

READING FOR CHANGE: SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM BOOK GROUPS AS AN ORGANIZING TOOL

Kathleen Riley, Ph.D., *West Chester University*

In my view the only meaningful option is to acknowledge that it is in our common interest to make equity and quality the cornerstones for educational reform. That can only happen if parents, students, and teachers band together to wrest control from the elites who are driving federal and state policy, and insist on schools they directly control. That in turn will require a social movement – Occupy Our Schools – which has as its goal the reinvention of schooling as engaging, demanding, responsive, accessible, timely, future-oriented.

– James H. Lytle, *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 2013

We have reached the tipping point. A movement is growing in Philadelphia, and teachers are a part of it. Teacher Action Group will continue our work to develop the kind of teacher leaders who are engaged in the fight at every level, so that we can look back and see that the Summer of 2013 was indeed the moment when the levees broke, we awoke to the sleeping giant of community power in Philadelphia, and parents, students, teachers, and community members reclaimed control over our public schools.

– Anissa Weinraub, *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 2013

James Lytle and Anissa Weinraub wrote these words in *Perspectives on Urban Education* in the summer of 2013. While they hold different professional positions (Lytle is a retired administrator and professor; Weinraub is a teacher and organizer), both wrote as Philadelphia residents and educators deeply committed to a vision of schools that are accessible, democratically run, and responsive to local communities. Both wrote against the neoliberal agenda in which private funders make decisions about what is best for communities – especially working class and poor communities of color that have long been disenfranchised from decision making structures. And both cast a vision for a rising social movement that includes parents, teachers, community members, and students working together in solidarity to resist the privatization and standardization regimes that are eroding public education (Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2013).

This commentary provides an account of the early work of the Caucus of Working Educators (WE or The Caucus), a social justice caucus within the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) that has emerged since Lytle's and Weinraub's prescient commentaries. I focus on one of the group's early efforts to build a social movement in Philadelphia, a Summer Reading Series comprised of nine interconnected book groups that met throughout the summer of 2014. Rather than focusing exclusively on improving instruction at the level of the individual teacher, the Caucus responded to the urgent need for teachers to organize together to fight for the kinds of conditions and institutions that will allow for teacher autonomy, student dignity, and the material resources necessary for quality instruction to take place. This account of the early work of the Caucus serves to inform and inspire teachers, parents, teacher educators, faculty, organizers, activists, students, and community members to join – or create – similar spaces of self-education and empowerment so that social justice unionism and the values for which it stands can continue to grow stronger.

My perspective is informed by my own reading and learning as a member of three of the book groups, as well as conversations with several of the Caucus's organizers in the summer of 2014. As a former teacher in the Washington, D.C. Public Schools, seven year resident of Philadelphia, professor of literacy education at a nearby state university, and person who has long advocated for justice-oriented policies and practices in urban schools, I was drawn to the work of WE and became a supporting member as soon as I learned that I could.

I saw my participation in the book groups as a way to educate myself on the threats facing public education and the movement that is mounting to resist these threats; connect with Philadelphia educators, parents, and community members; and consider how the work of the Caucus can inform my own work as a teacher educator and member of a faculty union within a large state school system. I was inspired to spend a summer reading and thinking along with public, independent, and charter school teachers, as well as college professors, graduate students, social workers, people who work for educational nonprofit and for-profit organizations, those who identify as allies in the fight for equitable education, people who work for youth-serving organizations, pre-service teachers, and parents of students in the School District of Philadelphia. In the sections that follow, I

offer background on the Caucus and the Social Justice Unionism Reading Series, provide an overview of the books they read, discuss the organizers' hopes for the reading series, and offer a vision for literacy as sociopolitical action.

What is the Caucus of Working Educators?

Drawing inspiration from the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) within the Chicago Teachers Union, the Caucus of Working Educators is a grassroots organizing body within the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), the union for School District of Philadelphia teachers. WE is made up of PFT members as well as supporting members who are not part of the PFT, including charter school teachers, retired teachers, professors, graduate students, and community members. WE was officially formed in March of 2014 in the context of a successful teacher strike in Chicago in the fall of 2012, a series of deep budget cuts and layoffs in Philadelphia in the spring and summer of 2013, and a growing movement of teacher activism throughout the country. The Caucus grew out of the need for those most affected by Philadelphia's budget cuts and layoffs to respond to the threats being waged on the city's students and communities. The group's founding members wanted to create a mechanism within the PFT to advocate and organize for social change in the School District of Philadelphia.

In my conversations with them, members spoke about the power of the organization to transform teachers' beliefs about their role within the union from a passive to an active one. WE member Larissa Pahomov said that meeting with CORE members from Chicago helped her see that "we could do it ourselves," referring to forming a social justice caucus within the PFT (personal communication, July 9, 2014). Pahomov realized that

People treat the union as this external thing, but the union is its membership. When we do what we want to do – what we believe is in the shared interests of students, families, and working educators – we're guiding the union.

