

1.

## Understanding the Assault on Public Education

Throughout the world, teachers, parents, and students are experiencing wrenching changes in how schools are run, who teaches, and what may be taught. Students are being robbed of meaningful learning, of time for play or creativity—for anything that's not tested. Hostile politicians blame teachers for an astounding list of social and economic problems ranging from unemployment to moral decline. In all but the wealthiest school systems, academic accomplishment has been reduced to scores on standardized tests that for-profit companies develop and evaluate. Parents, citizens, teachers, and students—education's most important stakeholders—have little say about what is taught, while corporate chiefs, politicians in their thrall, and foundations that receive funding from billionaires who profit from pro-business education policies determine who teaches and how. Children from affluent families face intensified competition for high grades, high SAT scores, a resume that will ease passage into a prestigious college and a well-paid

career. Children whose parents have little formal education and who attend under-resourced schools experience intense pressures to succeed on standardized tests and school days that consist mostly of test preparation. I've written this book for teachers who are committed to social justice and democracy, in our society and in our schools. From my work with teachers and college students who want to teach, I see the hope and idealism this new generation brings. Most teachers I work with focus on making change through their teaching. They consider what they do in the classroom the way to change the world. Another group of teachers and school professionals, often those who work with immigrant students and teachers of color who have gone into teaching to be of service to the communities in which they live, see themselves as advocates for students, families, and communities that experience prejudice and limited social opportunity. And I'm seeing more and more teachers who want to make their unions more democratic, proactive, and militant. I've also observed that these three groups of teachers often don't collaborate and may not see one another as allies. One goal of this book is to explain why it's essential to create a movement that brings these groups together and how that might be done.

While we have to understand the powerful forces arrayed against us, we also need to keep in mind that every major improvement to education occurred because social movements—ordinary people banding together to make change—made others see issues differently. We can reverse the assault on public education if we create a new social movement of teachers that knows how to learn from and work with parents, communities, activists on other social issues, and other labor unions.

## A Global Project Transforming Public Education in Ways the Rich and Powerful Dictate

It may seem as though many policies, like closing schools that have low test scores, are irrational or just ignorant. Politicians' lack of knowledge about education and animus toward teachers are both factors, but a far more onerous, chilling agenda drives the collection of policies destroying public education as it has existed for more than a century. The rhetoric of improving educational opportunity for those who have been excluded from prosperity has been used throughout the world to defend transformation of schooling that amounts to destroying what has existed for a century, to make drastic alterations in what is taught, how schools are funded and run, and who teaches.

We need—always—to introduce criticisms of the current reforms by affirming an unequivocal recognition of inequality, current and historic, and of our commitment to providing all children with a high-quality education. At the same time, we confront the reality that policies that are touted to “put children first” and “make services work for poor people” actually increase inequality for the vast majority of children who most need improved schools. Sometimes I am told that such a vast, well-organized project could not exist without the US public knowing more about it and that what I am describing sounds like a conspiracy.<sup>1</sup> Conspiracies are, by definition, secret. Yet the global project of wealthy, powerful elites to transform education has been quite public for more than a quarter century. Alas, we in the global North have been wearing blinders for decades. Evidence about the real aims and actual effects of “free market” reforms has been available for decades—if we looked in the right places, that is, at prospectuses from corporations developing new

products and reports from the World Bank. The record is quite clear that lofty-sounding slogans mask the drive of transnational corporations to refashion education to fit their vision of a new global economy. For the elites who control corporations, media, and government, public expenditure on educating workers beyond the skill level needed for low-paying jobs is wasted. Since most jobs being created require no more than an eighth-grade education (think of Walmart's "associates"), only a handful of people need to acquire the sophisticated thinking and skills to manage and control the world's productive resources. Minimally educated workers need only minimally educated teachers. Oversight of lowered expectations for educational outcomes can be achieved through the use of standardized testing. Therefore, a well-educated (and well-paid) teaching force, it is argued by elites establishing educational policy, is a waste of scarce public money.<sup>2</sup>

Financial and political elites, working through international organizations, like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, began this project forty years ago when they imposed school reform on countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia as a quid pro quo for economic aid. The project was first introduced in Chile, under Pinochet's brutal military dictatorship (supported by the United States), when schooling was privatized under the tutelage of Milton Friedman.<sup>3</sup> The project has emerged differently in the more industrially developed nations and though specifics of this social engineering differ in significant ways from one country to another, the same footprint is recognizable. Make public education a "free market" open to entrepreneurs; create a revolving door of minimally trained teachers; reduce the curriculum to basic math and literacy content that workers will need to compete for low-paid

jobs; control teachers and students with standardized testing; and weaken public oversight by breaking up school systems and replacing them with privately operated schools.

