

## **TURNing Unions Around**

**By Adam Urbanski**

Teacher unions in America must be reformed. This can best happen if teacher unionists themselves recognize not only the need for change but also that it is in the enlightened self-interest of their unions to welcome the next logical stage in their unions' evolution.

Certainly, forces and threats from the outside can play a role. In fact, much hinges on the capacity of teacher union leaders to understand the changing environment and to interpret it for their members. Such a proactive mode would ensure that the changes are not merely a begrudging accommodation but rather a purposeful fulfillment of our own vision for our institution and our members. But unless it is voices from within the teacher union movement who are driving the call for reforms, there is a great risk that the voices from outside would be viewed as hostile "bashing." So it does matter a great deal who is calling for teacher union reform. In a sense, unions are more likely to change if the unionists are *agents* of reform. Ironically, if unionists do not become agents of reform, they will remain *targets* of reform.

A persuasive case for teacher union reform can only be made in a manner that is sensitive to the experience and culture of these unions. This, after all, is not a matter of abandoning what teacher unions are; instead, this is a matter of building on the foundation that has been laid.

The industrial union model that emerged from years of struggling for parity with management was a good match for the industrial-style school organization. It mirrored the institution in which the teachers' unions existed, and the effectiveness of this approach brought it both legitimacy and loyalty.

Indeed, industrial unionism served teachers well. It helped them to achieve middle class status and to launch college and university-fueled professional careers for their children. It has also improved the terms and conditions under which teachers worked and, in many instances, it democratized the workplace.

Recognizing all this as an important foundation for building the next stage of teacher unionism is indispensable. Whatever is to become part of the "new unionism" must be built on the essential commitments of what teacher unions have always stood for and must always retain: a commitment to democratic dynamics, fairness and due process, self determination, unity without unanimity, social justice, and valuing the dignity of all work and workers.

### **Why Change**

There is no reason to believe that reforming unions would prove any less difficult than reforming schools and education. Nonetheless, teacher unions must change in tandem with the changes that are so obviously needed in schools and in education. Reinventing both is necessary for maintaining public support and confidence in the institution of public education. Just like today's schools, unions today are more like yesterday than they've ever been before. They still expend most of their energy and resources on defending a very small minority of troubled members, they still define their mission narrowly to bread-and-butter issues, and they still confine themselves to reacting to management's actions and provocations.

Change is inevitable, and only growth is optional. And while it is possible to change without improving, it is not possible to improve without change. So it is futile to agonize over whether or not to change. The choice is only whether the changes will be the kind that truly improve our institutions and increase the chances that more students will learn. The strong unions that we've built, therefore, must now help deliver a more genuine profession for teachers and more effective schools for all students. This won't be easy. Even in states where collective bargaining does exist, professional issues are either outside the scope of collective bargaining or, at best, are "permissive" items of bargaining. Thus, the collective voice of teachers is often muzzled on the very matters that can best assure improvements in the education industry and engender public confidence in schools. Our colleagues in higher education did achieve the right to negotiate professional issues and thus to maintain their professional status. That pattern was unfortunately denied to elementary and secondary levels. In essence, teachers have a so-called "profession," while the professionals have little or no voice in professional matters.

Precisely because there is a connection between what teachers do collectively and what they are professionally, the scope of collective bargaining must be expanded to permit negotiations on professional, pedagogical, and instructional issues. As it happens, this is a good fit with what new teachers now expect from their union: to invest no less in meeting their professional needs (access to new knowledge; professional development; opportunities to plan, design and implement new programs; opportunities for continuous learning) than in the traditional union priorities such as contract negotiations, grievance processing, health, and other benefits. But teacher unions have additional reasons to seek union reform and school reform: to help diminish the isolation among teachers thus improving collaboration, communication debate, and learning about reform; to encourage initiative from teachers and their unions, taking the lead with reform and promoting the kind of initiative that make sense to the practitioners in education; to help ensure that reform goes beyond rhetoric; to increase prospects and pathways for translating good ideas into practical local reality; and to create, articulate and actualize our own vision for our unions, our profession and our schools.

### **A Vision for the (Near) Future**

What might be the vision that teachers and teacher unionists wish for themselves in the foreseeable future? Here is a glimpse of what might be possible only a few years hence:

Instead of two major teachers' unions, there is now one merged organization that acts not only as an advocate for all of America's educators but also as a lobby for all of their students. Features of industrial unionism have yielded to changes that offer the promise of making public education more effective. The scope of collective bargaining has been extended to include negotiations on professional issues in addition to wages, benefits, and working conditions. The union now promotes such practices and dynamics as peer review, differentiated staffing and pay, public school choice, professional accountability, the transfer of teachers based on criteria other than seniority alone, and the involvement of parents, students, and peers in teacher evaluations.