WE operates within a framework of social justice (or social movement) unionism (Bliss, 2014; Jaffe, 2014; Uetricht, 2014; Weiner, 2012). Labor scholar Kim Moody describes the difference between business unionism and social movement unionism: "The former's vision does not extend beyond 'bread-and-butter' issues related to workers' compensation; the latter identifies itself as a vehicle for society-wide transformation on issues that affect communities beyond individual workplaces" (as cited in Uetricht, 2014, p. 111). WE believes in advocating for contract rights to ensure that educators are "respected, supported, and compensated fairly to provide the best learning environment for students," (Caucus of Working Educators, n.d.). However, WE's work extends far beyond contract rights to cast a vision of a union that works alongside the students, families, and communities of Philadelphia to defend and transform public education.

Their platform envisions:

- A member-driven union that believes in "strengthening the web of relationships between members, not from waiting for or responding to top-down decisions" (Caucus of Working Educators, n.d.);
- "Open governance, communication, and information exchange" among various stakeholders (Caucus of Working Educators, n.d.);
- "High quality, fully-funded public education regardless of family income, racial background, or neighborhood" (Caucus of Working Educators, n.d.);
- An explicitly anti-racist approach to organizing work within education, which understands inequality based on race or class to be systemic, rather than individual;
- "Transformative curriculum and pedagogy that promotes critical thinking, creativity, and compassion," rather than teaching to high stakes tests (Caucus of Working Educators, n.d.).

At the time of this writing in the fall of 2014, WE had 165 members, most of whom were teachers, librarians, nurses, and counselors in the PFT and some, like myself, who were supporting members. Members had been meeting regularly; facilitating regional discussion groups; hosting happy hours; co-sponsoring book talks; organizing petitions, call-ins, and rallies; holding school-based protests; and organizing teachers within schools. They had also led a public awareness campaign, Philly Teachers Sound the Alarm (www.phillyteachers.org), to call attention to the working conditions in schools after deep budget cuts. The Social Justice Unionism Summer Reading Series was one of the major efforts of their first year.

What was the Social Justice Unionism Reading Series?

In the spring of 2014, members of WE, in collaboration with members of the Teacher Action Group – Philly, conceptualized and launched the Social Justice Unionism Reading Series. Nine reading groups were organized, and over 85 people signed up for at

least one group. Each group was led by one or two facilitators who reached out to participants to schedule meeting times and set a reading schedule. Groups met throughout the summer and culminated their work with an end-of-summer celebration and share-out in August.

The Caucus chose to focus on a reading series in order to politicize participants. That is, they wanted teachers to see how their work was situated within social, cultural, historical, and political contexts and to see themselves as what Giroux (1992) calls “public intellectuals” and agents of change. As WE member Kelley Collings explained:

WE needs to politicize all stakeholders in Philadelphia and help anchor folks’ understanding of what is happening in Philadelphia within a larger framework of the national attack on public education by the neoliberal corporate education reformers. People in Philadelphia need to be able to situate what is happening to us – school closings, layoffs, budget cuts, attacks on seniority and tenure, attacks on collective bargaining rights, an exponential growth of charters, the explosion of school choice – within a larger national political framework. This contextualization will enable us to broaden our self-interest, identify more areas of collective common self-interest, and firmly anchor us in the larger fight to save public education. This perspective will lock us in for the long haul (K. Collings, personal communication, July 17, 2014).

With this vision in mind, the steering committee chose books by asking each other, “What do you personally want to read?” and “If you could give new members of the Caucus one book to read, what book would you give them?” The group selected a range of titles, which, according to Collings, included books that members might already be reading (with the intention of engaging large numbers of people), books that expanded people’s knowledge of the corporate reform agenda (with the intention of sharpening members’ political analysis), and books about organizing (for members who were seeking organizing strategies). What emerged was a robust set of nine books that served to contextualize, inform, fuel, and inspire the work of WE in various ways.

What did they read?

The selected books covered a range of topics and perspectives related to the politics of education, the labor movement, and the history of social movements in Philadelphia. Two titles by Diane Ravitch (2013, 2010), *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools* and *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, offered broad-based critiques of standardization, accountability, and privatization.

Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism by Naomi Klein (2007) provided a political and economic analysis of “disaster capitalism,” the corporate exploitation of areas that have been hit by tragedies. *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who’s Who in the Implosion of American Public Education* (Schneider, 2014) exposed the individuals and organizations that are driving the privatization of American schools and unmasks “corporate reform.”

Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia (Countryman, 2006) offered a historical analysis of the Black Power movement in Philadelphia, which included an analysis of the overt and institutionalized racism within labor unions in Philadelphia. The book also documented the movement’s grassroots community organizing, which occurred in a broad network of neighborhoods, organizations, churches, and cultural centers.