In much of the world this framework of "free market" policies is called "neoliberalism," a term unfamiliar in the United States. This new term signifies a key shift in the thinking of elites that control the world's resources—and governments. In the United States, "liberalism" is associated with development of the welfare state, government policies like Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The term "neoliberalism" refers to quite a different political stance, drawing on the ideas of the first liberals (like Adam Smith), who developed theories about how "free markets" operate.<sup>4</sup> I am often asked about the intentions of the individuals who support neoliberal reforms, especially politicians who may identify themselves as liberals or progressives. Are they misguided? Ignorant? I think since we can't know what's going on inside of someone's head, there's little benefit in focusing on intentions. Instead we should examine ideology.

As with "neoliberalism," "ideology" is a term that can be confusing to people in the United States. Other economic and political systems have ideologies, but not us in the United States—right? If we use "ideology" to mean shared political beliefs about how a society operates, its spoken and unspoken rules, then every society has a dominant ideology to explain why its political and economic systems are good and fair. Analyzing ideology rather than intentions helps explain why people who seem to care, genuinely, about poor kids embrace reforms that do harm. They buy into neoliberal ideology, primarily the belief that the "free market" and "choice" will solve the problem of educational inequality.

Persistent inequality, in society and education, is at the heart of neoliberalism's appeal, not only to the wealthy but also to many poor and working people. Public education in the United States has not, historically, served poor and working people as well as it should, and we need to acknowledge that in order for our case about what's wrong with current "deforms" to be credible to people who should be our allies. We also have to be forthright in stating that while teachers and their unions did not create educational inequality, they have been too complicitous in maintaining it, from the very start of mass public education.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, many policies in the '60s and '70s that could not have been enacted without support from teachers, teachers unions, and organized labor did, in fact, help reduce inequality in school outcomes. One example is high-quality early childhood education. Another is school lunch programs. At the same time that we note the successes, it's essential to understand that much more was needed. Some of the '60s reforms were, in hindsight, problematic, like using standardized test scores to measure whether federal money was well spent. This history shows us that education cannot on its own reverse deeply rooted causes of school failure, like poverty, racism, and unemployment, but schools and teachers that are better supported can make strides in closing the gap.<sup>6</sup>

## Teachers Unions and Social Justice: Making the Connections Real

There's far more to neoliberalism's global assault on teachers and teachers unions than I can summarize in this book. However, teachers committed to working for social justice need to understand a

few key issues. The neoliberal project in education has generated opposition wherever teachers and parents have the political freedom to resist—and in some places where they do not. The architects of this project aim to eliminate spaces in schools for critique, social justice teaching, and voices of parents and community—that is, when the voices are not a chorus supporting neoliberal goals. The elites who are orchestrating school "deform" understand (unfortunately, more than do most teachers) that despite their all-too-glaring problems, teachers unions are the main impediment to the neoliberal project being fully realized. Even when unions don't live up to their ideals, teacher unionism's principles of collective action and solidarity contradict neoliberalism's key premises—individual initiative and competition. Neoliberalism pushes a "survival of the fittest" thinking. Labor unions presume people have to work together to protect their common interests.

Unions press for *collective* voice and intervention to counter the employer's absolute control. Working together, employees possess a strength much greater than they have as individuals. Without a union, employees have no protection and no rights except those the employer grants. Especially in an occupation like teaching in which there is so much disagreement about what constitutes ideal practice, a supervisor has tremendous power to decide whether an individual is doing the job well. At its best the union brings individuals together to create a collective definition of professional conduct and responsibilities.

Another reason unions are a threat is that they can exercise *institutional* power. As organizations they have legal rights. Because unions have institutional roots, they are a stable force. And a union is able to draw on a regular source of income, membership dues.

These characteristics give teachers unions an organizational capacity seldom acquired by advocacy groups or parents, who generally graduate from activity in schools along with their children.

I know from my work as a teacher educator that what I've written about the unions' potential is often a hard sell to teachers and parents, so I want to clarify that I am explaining what gives unions their potential strength, not excusing what they don't do or do wrong. It's important to say, loudly, that the potential of teachers unions is not being realized and that they need to be transformed. Often union officials tell reformers not to "wash our dirty linen in public." However, this dirty laundry has already been paraded to great advantage by our enemies. The only way we will persuade teachers and the public that unions can be different—better—is by coming clean about problems.

