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(Anti)Racism, Democracy, and Social Justice Unionism

Introduction to Part 3 of the Special Series on Transforming Unions, Schools and Society

Lauren Ware Stark
Bowdoin College

Rhiannon Maton
State University of New York College at Cortland

Erin Dyke
Oklahoma State University

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Abstract

This is the third issue in a special series titled Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America. In this issue, we turn our attention to educator organizing in cities on the east and west coasts of the United States, tracing movements that developed before and alongside the statewide organizing highlighted in the previous issue. In particular, we bring together studies that illuminate the organizing of educators within social justice caucuses: groups of educators organizing to advance justice and democracy in their schools, unions, and communities. The authors and interviewees in this special issue document the complex ways that educators advance racial justice and democracy within and through their organizing.



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This is the third issue in a four-part special series titled *Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America*. In this *Critical Education* series, we bring together research documenting educator movements in the Americas, including the recent labor upsurge in the United States. The first issue of the series (Vol. 12, No. 7) illuminates teacher learning and knowledge production in contemporary educator movements. The second issue in the series (Vol. 12, No. 15) offers counternarratives on the 2018 statewide walkouts. The fourth and final issue of the series (Vol. 12, No. 17) explores international educator organizing.

In this issue, we turn our attention to educator organizing in cities on the east and west coasts of the United States, tracing movements that developed before and alongside the statewide organizing highlighted in the previous issue. In particular, we bring together studies that illuminate the organizing of educators within social justice caucuses: groups of educators organizing to advance justice and democracy in their schools, unions, and communities. The authors and interviewees in this special issue document the complex ways that educators advance racial justice and democracy within and through their organizing.

Democracy and justice are key principles in contemporary educator movements and can be considered definitional elements of social justice unionism (Stark, 2019; Weiner, 2014). In a 1994 statement published in *Rethinking Schools*, the National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA) put forward a definition of social justice unionism that emphasized transforming teachers' unions to prioritize bottom-up democracy and organizing for social justice in schools and other areas of society. While progressive educators in NCEA and other networks worked to advance this model in cities across the country in the 1990s and early 2000s, the model took an important turn in 2008 with the formation of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in Chicago. CORE educators organized against school closures and other racist neoliberal reforms before winning positions in their union, going on to lead a wildly influential strike for "the Schools Chicago's Students Deserve" in September of 2012 (Uetricht, 2014). This strike highlighted the potential for rank-and-file educators to democratically harness the power of their unions to advance racial and economic justice within their schools and communities.

Inspired in large part by the notable educator organizing in Chicago, over twenty social justice caucuses developed in the years since CORE's formation in 2008. Like CORE, early caucuses such as the Social Equality Educators (SEE, now the Social Equity Educators) in Seattle and the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) in New York City initially focused on advancing workplace democracy and countering neoliberal education reforms in their local contexts. Over time and through deliberative processes such as inquiry groups (Maton, 2018), however, many of these caucuses shifted toward a more intersectional analysis with an explicit focus on challenging systemic racism. In 2014, caucuses across the country joined together to form the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE) network, offering an intersectional purpose statement: "creating schools and workplaces that advance economic justice, racial justice, and democracy." In her national study of caucus organizing in the national UCORE network from 2016 to 2019, Stark (2019) confirms that social justice caucuses generally pursue these principles in their work, arguing that caucuses throughout the network aim "to build rank-and-file educators' power to democratically transform their unions and advance justice in their schools and broader communities" (p. 122). We can see this purpose, for example, in the intersectional organizing of educators in the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), with campaigns that work toward economic

justice, racial justice, and democracy in their schools and union (Asselin, 2019; Maton, 2018; Maton & Stark, 2021; Morrison, 2021; Riley, 2015). We can also see this focus in the significant work of educators in the Baltimore Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (BMORE) caucus, which centers the leadership of women of color and recently won leadership of their union (Schiller & BMORE Caucus, 2019).

At the organizational level, social justice caucuses generally pursue an intersectional purpose that addresses multiple forms of oppression. On the individual level, however, tensions frequently emerge between educator organizers with differing political analyses. Some educators emphasize economic justice or workplace democracy over racial justice, for example, while others emphasize anti-racist principles (Stark, 2019). Caucuses throughout the UCORE network have navigated these tensions (Asselin, 2019; Bocking, 2017; Brogan, 2016; Owens, 2020), with new and existing caucus organizers learning from struggles in other contexts to develop practices that more fully center anti-racism alongside economic justice and democracy (Dani & Asselin, 2020; Maton & Stark, 2021).

This issue brings together scholars at the forefront of the growing body of research documenting how these principles shape educator movements, including the specific practices that educators use to support these principles and navigate tensions between them. In her qualitative study, Asselin explores how educators in two social justice caucuses counter racism within their own organizations, focusing her attention on the WE caucus in Philadelphia and the MORE caucus in New York City. Drawing on extensive participant observations, interviews, and document analysis, Asselin offers a microlevel analysis of key cultural processes within caucus organizing. In particular, she highlights how caucus organizers in MORE use such practices as “building relationships, having difficult conversations, and engaging in collective protest activities” (p. 1) to foster cultures of solidarity (Fantasia, 1988) and counter dysconscious racism (King, 1997) within their caucuses, schools, and unions. Asselin’s article is significant as an engaged study of racism and democracy within caucus organizing, in particular in her consideration of how caucus organizers use democratic practices to counter racism within their own organizations.

In addition to offering engaged research on democracy and (anti)racism in educator organizing, this issue features the analyses and perspectives of educators leading this work in their own caucuses, networks, and unions. In her critical autoethnographic study, Owens traces the “intersections of democracy and racism” in her own experiences as an educator organizer within the Newark Education Workers (NEW) caucus in Newark, NJ as well as other labor and grassroots networks. She begins with a series of narrative vignettes or episodes from these experiences before drawing on critical democratic theory (Oakes & Rogers, 2006), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) to analyze key themes in these episodes. Owens’ study offers both an important testimony of educator organizing in Newark as well as significant analyses of educator practices within social justice caucuses, including practices that counter racism and center grassroots democracy. In her interview with Black Lives Matter at School leaders Jesse Hagopian and Tamara Anderson, Stark includes additional testimonies of how key educator organizers have used grassroots democratic practices to advance racial justice in schools at both the local and national levels.

Together, the articles and interview in this issue highlight some of the ways that organizers in contemporary educator movements are advancing democracy and racial justice within and through their work. They also shed light on challenges and tensions within this work, suggesting campaigns and practices that enable educators to build power and counter oppression in their

schools, unions, and communities. By bringing these pieces together, we hope that this issue will support learning and knowledge production around contemporary educator movements, informing future struggles for democracy and justice.

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