to endure a grueling 23 day strike without a local strike fund (Williams 1979) (Easterling 2013). Repression was again heavy. The school board got an injunction against the WTU, leading to over \$500,000 in fines. Ultimately, the union emerged victorious, with the judge in the case extending the contract until the end of the school year (New York Times 1979). That gave the union crucial time to negotiate a new contract that contained the same provisions as the old contract (Easterling 2013). On top of that, the board was prohibited from retaliating against striking teachers who returned to work in any way—despite the fact that their activity was highly illegal (Williams 1979). Rank and file solidarity, paired with democratic leadership, is a recipe for union success even in the toughest battles.

That same 1979 battle also shines a spotlight on one of the craft union model's severest weaknesses: its division of workers by craft and job role. Teachers in The District organized with the AFT, while cafeteria and janitorial workers organized with AFSCME. This prevented them from taking effective coordinated action in a timely manner. With teachers but not support staff out on strike, the city's superintendent was able to keep the schools open even as attendance cratered. It was these support staff moving to join the teachers' strike that forced the government to cave. Organized industrially, these education workers could have undertaken militant strike action together, winning a decisive victory in days, not weeks.

Pennsylvania

Histories of striking teachers in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh highlight the total inability of the capitalist state's law to uphold dignified working conditions or pay for education workers. The New Deal Era reforms had taken deep root in Pennsylvania. Pro-union governors and state legislatures had passed the most generous teacher tenure law in the nation in 1937 (Toloudis 2019). In 1968 Pennsylvania again led the country in progressive public sector labor law by passing Pennsylvania Act 195 (PA 195), which gave public sector workers a "limited" right to strike (Shelton 2017). Pittsburgh teachers' militant strike actions had forced the politicians' hands. No other state even approached this level of permissiveness. Some other progressive state governments had made it especially difficult to punish striking public sector workers. But striking was still illegal (Shelton 2017). In Pennsylvania, on the other hand,

teachers could go on strike. Capitalist states always seek to constrain any freedoms they offer to their workers, so the real goal of the law was to reduce strikes. Only after “mediation, fact-finding panels, and arbitration proceedings through the state department of labor” could teachers go on strike (Shelton 2017).

Even then, the law failed to satisfy both union teachers or the public. Philadelphia teachers, enraged over the board’s refusal to honor their old contract during negotiations, launched a strike in September 1972, just as the WTU’s strike action was wrapping up. The board was trying to freeze teachers’ salaries, lengthen their work days, and increase their class sizes to plug a massive municipal budget deficit (Shelton 2017). Organized teachers saw this for what it was: balancing the budget by increasing the economic exploitation of education workers. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) ended up fighting through two strikes that lasted nearly three months.

Pittsburgh, meanwhile, had seen teachers walk out in 1971. Chicago teachers walked off the job at about the same time. Again, in 1975, Pittsburgh teachers went on strike—inciting a brutal and divisive conflict with the school board and the public. Weeks later, the teachers were still out on the picket lines. The Pittsburgh Council of Parent-Teacher Associations got a court injunction ordering the teachers back to work. They stayed out, and their leaders served their jail terms. In the end, the teachers got a new contract with part of the raises they wanted (Shelton 2017).

Militant craft unionists proved unable to sustain their militancy or workplace gains with their focus on salaries and benefits. This narrow focus alienated them from the public and made it easy to blame ‘selfish’ teachers for widening budget deficits with the onset of Neoliberalism. Teachers, with higher education levels than most workers, were painted as separate and above the working class. Relying on legal reform, too, is a dead end. Examining the legacy of rural teachers’ unions and the rise of the public boss class reveals why.

Rural Teachers’ Unions

After World War II state legislatures and courts raised curriculum requirements, teacher qualifications, and tied state-level funding to consolidation in some way. Wisconsin, for example, passed a law in 1959 “essentially outlawing the one-room schoolhouse” by making all districts operate a high school if they wanted access to increasingly necessary state money (Goldstein 2014). From 200,000 one-school districts in 1915, 1,200 existed by the 1970s. The number of school districts in Wisconsin collapsed from over 5,000 to less than 600, a story repeated across the US

(Scribner 2015). Local tax revenues covered over 65 percent of American education spending in 1945. That dropped to less than 50 percent by 1975 (Shelton 2017). Accumulation of investment capital built up through tax revenues in the industrial centers of the country, and now could be poured into rural education.