The very factors that make unions stable and potentially powerful also induce bureaucracy and conservatism. Consider the difference between how principals and superintendents are chosen and the elections that must occur in unions. Teachers unions are membership organizations, "owned" by their members, whose votes keep the leadership in power and whose dues keep the organization operating. Yet neither unions as organizations nor union members as individuals are immune to prejudices that infect a society, even when these prejudices contradict the union's premises of equality in the workplace. The automatic collection of dues from members' paycheck stabilizes the union financially but also insulates officers from members' disgruntlement. Contracts offer protection, but they are very complex documents, and the staff's specialized knowledge and skills in negotiating and enforcing contracts can encourage members' passivity. When the law gives a union the

right to negotiate a contract, it also generally gives the union exclusive bargaining rights, meaning that members can't replace their union with another one they think will be more responsive, at least not during the life of the contract.

Classrooms, teachers, and unions are affected by social, economic, and political life. The Right has become bolder and government policies more conservative in almost every realm. The communities we work with have been altered too, by more economic hardship and political repression. We must also acknowledge our opponents' ideological victories in changing how people think about education and government. The social movements that support social justice teaching and union work are weaker now. When I started teaching, we could often use school resources to support social justice work. For instance, when I was chair of my union local's women's rights committee, I helped organize a professional development conference that involved the women's studies program at a local university, along with community groups.

Today, in contrast, teachers and teachers unions have fewer allies and are in many ways more politically isolated. Many teachers in schools struggling with low test scores fear their schools will be shut down. Others, in schools that seem immune from being closed, shut their classroom doors, literally and figuratively, trying to deny the powerful social and political forces that are subverting their hard work with students. Too many teachers have stopped asking, "Is this good for our kids?" because they fear that questioning authority puts their jobs at risk.

The deterioration in teachers' confidence to stand up for their students, for social justice, and for their dignity as workers mirrors

the weakening of teachers unions. If you care about social justice in education, you have a very important stake in not only the continued existence of teachers unions but also in their transformation. Though the popular media cast teachers unions as powerful, the unions are quite weak where it counts most, at the school site. Union leaders are disoriented and confused. When I started teaching, teachers unions might win economic gains without doing much to mobilize members. That is no longer the case. The propaganda campaign we have experienced has achieved its goal of discrediting the unions as organizations and even the idea of teacher unionism among much of the public and teachers as well. Yet we need democratic, vibrant, progressive teachers unions to turn back privatization of schools, which spells destruction for public education. To stand up as individuals for our dignity and our students' well-being, we need the institutional support a good union can provide. If we fail to make the unions what they should be, most students in our country—and the world—will be trained for a life of menial labor, poverty, or imprisonment.

What I've explained so far points to why we need to take back the unions. At the same time, activists who focus their attention on the teachers unions need the vision of teachers whose paramount concern is what goes on in their classrooms. Because of the conservatizing factors I've mentioned in this chapter, as well as others I explain later in the book, even progressive unions and radical teacher union leaders feel pressure to narrow the union's focus, to take up "bread and butter" issues that are more popular with many members than social justice concerns. For teachers to succeed in pushing back on school closings, standardized testing, and a narrowed curriculum, they must also have

strong, mutually respectful alliances with communities and parents. School workers who have roots in minority communities are a key resource, and are often overlooked. Sometimes these individuals work as aides and teachers in bilingual or English as a Second Language programs. In some districts, workers who belong to another union can provide crucial personal links with community activists and parents.

As attacks on teachers unions have intensified in the past few years, I've been asked by teachers for practical reading about how to improve their unions. Finding no book that I could recommend, I've written this one. In developing my ideas for this book, I've drawn on my work as a researcher, teacher union activist, professor of education, and career high school teacher. To make the book more readable, I've tried to keep references to the absolute minimum. For current updates on research and analysis on teachers unions, you may want to refer to my website.<sup>7</sup> All royalties from this book will go to Teachers Unite, an organization that I think embodies the goals of building a movement of teachers, parents, and community activists committed to social justice in education and social movement teacher unionism.

The second section of this book contains articles I've written over the past thirty years for *New Politics*. This material provides additional background about issues that deserve more attention than I could give in this book, which I conceive of as an intelligent activist's guide to the teacher union universe.