Other books dealt more directly with the labor movement and teachers unions. *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* (Mcalevey & Ostertag, 2012) is a personal narrative of a union organizer who made the case that social movement unionism could be revitalized with organizing and participatory education. *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity* (Uetricht, 2014) tells the story of the Chicago Teachers Union strike, describing it as one of the most important US labor actions of the decade.

And finally, two other books drew on the Chicago story to offer practical wisdom for organizing within unions. *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons From the Chicago Teachers* (Bradbury, Brenner, Brown, Slaughter, & Winslow, 2014) offered specific strategies used by Chicago teachers to transform their union. Similarly, in *Class Action: An Activist Teacher’s Handbook* (Sunkara, 2014), various authors, mostly educators, offer accessible explanations of neoliberal education reform, the history of unions, and strategies for building power within a teachers union.

What are the hopes for the reading series?

From the participatory democracy principles of the Civil Rights Movement (Mueller, 1990) to consciousness-raising groups of the

women's liberation movement (Evans, 1979), and from popular education at the Highlander School (Horton & Freire, 1990) to Story Circles among educators and students in New Orleans (e.g., Michna, 2009; O'Neal, n.d.), social movements have long included group-based dialogue as part of their organizing (Foley, 1999). Bringing people together to better understand how their lived realities fit within larger structures is reflective of theories of critical consciousness (e.g., Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008), which is the awareness of how one's lived reality fits within systems of oppression and the desire to take action to change existing conditions in the name of social justice. In that spirit, WE organizers hoped that the Summer Reading Series would:

1. **Allow members to see the bigger picture.** Summer is a time when teachers often take a step back and look at the bigger picture. In addition to revising curricular units and reconsidering classroom systems, WE teachers took advantage of the opportunity to respond to the political systems in which they taught. One member shared that she hoped the reading series would “deepen people’s understanding of the national and international project of neoliberalism and corporatization of the public sector” and “see the Caucus as part of a national movement of other social justice caucuses within unions” (K. Collings, personal communication, July 17, 2014). Another member described the effect of the Chicago teachers’ collective reading of *Shock Doctrine* (Klein, 2007) by saying that “it gave them theoretical language to describe their reality. It helped them not just feel frustrated, but to see more of the cause of their frustration” (L. Pahomov, personal communication, July 9, 2014).
2. **Politicize teachers.** WE member Eileen Duffey shared with me her belief that most teachers did not decide to be teachers with the understanding that they would be activists or need to take a political stance on their profession. Referring to the relentless waves of deep budget cuts, staff layoffs, and chronic underfunding, Duffey said, “The attacks require more politically savvy teachers” (personal communication, July 9, 2014). One of the key elements of CORE’s work in Chicago was a summer organizing internship program that trained members to see themselves as organizers and activists (Uetrict, 2014). The Reading Series was a beginning step in building a similar kind of infrastructure for political education within WE. The overlapping network of nine interrelated book groups enabled members to build a collective analysis of the issues, and the end-of-summer share-out allowed each group to share insights based on their group conversations. One member said she was particularly excited about the end-of-summer event because it would allow her to access the learning of each of the groups and build a collective consciousness across participants (L. Pahomov, personal communication, July 9, 2014).
3. **Foster new connections among people and ideas.** All of the books in WE’s summer reading series had the potential to lead to new connections – between the past and the present; between Chicago, Philadelphia, and other cities facing similar challenges; between micro-level interactions at schools and macro-level political projects; and between education and other sectors of society that are facing neoliberal reforms. The book groups functioned much as the consciousness-raising groups in the women’s movement did – to bring people away from feelings of isolation and enable them to see how their struggles are intimately connected with others’ (Evans, 1979). Ken Derstine, a retired teacher and supporting member of WE, shared that he was looking forward to talking with others about these issues. “People feel like they’re alone,” he said, “so it will be good to come together” (personal communication, July 9, 2014).

Moving forward: Literacy as sociopolitical action

In my scholarship and teaching, I spend a lot of time thinking about literacy. While many think of literacy as simply “reading and writing,” or a set of skills that can be learned in one context and applied to another (e.g., Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), I see literacy as profoundly political (e.g., Royster, 2000; Willis, 1997). Jacqueline Jones Royster, who writes about African American women essayists, conceptualizes literacy as sociopolitical action. She argues that “Becoming literate has meant gaining the skills to read and write; it has also meant taking the power and authority to know ourselves, others, and our circumstances in multisensible ways and to act with authority based on that knowing” (Royster, 2000, p. 61).