The union now not only considers itself the voice of teachers, it sees its role as giving voice to teachers. It now spends as much energy and resources on the professional needs of its members as it does on collective bargaining, contract enforcement, economic benefits, and other basic traditional union functions. Recognizing that the welfare of the union and its members hinges on the effectiveness of the profession and industry within which it exists, the teachers' union has formalized its commitment to reform. This new teachers' union considers unionism and professionalism as complementary and not mutually exclusive. It helps its members become agents of reform rather than the passive targets of reform; it views the negotiated contract as the floor and not the ceiling for what union members are willing to do for students; and it acts as the guardian of professional and educational standards.

## **Rhetoric into Reality**

Any vision is only a pipe dream unless created twice: first in the mind and then in the real world. But whatever we can envision we can also achieve, and some have already begun to build tomorrow today.

In Rochester, for example, the teachers union learned over the last decade and a half that the more the teachers union promotes educational reforms and professionalism, the stronger and more credible the union becomes. We have also learned that the stronger the union becomes, the more it is able to promote the needed changes in education. Through collaboration and a willingness to re-think traditional postures, the union achieved a substantial number of changes:

Negotiated a school-based planning process that involves teachers, parents and high school students, and school administrators in making decisions about each school's instructional program  
Altered the traditional teacher evaluation process by developing the Performance Assessment Review for Teachers (PART)-a portfolio-based system that includes peer evaluations and parallels the principles and criteria of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Negotiated a "professional day" provision that eliminates the teachers' dismissal time so that the teachers' workday ends when the teachers' professional responsibilities (as determined by the teachers) are completed.  
Introduced aspects of pay for knowledge, skills and additional service into the teacher compensation system.  
Negotiated an annual Classroom Resource Fund to support effective school practices and to invest in what works for student learning.  
Initiated and published a pedagogical journal that features articles by teachers and paraprofessionals themselves.  
Supported public school choice as a way to empower parents and students while providing additional incentives to schools.  
Negotiated the Career In Teaching Program that includes differentiated staffing and differentiated pay.  
Developed "lead teacher" positions for accomplished teachers who assume additional responsibilities and roles in exchange for additional pay and a different job description.

- Negotiated a formal role for teachers in the annual evaluation of their supervisors and other administrators.
- Negotiated a role for parents in the teacher evaluation process.
- Designed and negotiated an internship program for new teachers and a peer intervention plan for tenured teachers experiencing difficulty with their classroom teaching.
- Adjusted teacher seniority provisions for teacher assignments and transfers.
- Initiated and continues to support a homework hotline for students to help them with homework and school-related matters.

By placing a premium and a priority on what we are *for*, not just what we are *against*, we began to bridge the gap between unionism and professionalism. And although this has been a rocky and scenic route, we remain determined to continue on this path in collaboration with school management when we can and alone when we must. Along the way, we have found it necessary to promote "creative insubordination" and "reform without permission" during periods of hostile and anti-union school management postures.

## **TURNing Unions Around**

Rochester Teachers Association's commitment to union and school reform is not unique. In fact, the new leaders of both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) champion the very same impulses and directions. NEA President Bob Chase's outspoken support of peer review and AFT President Sandra Feldman's position on not tolerating low performing schools are examples of this. And there are local teacher unions within AFT (Toledo, Cincinnati, et al.) and NEA (Columbus, Seattle, et. al) that have been pursuing similar goals and implementing similar changes.

In July, 1995, representatives of 21 progressive teacher unions from both AFT and NEA formed a Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN)\* with the express purpose of redesigning teachers' unions so that they could become more effective partners in the effort of improving education in America's public schools. Supported by an initial grant from The Pew Charitable Fund, and in collaboration

with the University of California at Los Angeles' Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, TURN adopted for itself the following mission statement:

Teacher unions must provide leadership for the collective voice of their members. Teacher unions have a responsibility to students, their families, and to the broader society. Teacher unions are committed to public education as a vital element of American democracy. What unites these responsibilities is our commitment to help all children learn.