One final note: I often use the word "teacher" to signify members of teachers unions, but I acknowledge in advance that the label is misleading. Teachers unions usually represent constituencies other than K-12 teachers with their own classrooms, including social

workers, paraprofessionals, psychologists, librarians, adult school teachers, and substitute teachers. A strong, democratic union values each constituency's unique contribution and takes care to demonstrate to all members that it is a union of equals.

## 2.

# Protecting the Heart of Teaching

Our responsibility to do right by our students is at the heart of teaching. Under the present conditions in many schools and most school systems, teachers are pressured to carry out mandates that actually harm kids. Though some teachers manage to protect their students from test-prep mania and other destructive policies, many more lack the skill, confidence, and courage to resist as individuals. I think teachers can no longer presume that if they shut their classroom doors and concentrate all their energies on what goes on in their classrooms, they are satisfying their moral charge. While our first responsibility is always to our students, teachers need to open their classroom doors, literally and figuratively, enlarging the definition of the workspace to include the school and community.

To be clear, I am not saying we should expect every teacher to become a political activist—though we'd certainly be in better shape to defend public education if many more were. What I am proposing is thinking about how to politicize teachers who do not understand

why the world outside their classroom has to be a consideration for the decisions they make in their work lives, as well as encouraging teachers who are already more politically aware to become more active. For instance, I know several teachers who are adamant about insulating themselves (and their students) from negative influences in their schools, who were receptive to my suggestion that being true to their professional obligations meant informing parents of their English as a Second Language (ESL) students about cutbacks in ESL services. Other teachers may be politicized through work informing parents about the harm done by standardized testing, a project the British Columbia Teachers Federation undertook.<sup>1</sup> An encouraging sign of teachers' increasing politicization is the growth of local organizations of social justice teachers that hold conferences, study groups, and projects to encourage social justice teaching.<sup>2</sup>

To create a new social movement of teachers who understand what's at stake in protecting teaching's moral core, and who are passionate about social justice, we need new spaces that bring teachers in varying degrees of politicization together. We need to support the development of networks that emerge naturally when social movements are more robust than they are at this historical moment.

## New Territory and New Rules

In fall 2011 the Occupy Wall Street movement and its local offshoots have excited hope of reversing the control of the 1 percent and helped to create space for resistance. Yet today's struggle occurs on a landscape that was unimaginable forty years ago. Richard Nixon signed laws protecting the environment, civil rights, and labor that all but the most liberal Democrats today dismiss as too

costly, intrusive, or radical. Vast changes have been made to education, and parents, teachers, and even seasoned school activists are often not sure what to believe. Neoliberal rhetoric about "putting children first," ahead of purportedly selfish school employees and their unions, may seem to make sense, even if parents don't see selfishness in their children's teachers. Nonprofit organizations and foundations do the work of right-wing think tanks pushing for privatization and profits.<sup>3</sup> Often citizens and parents who see through the propaganda and oppose making schools into profit centers for corporations feel helpless to stop these policies. Parents who experience the reforms' damage firsthand often feel they are powerless to act. Elected officials, from school boards to governors, break the law with impunity. Take the governor of New Jersey (please!), who proclaimed that his crusade to save New Jersey's children justified his defying the State Supreme Court's orders to give the state's low-income school districts the funding to which they were legally entitled. Democrats and Republicans excuse violating union contracts or firing teachers wholesale from schools and districts with the rationale that they are saving children's lives.

Another change is the labor movement's diminished power. The percentage of workers who are in unions has fallen—dramatically. Public education is the only sector of the economy that is still heavily unionized, and many teachers, especially those who come through "fast track" certification programs and worked in the private sector where unionization is negligible, may be unfamiliar with unions or even scared by them. Also, teachers unions' traditional allies, including civil rights organizations and community-based groups, can no longer be counted as automatic supporters. Traditions of solidarity within the labor movement are weak, although they are being revived,



as we saw in the inspiring struggle of Wisconsin's teachers and public employees. Still, the reelection of Wisconsin's governor also illustrates the pitfalls that face teachers and other public employees if they play by the old rules. We will not be able to defend education if we rely on the same strategies that unions have been using for the past twenty years, especially looking to "friends" in the Democratic Party.<sup>4</sup>

Neoliberal think tanks and foundations, like the American Enterprise Institute, the Broad Foundation, and the Gates Foundation, have recruited people identified by the popular media as spokespeople for oppressed groups. When the Reverend Al Sharpton joined former New York City Schools chancellor Joel Klein, Newt Gingrich, and Arne Duncan to campaign for Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" legislation, the alliance was big news. What didn't get the same attention in the media was the half-million-dollar grant to Sharpton's organization from a hedge fund headed by another former New York City Schools chancellor, Harold Levy.<sup>5</sup> Who these people touted as community leaders really represent is never clear, but their endorsement of policies like charter schools, behind the smokescreen of educational equity, adds to the public perception that the reforms have the support of minority parents—and that teachers who oppose the changes are blocking real improvement.