Resistance to school consolidation and the local tax raises they caused wove rural landowners into a public boss class. Class struggle in education pitted spreading teachers' unions against the rural and suburban boss classes: the voting “public,” usually landowning farmers, small industrialists, and suburban homeowners, the “taxpayers”. They viewed themselves as the only productive members of society, forging political and ideological alliances with other boss classes when “residents tapped into the stream of anti-union literature propagated by conservative business interests like the John Birch Society” (Scribner 2015). Teachers were cast as outsiders and special interest groups. Taxpayers maligned unions as anti-democratic bodies that reduced voter control of schools. In other words, these rebellious union teachers had to be “cowed” to stay in line at the ballot box and—more ominously—through vigilante groups (Schirmer 2016). Confrontations with these people during labor struggles could turn ugly and violent, fast. The 1974 Hortonville teacher strike is one of many examples.

Teachers in Hortonville organized with the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) were renegotiating their contract in 1974 (Schirmer 2016). Nearby urban growth had already disturbed the sleepy farming community by bringing newcomers. These negotiations added a new level of tension in a town already unused to union activism (Alvarez 2021). Contract negotiations in these years were contentious nationwide because inflation kept hollowing out teachers’ pay increases into pay cuts. Hortonville was no exception. When the district refused to negotiate, teachers faced their fifth year without an effective contract (Schirmer 2016). In March, teaching staff walked out on strike. The district fired 88 teachers in retaliation. Education workers from across the state poured into the little town in support of the picket line. The Hortonville Vigilante Association, meanwhile, attacked teacher unionists, defaced their residences, and menaced union supporters (Alvarez 2021). The president of the Wisconsin Educators Association got dragged down a road on a chain by a truck (Schirmer 2016).

Folks associated with the public boss class resented property taxes, which meant they hated education. Most of them either did not have school-age children, or had redirected their children to private, parochial, or suburban public schools to avoid racial integration. Rural and suburban public boss classes were united. These were not unconscious actions. Hundreds of letters to newspapers from white city residents throughout

the 1970s threatened to join the working and middle-class whites streaming out of the urban cores. Not only that, these letters were explicitly responding to teachers' strikes and the higher property taxes that came with their victorious battles (Shelton 2017). After these fractious social struggles with organizing teachers, librarians, and other public sector workers, the public boss class "opened up a space in which commentators began to imagine alternatives to the public school system" (Shelton 2017)

The newspaper industry helped mobilize the public boss class.

Newspapers, fighting their own battles with unionizing workers, maligned striking teachers (Shelton 2017).

They published endless op-eds and letters smearing teachers. They galvanized the public boss class with its



coverage of Prop 13 in California. Prop 13 amended the state constitution to permanently cap property taxes. Their virulence sharpened after 1973 when teachers launched strikes from St. Louis to Philadelphia to New York. Teachers took it too far by demanding more control over curriculum and other higher level school decisions (Shelton 2017).

Rebirth of Social Movement Unionism

Teachers' unions follow a trajectory tracking with and departing from the historical fluctuations of the broader labor movement. In Post-War labor liberalism, the union movement grew anemic from a lack of democratic institutions to empower rank and file workers (Tillman & Cummings 1999). Teachers' unions followed this example until the Strike Wave Era. For decades, private sector unions seemed comatose.

Organized teachers avoided the same death by a thousand cuts partially because they kept some industrial and social movement unionist tactics. Internationalism by teachers' unions in Mexico, the United States, and Canada with the Trinational Coalition in Defense of Public Education to oppose Neoliberalism and NAFTA shored up their strength (Bocking 2020). Membership in teachers' unions continued rising and reached over 90 percent by 2000, even as strikes virtually disappeared (Marianno 2015). General consensus by historians attributes this to teacher militancy from 1960-1981.

Teachers and schools are demonstrably worse off since the first charter school authorization laws passed in 1992 and Bush the junior war criminal signed the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Givan 2014). People correctly believe teachers' unions are under attack (Marianno 2015). Not all of them think that's a bad thing. The technocratic managerial class of university academics sees teachers' unions as "rent-seeking organizations," and supports undermining them (Marianno 2015). A blitz from all branches of government created a hostile legal environment where teachers are "more vulnerable to the actions of school and district administrators" (Marianno 2015).