We affirm the unions' responsibility to collaborate with other stakeholders in public education to:

- Improve continuously the quality of the teaching force,
- See consistently higher levels of student achievement,
- Promote in public education and in the union democratic dynamics, fairness, and due process for all,
- Improve on an ongoing basis the terms and conditions under which both adults and children work and learn.

Including teacher unions as partners in transforming public education is essential to achieving the ultimate goal of improving student learning. Progressive union leaders have begun to recognize that fundamental cultural change in their own organizations is a precondition to broader reforms that will culminate in better education for students. Just as industrial trade unions have recently begun to discover, rapid and unpredictable changes in the environment now demand the rethinking of the roles and structures of unions. Both AFT and NEA participating locals embrace this conclusion and seek ways to recreate themselves to meet the needs of a new environment.

TURN is a union-led effort to restructure the nation's teachers' unions to promote reforms that will ultimately lead to better learning and higher achievement for American's children. TURN relies on models drawn from a variety of research internal initiatives, and the experience of some industrial trade unions, which have begun to transform themselves. The primary goal of TURN is to create new union models that can take the lead in building and sustaining high performing schools for all students. Because teachers are closest to students and to the learning process, they are in a unique position to play a powerful role in stimulating the necessary changes.

TURN's goal is to explore, develop, and demonstrate workable models that lead to successful restructuring to enable teacher unions to become high performing organizations to meet the needs of members and to become agent of school and educational reform that will ultimately contribute to improved student learning.

Critical to the process of creating high performance unions is developing a network of reformers to share ideas, create mutual systems of support, and participate in the evaluation of progress to build organizations committed to taking on broadened responsibility for educational quality.

TURN leaders convene at least three meetings each year to examine unions' strengths and weaknesses and to develop models to ready them for reform. TURN also created a Web site for TURN activities to stimulate and continue the conversation. This includes creating a library of information and ongoing research related to high performance unions, school reform, and student performance issues. We are building a networked set of e-mail and video conferencing contacts that will facilitate an easy and instantaneous conversation among reforming locals. We plan to use action research methods to help document the process of change in the participating locals.

In addition to all this, TURN has already delved into specific work. The initial three projects are as follows:

- Assuring teacher quality is a goal of TURN locals working in conjunction with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

How teacher unions could become facilitators of professional development for their members is a topic explored with the partnership with Brown University's Center for Leadership and Professional Development.

In collaboration with Allan Odden and the University of Wisconsin's Consortium for Policy Research in Education, TURN locals are seeking to develop alternatives to the current prevailing teacher compensation mode.

## **Conclusions**

In his last speech to the AFT Convention in 1996, the late AFT President Albert Shanker reminded the assembled teacher unionists that "It is no less the responsibility of a teachers' union to preserve public education than to negotiate good contracts." To achieve this, teacher unions will have to change their traditional orientation. They will have to seek not only the job-related interests of their members but also the success of the education industry. They will have to recognize that teachers will do well only if their students do well and that no community would long tolerate teachers doing well while students do not. Thus, school productivity must become central to the mission of teacher unions, too. Real change is real hard and takes real time. But it can be done; it's just that it can't be done easily. Along the way there will be false starts, wrong turns and negative findings. And pain. But the pain is in itself evidence that the changes are real.

We can succeed if we are passionate about change and commit for the long haul. But to do that, we first must instigate among our colleagues a revolution of rising expectations and create a vision that inspires others to aspire to more. Then we must do the hard work that is unavoidable when the agenda is so ambitious. When -we succeed, we will have built a more genuine teaching profession for ourselves and more effective schools for all of our students. And the new teacher unions can lead the way.

## **NOTE**

The 21 local teacher unions belonging to TURN are: Albuquerque Teachers Fed. /AFT; Bellevue Education Assn./NEA; Boston Teachers Union/AFT; Cincinnati Fed. of Teachers/AFT; Columbus Education Assn./NEA; Denver Classroom Teachers Assn./NEA; Hammond Teacher Fed./AFT; Memphis Education Assn./NEA; Minneapolis Fed. of Teachers/AFT; Montgomery County Education Assn./NEA; Pine Classroom Teachers Assn./ NEA; Pittsburgh Fed. of Teachers/AFT; Rochester Teachers Assn./AFT; San Diego Teachers Assn./NEA; Seattle Education Assn./NEA; Toledo Fed. of Teachers/ AFT; United Educators of San Francisco/AFT-NEA; United Fed. of Teachers/AFT; United Teachers of Dade/ AFT; United Teachers of Los Angeles/NEA-AFT; Westerly Teachers Assn./NEA.

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