At the same time, teaching has become more demanding than it was just a few years ago, due to larger class sizes, cuts in support services, and more autocratic administration. Working with young people is harder because of the social devastation caused by unemployment and increased poverty. Teachers are worried, tired, and often frightened. They have been influenced by the masterful anti-teacher union propaganda orchestrated by right-wing think tanks, foundations, corporations, and supposedly nonpartisan "watchdog"

organizations. Lots of teachers are confused about merit pay, particularly those who see themselves as especially conscientious or committed in ways other teachers are not to helping students, families, and communities of color. The challenges are substantial and our resources limited, so we have to be strategic—meaning being clear—about our goals.

## Putting School Reform and Teacher Quality in Perspective

We need to be upfront that in some schools and classrooms students are not being treated respectfully or educated well. Sometimes teachers who work in schools would not want to send their children to the schools in which they teach. We have to find ways to put this on the table so that we maintain credibility with our natural allies—parents and activists in communities that have, historically, not been given equal educational opportunity. Improving educational outcomes for kids whose families are poor and whose neighborhoods are dangerous will take a great deal more than improving teaching. While not all teachers are great (who is, in any occupation?), we need to make the case that the exclusive focus on teacher quality ignores many powerful social factors outside the classroom.<sup>6</sup> Consider how little we hear about child hunger, homelessness, and unemployment affecting school achievement, especially in comparison to the horror tales about tenure and union contracts. As experienced teachers know, what occurs in classrooms also depends on how well schools are run, on the quality of the administrators who oversee the school's operations, set the school's tone, and supervise teachers.

Still, I cringe when teachers and union officials answer tirades about poor teaching with the argument that schools and teachers are helpless in light of social problems. Worse still is criticism that parents aren't doing their jobs so teachers can't do theirs. This stance of denial falls into our enemies' trap of making us seem uncaring and self-serving. It isolates us from parents, whom we need on our side. Moreover, blaming parents or saying that schools are helpless to do a better job ignores that some schools do better than others. There are ways we can improve schools, and a teachers union's mantra should be that social and economic facts influence what occurs in classrooms, *and*, at the same time, schools and teachers will have better results when they are better supported. I'd say that *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve*, a report published by the Chicago Teachers Union, is a fine model of how to set out what we need to make schools work.<sup>7</sup> The report describes the services and rich instructional diet all kids deserve and at the same time explains how race and economic status configure the low-quality education that poor kids of color actually receive.

Education can't solve the country's economic problems or create new jobs, and we must say so loudly. By insisting that education is the key to ending poverty, politicians avoid taking on the fight for economic policies the country desperately needs. Labor and progressives need to push hard on the federal government to create jobs that benefit the public and pay enough for families to live decently.<sup>8</sup> Schools (and teachers) can help put all students on an equal educational footing for existing jobs. Better schools can democratize the competition for jobs, but they can't eliminate the "tyranny of the labor market," the absence of enough well-paying jobs.<sup>9</sup> Good teachers unions will join with other labor unions in fighting

for full employment, as was done during the Great Depression. But teachers unions have special responsibilities, too.

### What Makes a Union of Teachers Different?

What makes a union of teachers different from a union of bus drivers, electricians, or nurses? Describing teaching as a profession is often an opener for arguing that what we need are professional organizations, not labor unions, but we can't let that deter us from examining this issue because the unique nature of teachers' work is one of the reasons teachers are experiencing such a vicious political attack.

To start, we should be clear about the ways unions of teachers are, or should be, like other good labor unions. First, all labor unions should be defining their members' interests broadly; seeing members' immediate interests as inseparable from what's best for working people. Second, workers in public service and the unions that represent them have to be especially mindful of championing quality services, especially for people who have traditionally been underserved.

In one respect, teachers are no different from other workers in needing democratic, vibrant unions that stand up for social justice. But a good teachers union has special moral and political responsibilities because of the unique nature of teachers' work. Teachers are idea workers. We need to be absolutely clear about this aspect of our work because it's a major reason the banks and corporations aim to control teaching and teachers. A key aim of the neoliberal project, that is, the goal of the educational policy being pushed by the 1 percent and their political allies, is to destroy teachers' autonomy and the space this creates in schools for critical thought and for ideas of freedom and social justice.

