

APPEASING THE ALLIGATOR: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TEACHERS' UNION RANK AND FILE?

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In the 1990s I participated in demonstrations, school pickets, and other collective actions with teachers in New York City, demanding a new and fair contract. I was taking a risk. I wasn't tenured. But I did not even question the union-sanctioned action. I believed in our common purpose. I have mostly had government jobs and have been a member of some form of a union my entire adult life. Today, I am a member of the union in the New Jersey town in which I teach elementary school. Many teachers' unions were progressive, even radical organizations. A New York City teachers' union formed in 1913, for example, was a "visionary organization that promoted teacher participation in the design and implementation of Board of Education policies, teachers' freedom of speech, the expansion of democratic school management, and improved working conditions and salaries." It was an organization through which women fought for higher pay and respect (Rousmaniere, 1997).

The Espionage Act of 1917, a policy imposed against political radicalism, drove down union membership from over 5 million members in 1920 to 3.5 million by 1923. This legislation greatly affected teachers' professional lives, and they feared retaliation. Following notable historical periods of teacher activism in the 1930s and 1960-70s, the rank and file of the union grew apathetic. In my historical reading this may be due to neoliberal school reform movements and the consequent suppression of teachers' voices. Looking back at this time from my present perspective, I understand how the political climate of the times affects rank and file union members.

Fast-forward to this past school year, 2010-2011. I am again a non-tenured teacher working in another school system without a contract. Recently, my local union briefed us on a new action and asked all of the rank and file to comply. We were asked to wear black on Fridays and to work to contract, meaning our exact hours from 8:15am to 3:30pm, for three weeks.

Apathy in the Face of Attacks

Only a handful of teachers in my school followed the union action. I was one of the few who acted. I met my collaborators in the morning outside the school and we walked in together at exactly 8:15am. "Why aren't you supporting us?" I asked one of my colleagues. They said that they did not see it as important. Others told me that they needed to stay late on a nightly basis and could not follow the action and possibly get all of their work done. I was surprised to discover that even with 98 paraprofessionals and

20 teachers laid off in my district alone, teachers were not motivated to support the union. Morale was at an all-time low. Today, more teacher layoffs are pending, and still teachers are not supporting union actions or going en masse to union meetings.

At a district union meeting at the end of last year the teacher turnout was pathetic. Only three teachers from the 60 teachers at my school showed up. The president of the union reported to us the local School Board president's comments after the district's firing of all the paraprofessionals. She said he was "happy" that there were at least 98 fewer union members to deal with in future negotiations. The union president talked about the impending climate of union busting and bullying. She riled up the crowd saying, "You may want to appease the alligator so he won't eat you. Only he will eat you last."

The alligator is the New Jersey governor. In his first six months of office, Chris Christie has already tried to dismantle the teachers' pension fund by eliminating matching funds, effectively cutting health insurance by applying it to a tiered structure making new teachers pay more, and advocating merit pay and the dissolution of tenure. Recently, collective bargaining rights have been eroded. As in several other states, these actions reveal Republican governors' clear vision of dismantling the union.. Have we forgotten the importance of the union? Al Shanker, a union activist who was president of the United Federation of Teachers in the 1960s, spent his life fighting for the rights of the union and the teachers. He and the union membership fought for the right of collective bargaining in New York State, and won despite the repressive Taylor Law that was implemented to penalize municipal workers' job actions.

With collective bargaining came a huge change in the culture of teaching. Before the union, teachers were accustomed to being pushed around. They were poorly paid, forced to eat lunch while supervising students, and could be fired at will. Collective bargaining brought higher salaries, job security, and also greater dignity. The UFT also negotiated contracts that guaranteed the following for their workers: daily preparation periods, strict work hours, fixed lunch periods, equalized pay for elementary and high school teachers, and paid vacation and sick days.

Eroding Historical Gains

Today, several states have abolished collective bargaining for teachers, and Wisconsin teachers—among those in other states—are now in a struggle to preserve their most basic union rights. To my way of thinking, collective bargaining is essential to the professional teacher. If we overturn the great strides the union has made and revoke the power of collective bargaining, then teachers will have no recourse and no venue to fight for their rights. Ending these protections would greatly and negatively impact the everyday lives of teachers and thus, the children in their classrooms. How are the rights of teachers connected to the success of their students? In my experience, I have seen that a teacher who is stripped of her professional dignity will not have the same impact in the classroom as a teacher who is empowered and respected.

What has happened to the rank and file of my teacher's union? Is it just apathy in the face of a changing and more conservative political economy? A union works primarily by its strength in numbers. The collective action I was involved in during the 1990s had strength in numbers – most of the teachers in my building supported the union action, and in the following days a new and fair contract was signed.

The Union's Inspiration

To me, the union is an inspirational force – one to be reckoned with, and a true advocate of women in the workplace. In her 2005 book, *Radical Possibilities*, Jean Anyon presented research that showed that the importance of unionization may be greatest for women and minorities. This research found that in some industries, women union members earned 30.5% more than their non-union counterparts. I wonder why all the women—who are the clear majority in my elementary school—are not following union actions and standing up for their rights.

I am still working without a contract, and negotiations this year have stalled. Class sizes are going up, and more teachers will be laid off by the end of this year. Morale is at an all-time low, especially with the negative press and the anti-teacher slurs across the state. The present-day political climate has had a strong and negative effect on rank and file union members. I wonder how bad it will get before the rank and file get involved and support their teachers' union?

References

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Rousmaniere, K. (1997). *City teachers: Teaching and school reform in historical perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press.