This definition of literacy highlights its potential to lead to individual transformation, awareness of one’s own agency, and action. In participating in WE’s book groups, I could feel the educators of Philadelphia using their power and authority to better know themselves, their worlds, and their circumstances. I could see people building relationships with each other and also making connections between books, as participants in one book group shared analyses developed in other groups. Collings shared that she could feel how her participation in the book groups would inform how she would talk to people to bring them into the Caucus. She said that she felt better able to articulate how the forces of neoliberal corporate reform are chipping away at the public sector and how the dismantling of Philadelphia public schools is part of that larger agenda. She said:

I’m learning so much right now. And I trust that over the course of the summer, through being in conversations with others, I will sharpen my understanding and ability to communicate to others in a way that politicizes them around the issues and propels them into action. (K. Collings, personal communication, July 17, 2014)

Philadelphia faces daunting challenges. It also has a rich history of organizations of teachers coming together to learn with and

from each other, including the Philadelphia Teacher Learning Cooperative (established in 1978), the Philadelphia Writing Project (established in 1987), and the Teacher Action Group (established in 2008). WE's Summer Reading Series is the latest – and most expressly political – iteration of this tradition. WE is working in collaboration with a broad base of parent, student, and community organizations and fostering connections among people, places, and ideas. Their work is building power for the kind of social movement that Lytle, Weinraub, and a growing mass of educators believe is so badly needed to protect high quality, democratically organized, student-centered public education for all students.

To learn more about the Caucus of Working Educators, visit their website and blog at www.workingeducators.org, or follow them on Facebook at [facebook.com/WorkingEducators](https://www.facebook.com/WorkingEducators), or on Twitter at [@CaucusofWE](https://twitter.com/CaucusofWE)

KATHLEEN RILEY, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Literacy at West Chester University. She received her Ph.D. in Reading, Writing, and Literacy from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Her research and teaching interests include critical literacy education in university and K-12 contexts, adolescent literacy education, community-based education, teacher inquiry, and teacher activism. You can read her recent article, "Enacting Critical Literacy in English Classrooms: How a Teacher Learning Community Supported Critical Inquiry," in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

References:

Bliss, R. (2014, April 26). How the creation of social justice caucuses in unions is revitalizing an aging labor movement. *AlterNet*. Retrieved from <http://www.alternet.org>

Bradbury, A., Brenner, M., Brown, J., Slaughter, J., & Winslow, S. (2014). *How to jump-start your union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers*. Detroit, MI: Labor Notes.

Caucus of Working Educators (n.d.). *Our platform*. Retrieved from <http://www.workingeducators.org>

Countryman, M. (2006). *Up south: Civil rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Evans, S. (1979). *Personal politics: The roots of women's liberation in the civil rights movement and the new left*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Foley, G. (1999). *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education*. London, England: Zed Books.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury.

Giroux, H. A. (1992). Textual authority and the role of teachers as public intellectuals. In C. M. Hurlbert & S. Totten (Eds.), *Social issues in the classroom* (pp. 304-321). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Jaffe, S. (2014, April 3). Teachers' strikes catching fire from Oregon to Minnesota. *Labor Notes*. Retrieved from <http://www.labornotes.org>

Kincheloe, J. (2008). *Critical pedagogy primer*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race and the right to the city*. London: Routledge.

Lytle, J. (2013). Philadelphia School District deconstruction: A case requiring consideration. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/volume-10-issue-1-summer-2013>

Mcalevey, J., & Ostertag, B. (2012). *Raising expectations (and raising hell): My decade fighting for the labor movement*. New York, NY: Verso Books.

Michna, C. (2009). Stories at the center: Story circles, educational organizing, and fate of neighborhood public schools in New Orleans. *American Quarterly*, 61(3), 529-555.

Mueller, C. (1990). Ella Baker and the roots of "participatory democracy." In V. L. Crawford, J. A. Rouse, and B. Woods. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965* (pp. 51-70). New York, NY: Carlson Publishing.

O'Neal, J. (n.d.). Story circle process discussion paper. *Race Matters*. Retrieved from <http://www.racematters.org/storycircleprocess.htm>

Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York, NY: Alfred Knopf Books.

Royster, J. J. (2000). *Traces of a stream: Literacy and social change among African American women*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Schneider, M. (2014). *A chronicle of echoes: Who's who in the implosion of American public education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Snow, C., Burns, M., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Sunkara, B. (2014). *Class action: An activist teacher's handbook*. New York, NY: Jacobin.

Uetricht, M. (2014). *Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity*. New York, NY: Verso Books.

Weiner, L. (2012). *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Weinraub, A. (2013). Why teachers must join the fight for public education. Now. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/volume-10-issue-1-summer-2013>

Willis, A. I. (1997). Focus on research: Historical considerations. *Language Arts*, 74(5), 387-397.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2024 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-12-issue-1-spring-2015/reading-change-social-justice-unionism-book-groups-organizing->