

Class Notes – History of Labor Unions

Student Unionism

- In U.S., we talk more about student government, student walkouts, and student activism. Student unionism and governance looks different in other places in the world.
- Graduate student union movements in U.S. are tied to trade unions, e.g. working with United Auto Workers. Debate revolves around whether or not students are employees. But the scope of student work isn't just about labor, also involves community.

History of Unions

- Slave revolts as the first strikes in the US
- Overlap with history of immigration
 - First unions established to protect Asian workers
 - United Farm Workers Union is majority Latinx now
- Political violence
- Grayber - Unions are the only bodies legally permitted to participate in direct action (although not calling that) but only given a lot of regulations. What is the relationship between unions and capital and the state? What are the contradictions of unions and how might they be transformed?
- Janus Decision (2018) - decision that workers could partake in benefits without paying union fees, which weakens the financial base and strength of unions.
- Having fought for basic protections and rights, what's next for unions?

Case Studies

- Professional Air Traffic Organization (PATCO)
 - Went on strike in 1981 after failed contract negotiations. Reagan Administration fires workers and bans them from working in the federal government. Ban lasted until 1993.
 - Largely non-college educated workers
 - Undermining the power of the strike
 - How did this change unionization, like NATCA which emerged after PATCO?
- Fast Food Workers
 - Started in 2012. Strikes in NYC and IL.
 - Court case allowed fast food workers to unionize.
 - Fighting to raise the minimum wage and to draw attention to unjust firings.
 - A lot of workers are hired at-will, so not much protection from firing.
 - Skeptics saw unions as advancing their agenda through the fast food worker organizing.
 - What happens with automation and technology replacing workers?
 - How do we support workers and fight for protections, when union might be corrupt?
 - What kind of power are unions asserting (power over vs. power with)?
- Graduate Student Organizing
 - Intellectual property - ownership of work is in question

- Compensation for academic work, ambiguity around how labor at the university is framed
- AAUW - work around sanctuary schools, pay discrimination, academic freedom
- NLRB recognized that graduate students at private universities could unionize in 2016
- Oceanhill Brownsville NYC Teachers Strike
 - Strike in 1968, fight is ongoing
 - Largely black student population in a district with mostly white teachers
 - Families advocate for a teacher workforce that more reflects student population
 - Teacher firings, without due process
 - Tension between diversifying workforce and union interests
 - Effects of Brown v. Board: integration of schools, but loss of diversity in teacher workforce. Communities still fighting for control of their schools. Charter schools were one way for black/brown communities to control schools - movement has definitely shifted in the neoliberal context.

Panel

Questions: What role does social justice play in unionism? How do you make your union space inclusive?

- John Braxton, affiliated with CCP Teachers Union
 - Union also represents community college support staff.
 - Unions have always been interested in leveling the playing field. Hasn't always done it well.
 - Social justice issues are also important for earning public support. Public support is necessary to win on "bread and butter" issues (e.g. salary, working conditions).
 - 1970's - corporate elites attacked unions in the private sector and weakened them; later went after public sector, freezing funding for education, limiting full-time teaching opportunities in higher education (many community colleges hire part-time faculty, exploitative model).
 - Wins: Graduate student wins have had a huge, positive impact on teachers unions. Seniority system - transparency.
 - Resources: Jobs with Justice in Philadelphia (also pushing for PILOTs)
- Audrey Jaquiss, member of GET UP (Graduate Employees Together Union at Penn)
 - Goal is to make Penn at large a space that is more accessible and more open.
 - Researching Penn and what Penn is not doing
 - Support for graduate students in the absence of institutional support
 - Wins: Less of a sense of powerlessness, exhaustion that Penn reinforces. \$14 billion endowment that invests in violence globally and nonprofit status that is built on all of our labor - There is power to be won!
 - Resources: Pedagogy of the Oppressed, No Shortcuts
- Devin Daniels, member of GET UP. Labor crisis affecting academia - 70% fewer opportunities. Addressing other precarious forms of employment.
 - Unionizing is essential to reducing the ways that the university from perpetuating other forms of social inequality, reproducing privileges for the privileged, e.g. medical leave policy, GRE requirements, marginalization of students of color, etc.

- New organization, still working to make union inclusive. Horizontal decision making process, all are welcome to attend meetings. Centralized leadership structure.
- Wins: stipend increase, dental insurance increases
- How to help: join and get involved! Email penngsetup@gmail.com with a non-Penn email address to get information. Next meeting on October 25.
- Resources: Making Sense, history of capitalism podcast
- Daniel Symonds - Caucus of Working Educators. Growing labor insurgency in public schools.
 - Contradictions in incorporating social justice in unionism.
 - Working in the context of reduced/fragmented power and marginalized black/brown communities, seeking institutional power and more equal distribution of resources.
 - Have to be open to conversations, overcome differences in perspectives and politics
 - Would like to take a small part of the union's budget to provide training for other organizations
 - Wins: Developing organizing skills among membership (petitions, increasing awareness, trainings)
 - How to Help: We need your money! Events require child care, transportation reimbursement, food, translation services
 - Workingeducators.org
 - Asking for Penn for PILOTs
 - Resources: On Labor Blog from Yale (<https://onlabor.org>), Bill Fletcher's Solidarity Divided
- Jia Lee - NYC Public School Teacher in East Village, NYC since 2001, beginning of NCLB. Special Education teacher. MORE Caucus, part of network with WE Caucus.
 - *Re-Thinking Schools* - great definition of social justice unionism. Should defend the rights of its members and the rights and needs of students. Defend public education and fight to transform it.
 - Beyond policy - also look toward implementation, structure
 - Unionism doesn't function in isolation. Needs to be democratic, not bureaucratic to understand the needs of community/students.
 - MORE Motto: "Our working conditions are students' learning conditions"
 - Process matters
 - Wins: Paid parental leave (policy previously excluded all union members in NY) won last year, getting December 23rd (Monday) off.
 - How to help: Support WE Caucus and local organizing efforts - successes in LA and Chicago due to changes in the internal structures, made organization more democratic and spaces more inclusive.
 - Resources: Tema Okun, Kenneth Jones - White Supremacy Culture, workbook for social change groups and practical guide; Red State Revolt; The Strike that Changed New York; Labor Nuts Secrets of Successful Organizing; Bettina Love's We Want to Do More than Survive