Teacher salaries fell after 2008 and had stagnated for ten years before then (Rosales 2018). The NCLB systematically fueled school teacher deskilling using test based accountability schemes and cookie cutter curriculum, while the "Race to the Top" funding program under President Obama escalated them (Marianno 2015). Finally, the response from teachers is a nascent revival of an industrial, social movement unionist strategy.

Years lapsed between NCLB in 2002 and militant responses from teachers' unions. The AFT and NEA responses to NCLB and austerity after 2008 were both relatively moderate (Koppich 2005). Inaction cost them dearly. Federal mismanagement damaged an already distressed education system. Constant acidic barrages against teachers' unions emanated from politicians and corporate elites (Givan 2014). Neoliberal technocrats and conservative demagogues in coalition disguised their scams as an "education reform" movement combated by recalcitrant "anti-student" teachers' unions (Strauss 2021) (Singer 2018) (Givan 2014). Films like *Waiting for Superman* feature prominently in the academic discourse of the time. Public schools before 1992 still rested within the local and state government sector "sheltered" from the profit motive, unlike healthcare. Charter school laws, NCLB, and other education reforms brought the federal government directly into education policy making for the first time since the early Reagan years, which they used to keep prying education open for privatization and commodification (Givan 2014).

With NCLB and Race to the Top came proliferation of charter schools, corporate-created curriculum like "Common Core," teaching to the test, and punishment for underperforming schools. Chicago hosts some of the worst devastation from this war on public schools as school closures cause massive dislocation, especially for houseless students (Aviles & Haybach 2019). Rahm Emmanuel and Arne Duncan strengthened the school to prison pipeline using school closures (Vitale 2017) (Meiners 2016). As Manchester, England was home to ruthless

industrial capitalism and organized labor, so Chicago rebirthed social movement unionism.

The triumph of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in 2011 union elections transformed the union. Despite union busting by Mayor Emmanuel, the CTU now empowers rank and file members through participatory democratic institutions and nurtures strong, reciprocal bonds in local communities (Green 2013). In the 2012 strike these developments took tangible form. The CORE victory and 2012 strike represented a revival of social movement unionism (Farmer & Noonan 2019). The Red for Ed Strikes spread it nationwide.

Red for Ed Strike Actions

In February 2018, united education workers in West Virginia shut down every single school district in the state. Centering “common good” demands like school funding increases alongside issues of pay and benefits, these teachers garnered widespread public support (Hess 2018) (Blanc 2019). What was so astonishing was that this took place in a Republican dominated state where public sector strikes are strictly against the law.

The movement then spread like wildfire. Oklahoma, Arizona, North Carolina, Colorado, and Kentucky teachers soon followed their comrades in West Virginia. More than 375,000 education workers struck in 2018—the vast majority of the 486,000 total workers who struck. Teachers brought the same energy in 2019. This time to urban centers led by Neoliberal Democrats (Blanc 2020). In 2019, West Virginia educators struck again, this time to thwart a law authorizing charter schools in the state. Their efforts forced the state legislature to withdraw the law. Education workers of all roles have joined teachers on the picket line around the nation (Blanc 2019). Dedicated aides, bus drivers, assistant teachers, custodial workers, and others have joined in solidarity for living wages and conditions.

Teachers in Los Angeles, Chicago, Oakland, Las Vegas, and beyond struck, leading with common good demands that reflected deep community organizing and engagement. United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), for example, had a new leadership modeled after CORE take the helm in 2014. One that reoriented the union to robust shop floor and community organizing. In fact, rank and file caucuses have spread in teachers’ union locals across the US. Most of them have not achieved power, highlighting that this upsurge is still ongoing and incomplete (Blanc 2020). Inflation or sneaky benefit hikes have destroyed the pay gains achieved through striking. West Virginia’s legislature successfully

passed the same charter school law it had withdrawn just a few months after the strike. New struggles are needed, everywhere.