Most teachers don't think of themselves as "idea workers." They enter the profession because they love being with children or the subject matter they want to teach. Teachers think about what went on in class today and what they will do tomorrow, next week, and maybe next month. They often don't consider that in their classrooms they are, in fact, shaping society. Unfortunately, the architects of attacks on teachers understand all too well that regardless of a teacher's conscious intent, s/he influences how students see themselves and society. Teachers have the potential to affect social arrangements, challenging the authority of elites who have an interest in maintaining their own power and privilege. While all labor unions—all citizens!—have a stake in promoting and protecting teachers' ability to educate students who can think for themselves, a union of teachers has a particular responsibility to safeguard teachers' rights to help students think critically. Protecting teachers' academic freedom is one of the union's most essential tasks. That means fighting for tenure and the guarantee of due process when complaints are made about teachers' professional conduct.

However, another aspect of teachers' work complicates the union's defense of academic freedom and its members' performance. Teachers are morally and legally responsible for children's well-being. Laws requiring children's compulsory attendance at school make children captive in classrooms. When I say this to teachers, they are startled, and understandably so. They don't view their students as prisoners. However, it's critical for union activists to remember that students are indeed captive and if teachers are not doing their jobs well enough, students can be harmed. The union has an allegiance *both* to its members as workers *and* to the protection of students' well-being.

The unions have been pilloried in the media for protecting incompetents. As a result, union officials have tended to downplay the reasons for teachers' rights to hearings and due process. Given the ferocity of the attacks about bad teachers, union leaders' wariness is understandable. But it is also wrong and dangerous. What the unions should be saying is that we can't have a democratic society if we have undemocratic schools. Our society gives those accused of criminal acts the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty. People with whom we entrust our children should have the same protection. "Due process" requires only that a teacher accused of wrongdoing has the right to a fair, impartial hearing, based on evidence. There's no escape from making this case to the public (and union members), and the unions have to do so much more vigorously.

The other reason protection of due process is so important is that teachers must respond to different, often conflicting, rules and demands from supervisors. Often what is first publicized in the press as an open-and-shut case of teacher negligence turns out to be quite different, though the clarification is seldom given as much publicity as the original charge. The media's obsession with cases of teachers' malfeasance obscures everything that schools and school districts botch. In defending teachers' rights to due process, the union insists that schools take responsibility for factors over which teachers have no control.

I acknowledge that in light of the propaganda about the unions defending incompetent teachers, unions will not be popular in making my argument. It takes courage, but the task is inescapable. When anyone questions how the union can defend a teacher who has been accused of even the most egregious act, I think the first question is, how do you know s/he did it? How do you know your

evidence is reliable? The follow-up is, if you were accused of a crime, should you have a right to present evidence in your defense? Doesn't s/he have this right? It may be that the allegation is so serious that the union leadership feels isolated from the members. In this case, the union may want to ask union representatives to discuss a policy, to come up with an alternative that protects due process and professional ideals. In my experience, when questions of impropriety or incompetence are brought to members, there is lively debate that ends in decisive support for protecting due process. People realize that they might be in a similar position and need to have the union stand up for them, so the discussion educates members about the importance of solidarity.

## Teaching as Caring

Teaching well is described as an art, craft, and science; as well as a kind of caring, like parenting. Yet schools in the United States are organized in a way that undercuts teaching's complexity, especially its nurturing functions. For instance, a teacher's workday omits time for the work that supports instruction. No time is built in to the school day for teachers to confer with one another, meet with parents or students privately, plan, evaluate student work, complete documentation of attendance and achievement, and so on. Mostly teachers are expected to do all these things in the forty-five-minute preparation period they have, an alteration in the school day that was won by teachers unions in the 1960s and '70s.

Good teaching is personal. In one respect, we're like parents. I've heard this aspect of teaching denigrated as "babysitting," and though teachers unions need to respect members' varied—even

contradictory—beliefs about what constitutes good teaching, I think defending teaching's nurturing functions is essential. Neoliberalism has succeeded in making many schools that serve children of working and poor families little more than training grounds for the factory—or prison. It's both morally essential and practical that teachers and unions stand up for children's human needs. The national teachers unions have yielded to neoliberalism's redefinition of schooling's purposes, away from development of our full human potential into job training. However, many parents look to schools to safeguard their children. It is parents, not bankers or the politicians they bankroll, who are the constituency we need to move to our way of viewing school reform. We are losing political ground because the unions have virtually surrendered the ideological battle about schooling's purposes. We need to project a different vision of what schools should be for everyone, not just teachers, as the Chicago Teachers Union has done in the proposal I mentioned previously.