Charter Union Organizing

Charter schools largely exist to break teachers unions and privatize education (Rooks 2017). So it's no surprise ten percent of charter school teachers are unionized compared to 90 plus percent of public school teachers. Half of that ten percent are only unionized because a state law mandates them to be. Nearly 75 percent are concentrated in California, Wisconsin, Hawaii, and Illinois. That leaves almost all other charter school teachers about where other private sector workers are at. Even as that part of the industry's growth accelerates: charter schools were the only segment of the education industry to grow in 2021—by a jaw dropping seven percent. Unfortunately, the traditional, mainstream teachers' unions seem reluctant to launch serious organizing drives in the charter sector—with some exceptions.

In Washington DC, for example, four charter schools have unionized, and three of them were closed down. The AFT and NEA—which currently represent most organized charter school workers—did little to help. Only Mundo Verde Bilingual Academy remains today. However, in 2019 workers there were able to sign a contract that gave staff then unheard of protections in charter schools. Progress is possible.

The Industrial Workers of the World—a rank-and-file led, revolutionary industrial union—has made strides in organizing charter schools in just the last two years. The Caliber Workers Union (CWU) at the Caliber Charter Schools in Richmond and Vallejo, California, have organized a shop of more than 200 teachers and support staff. After intense showdowns with the employer after the overwhelmingly victorious union election, the company finally recognized the union in 2022. To get to this point—they're presently in contract bargaining—they had to weather crushing repression from their bosses.



Meanwhile, the AFT has also made efforts to organize charter school workers. However, their efforts have been uneven. The CTU and UTLA have been the most consistent in trying to organize charter workers among the craft union teachers' locals. In Chicago, 25 percent of charter schools are unionized, while 27 percent of Los Angeles charters are organized. All this organizing has happened in the last ten years.

These union locals are helping show the way forward with industrial social movement unionist strategy that takes teachers' unions beyond the narrow bounds of 20th Century unionism.

Conclusions

There are two key dilemmas posed by the history of teachers' unions to untangle.

The first dilemma is: Is the teacher a professional, educated and white collar? Or is the teacher a worker, proletarian with only their educational labor power to sell? To cut through the Gordian Knot: the teacher is both. Teachers hold the education, training, and know-how of a professional, but often retain the practical status of a worker. In reproducing the U.S. labor force, teachers act as essential cogs in the economy just like nurses or sanitation workers. Professionalism is meaningless, entirely dependent on time, place, and individual personalities to define it. Teachers defined professional status as high enough salaries, academic freedom to teach as they wanted, inclusion in school-wide planning and decision making, and school conditions suited for the development of young minds. They then fought to make their definition into reality, and have fought since the 1970s to retain it.

If the teacher is a worker, they should organize as workers. Which brings us to a second dilemma, one that can only be resolved through class struggle from below. Can the current constellation of unions that organize teachers serve, or be made to serve, as an effective vehicle for our aspirations as workers?

Teachers have and continue to, but their choice of the AFT or NEA inflames the contradictions holding teachers' unions back. Craft unions like the AFL are notorious historically for racism, excluding "unskilled" workers, and compromise with employers. Teachers, often seeing themselves as above other working people, caused splits with communities they needed on their side for moral and practical reasons. The context of the NEA as a professional association and company union embodies this tendency. The nature of craft unionism makes it non viable for teachers in right to work states who can lose their credentials over traditional union tactics. Industrial organization, modeled off the CIO or CPUSA in the 1930s or the IWW, could represent a new path forward.

The history presented here is incomplete. We call for more education workers to become their own historians and to create more historical analyses of class struggles in our industry.



"From the Depths."

Who are we?

This is a project to gather a community of revolutionary education workers who want a new society, and who want to actually do something to make it happen. We want to build contacts between education workers around the world. The goal is to become a platform for educators of all backgrounds and job roles to share worker-centered inquiries (of any artistic medium) into the education industry under capitalism. We can then workshop and boost each others' work. Doing this, we can help each other figure out how to intervene effectively to build worker power in our local contexts and make education a truly public good.

Whether you're interested in joining the project, or just submitting something you want to get out there, get in touch! All levels of involvement are welcome. Burnout culture is bullshit.

We are more than happy to publish materials anonymously or under pseudonyms.

If you are a union, political collective, mutual aid network, etc., and want versions of any of our pieces adapted specifically for use by your group, please reach out!

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