The alternative vision has to counteract propaganda that teachers and teachers unions care only about themselves. The steady barrage of policies measuring and punishing teachers and students according to test scores is inseparable from neoliberalism's ideology of ruthless competition and individualism. It is this ideology we must turn back. An Australian researcher who has analyzed neoliberalism's success in casting social services, including schools, as profit centers proposes that we push back by insisting that schools be caring communities.<sup>10</sup> Rallying parents under the slogan "Make Schools Caring Communities—Not Factories," teachers and unions can infuse the elements of caring and collaboration into school organization and counter efforts to reduce schooling to job

training. We will face a battle in making this argument to cynical reporters and hostile politicians. As I learned in talking with a newly elected union officer, he was battered in a press conference when he argued that the union didn't want teachers to compete against one another for merit pay. The cynical reporters scornfully dismissed his answer that good teaching was collaborative and that schools should be caring communities. He stuck to his guns in the press conference, as all union officials need to do. His answer was exactly right—and it is one that many parents and students want to hear from us. Our opponents may confuse idealism with naiveté, but we should not.

Especially in schools serving students who are marginalized in our society, school organization and regulations can be inhumane. Partly because contracts don't permit the union to bargain over nonmonetary issues, it's tempting for teachers unions to accept the school's structure and organization as a given. Yet the misfit between teaching as a human, nurturing activity and the school's rigid structure has a corrosive impact on teachers' morale and students' achievement. I realize that not all teachers welcome parent involvement, which can seem (and be) intrusive. But the union has to take leadership in working with parents and community—in coalitions, as equals—to take on the way schools are organized. Doing so is one of the keys to building successful alliances to counter neoliberalism's "solutions." Again, something that is a moral responsibility is also quite practical. We cannot expect parents to support us in economic struggles when we do not engage with them respectfully, as partners, in coalitions about their educational concerns.

Working with parents doesn't come naturally to most teachers or to union officers. Teachers often feel that parents, especially those

who have little formal education, are hard to reach. It may surprise teachers to learn that low-income parents feel that teachers are hard to reach! Many parents who lack formal education and who don't measure up to the school's expectations are showing they care about their children's learning in ways that only teachers who have close personal connections to a community know firsthand. Researchers who interviewed African American mothers in a housing project learned that parents considered taking children to church every week a way to provide a sound moral base, which would translate into school success. However, the mothers wouldn't come to the school's "open house" to meet the teacher because they said it was not a priority when compared to other responsibilities as the breadwinner.

I often hear parents say that teachers don't care—and vice versa. This finger-pointing is counterproductive and ignores that schools were designed to be insular, cut off from communities and parents.<sup>11</sup> As a result, collaboration between parents and teachers (terms that mask the fact that the parent is usually a mom and the teacher is most often a woman) takes lots of time and commitment. Teachers and teachers unions have to struggle, consciously, not to acquire a bunker mentality. Tensions with parents are inescapable, especially when parents feel they are not respected by the union, as is often the case with groups who have experienced racial exclusion from labor unions. However, this is another hard issue there is no way to duck, as we learned from conflicts between black community activists and the mostly white teachers unions in the 1960s and '70s. Perhaps the most explosive of these conflicts occurred in Newark, New Jersey, in the early 1970s. In two bitter strikes the city was brought to the brink of race war, as the teachers union, though it was headed by an African American woman, and civil rights activists

became increasingly blinded to the other side's justifiable desires for dignity and equality.<sup>12</sup> As I discuss in the article in *New Politics* reviewing a book on the strikes (reproduced as chapter 9 in this book), the racial divide was never healed, which made the city ripe for one of the most audacious campaigns for privatization, led by an African American, Democratic mayor and paid for by billionaire patrons. To bridge the racial divide, teachers unions must develop a race-conscious culture and vocabulary. Having officers and activists who are members of minority groups is a vital part of this process, but as was demonstrated in the Newark strikes, it is not sufficient. The unions have to nurture a culture in which race and racism are critiqued, frankly. This process can strengthen the union internally and at the same time shows parents and activists that the union is an ally that can be trusted. Building alliances that are mutually respectful is hard work, but as we have seen in Chicago, it can be done.

### Professionally Speaking

I should clarify that although "professional" often connotes work that has an elevated social status, I'm using it to mean that someone meets the accepted standards of excellence in his/her occupation. To my knowledge, there's no word in English that comes closer to what I mean, and a conversation I overheard on a bus illustrates my definition. Many off-duty bus drivers ride this bus route to or from work, and I eavesdropped as my driver and his pal criticized another driver's cursing at abusive riders. "That's just so unprofessional!" my driver exclaimed. His colleague nodded vigorously in agreement. "It sure is," he said. "Very unprofessional."

What should be the union's role in teachers' exercise of their professional responsibilities, in particular when teachers develop curricula, decide on textbooks, consult on an instructional package? I think when teachers are functioning professionally as "idea workers" as they are when they decide what will be taught and how, the union should use its clout to try to create a vehicle in the school, separate from the union, for this work.

If teachers have a good union, do they also need separate space to pursue their responsibilities as "idea workers"? The first teachers union in the United States, formed by elementary schoolteachers in Chicago at the turn of the nineteenth century, thought so and pursued the creation of "teachers councils." These councils were similar in their function to a college or university faculty senate. They were organizationally independent of the union. The union's involvement was in advocating for creating the councils and pressing for council decisions to be taken seriously. Teachers elected representatives to the councils, which had an advisory role on educational decisions.<sup>13</sup>

When I began to teach in New York City, I saw the importance of having separate professional organizations and teachers unions. In California, the state teachers unions and professional associations collaborated on legislative matters, and a stellar English teacher was an officer of both the California Federation of Teachers and the California Association of Teachers of English. However, the organizations retained total organizational independence and sometimes came down differently on issues of curriculum. Quite a different situation existed in New York City, where the union's subject matter committees used the union's political clout to represent the union as speaking for teachers in regard to city and state decisions on curriculum and

instruction. The subject committees blocked proposals that the union leadership found politically objectionable.

We need to maintain a separation between teachers being organized professionally as “idea workers” and the union’s apparatus so as to protect teachers’ freedom to advocate ideas that the union, even a good union, may find objectionable. We see the kind of separation I’m advocating in colleges and universities that are unionized and have a senate, which oversees curriculum. While the faculty union may be involved in decisions that relate to instruction, for instance in pressing the administration to lower class sizes, the two spheres are separate. This separation is especially important in K–12 schools because of the diversity of opinion among thoughtful teachers and parents about what works best in classrooms.<sup>14</sup> Teachers who are closer to minority and immigrant communities bring perspectives that their colleagues and the unions have to hear.<sup>15</sup> The union’s responsibility is to protect the space for teachers, parents, and students to have those conversations.

Conventional (teachers union) wisdom has it that collective bargaining improved teachers’ working conditions, and if we define teachers’ work primarily in terms of wages and hours, that is accurate. In contrast, what’s happened to teachers’ influence on nonmonetary issues, like curriculum? One study argues that teachers in National Education Association (NEA) affiliates actually had more voice in professional matters before the NEA engaged in collective bargaining.<sup>16</sup> In part this occurred because collective bargaining laws defined the “scope of bargaining,” what was legal to negotiate, quite narrowly. Most professional matters, like having a voice in adoption of materials or professional development, were ruled off-limits, leaving only class size, salary, and hours as bargaining concerns.

I think neoliberalism’s success in painting unions as self-interested and selfish and the attack on the right to bargain contracts make this an opportune time to rethink the scope of bargaining. In other words, what do we get in legislation that gives us the right to negotiate legally binding contracts—as compared to what we give up? In California, I and other teacher union activists were advised by experts from the state and national unions to accept collective bargaining legislation with the usual narrow scope. We were persuaded that we would never get the legislation we wanted, but that we could at a later date modify the legislation (which has, to my knowledge, never occurred—anywhere) to cover professional concerns. Previous to having collective bargaining, my school district had school-site councils with department heads (elected, in the junior high and high schools) and grade-level leaders (elected, in the elementary schools). The councils met with principals, and while they were strictly advisory, in schools that had a strong union presence, the councils had considerable influence. Though we lacked the legal right to bargain collectively, teachers in my district could and did mobilize effectively to pressure the school board on salary and working conditions. With collective bargaining, we had a single bargaining agent and the right to have a contract. However, the councils lost their authority, and with their demise, teachers lost our collective voice about academic matters.

Because of this narrow scope of bargaining, teachers unions are generally precluded from addressing teachers’ academic concerns, like standardized testing and textbook selection. One solution, which I develop in the next chapter, is for the unions to be remade, as social movements, and to reopen the question of how we will use the power of teachers.