Critical Education

Volume 13 Number 3 July 15, 2022 ISSN 1920-4175

Fighting Racism through Teacher Union Democratization

Activist Educators in Social Justice Caucuses in New York City and Philadelphia

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Citation: Asselin, C. (2022). Fighting racism through teacher union democratization: Activist educators in social justice caucuses in New York City and Philadelphia. *Critical Education, 13*(3), 44-62. http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186566

Abstract

Since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, there has been a rise in reported hate crimes across the country. This study focuses on how educator activists in the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE), the social justice caucus of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, and in the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), the social justice caucus of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, relate to fellow educators who express racist views. This study argues that when engaging with fellow educators, who have racist views, social justice caucus activists participate in practices, including building relationships, having difficult conversations, and engaging in collective protest activities, that deepen union presence at the workplace and increase participation in the union by creating cultures of solidarity (Fantasia, 1988). MORE and WE reaffirm the importance of labor organizing in the educational justice movement and of anti-racist activism in the labor movement. They fight oppression through practices that democratize their union, and at the same time, the focus on racial justice drives the need for greater union democracy because engaging with racial tensions requires a democratic space for members to fight dysconscious racism (King, 1997) and arrive at new understandings.

Introduction

For nearly twenty years Chicago has been the petri dish for neoliberal education reform that has included school closings, privately managed schools, more testing, merit pay, and longer school days. In the mid-2000s, educators in Chicago began to organize with community groups throughout the city against an education plan created by Chicago's political and business elite that proposed closing down more than a third of all Chicago Public Schools, most of which were in majority African American neighborhoods, and reopening them as private charter schools. These activist educators not only formed coalitions with communities, but also, in 2008, a new group within their teachers union called the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), which began holding regular meetings, study groups, and public forums while also frequently attending school closure hearings (Uetricht, 2014). As a social justice caucus within the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), CORE believed, and still does today, in "a democratic, bottom-up organizing style that engages the entirety of the union's membership; it has also meant wide-spread coalition building with organized communities" (Uetricht, p. 14). Activist educators formed CORE in response to the perceived apathy of their school district and union leadership toward neoliberal education reforms and issues of injustice and inequity in their schools and cities. As activist educators who believe in the power of the labor movement, they decided to push for change from within the union rather than disengaging with it.

Inspired by its organizing with Chicago communities against school closures and angered by the continued apathy of union leadership, CORE decided to run in the 2010 Chicago Teachers Union elections. The caucus won leadership of the union, and in September 2012, the CORE-led CTU and its 26,000 members went on strike for the first time in 25 years. The CTU framed its struggle through the message that "teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions," gaining support from parents and the Chicago community at large. In reflecting on the lessons learned from the strike, Bradbury et al. (2014) argue that the "CTU showed that fighting against contract concessions and fighting for community demands were two sides of the same coin" (p. 185). However, the contract won was far from perfect. As Uetricht (2014) argues, it was an austerity contract that "contained both important wins that were mutually beneficial to teachers and students and some deeply flawed provisions" (p. 78). In addition, following the strike, the Chicago Board of Education closed 50 schools, disproportionately located in the city's African American neighborhoods, and made massive budget cuts to public education (Uetricht, 2014). Nonetheless, the CTU showed educators across the United States militant labor organizing tactics that centered bargaining for the common good, engaged in fights for racial justice, and organized in solidarity with parents, students, and communities. In October 2019, the CTU went on strike again, demanding salary raises and improved benefits; a reduction in class size; a nurse and social worker in every school; additional counselors, restorative justice coordinators, and librarians; an increase in financial and staff support for bilingual and special education classrooms; and support for homeless students. The contract was again far from perfect, and CTU President Jesse Sharkey declared, "Do I feel like we got everything we deserved in schools? No. And I hope our members aren't satisfied, either" (Leone, 2019). Nonetheless, the CTU showed once again what it means to use union militancy to make broad demands that will improve schools not only for educators, but also for students, parents, and communities (Chicago Teachers Union, 2019).

Currently in the United States, there is a growing movement within teachers' unions of social justice caucuses, inspired by CORE, practicing social justice unionism. This type of unionism demands the labor movement look beyond the collective bargaining process, with its

narrow focus on issues of wages and working conditions, and instead partner with parents, students, and progressive social groups and organizations to engage in social justice struggles beyond the workplace. Within teachers unions, caucuses form as a result of a small group of like-minded union members who come together because of dissatisfaction with the actions of union leadership and/or with the existing structures and policies within their unions. As of 2019, there were about twenty-five social justice caucuses across the United States and that number is growing (Friedman, 2018; Stark, 2019). Social justice caucuses have recently become key players in the educational justice movement with CORE and the 2012 CTU strike setting the foundation for the 2018-19 teachers union strike wave in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, Colorado, California, and Virginia. As Scott (2019) reports, educators in these states were not only inspired by the gains made by teacher militancy in Chicago, but also learned directly from educators in Chicago through social media, study groups, and personal communication.

This article focuses on two social justice caucuses: the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (MORE) of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City, and the Caucus of Working Educators (WE) of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT). MORE and WE formed soon after CORE's victory— MORE in the fall of 2012 and WE in March 2014 — and so are some of the longstanding and most experienced social justice caucuses, making them important case studies. Unlike CORE, neither MORE nor WE is in leadership positions in their unions; yet both take on responsibilities that they believe union leadership should be fulfilling in order to strengthen the union. They also work to push the union to do a better job representing its members by taking on more militant policies, contract fights, and campaigns in defense of public education. MORE and WE are member-driven caucuses within traditional business/service-style locals of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in Democratic cities with rich histories of labor uprisings, especially by educators. They organize around traditional "bread and butter" services, such as improved wages and benefits, but also fight for internal union democracy and build power at the school level through collaboration with parents, students, communities, and other social movements fighting for social justice.

Since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, there has been a rise in reported hate crimes across the country due to his inflammatory rhetoric and the fact that his election has acted as a "permission structure to engage in acts of bias" (Edwards & Rushin, 2018, p. 20). At the same time, social justice caucuses are connecting teacher unionism to a broader struggle for economic, social, and racial justice. In these vitriolic political times, this study focuses on how social justice caucus activists relate to fellow educators who express racist views. In our current polarized and increasingly unequal society that blames the victim, elevates the individual, and divides communities, I expected to find some bitter relations between colleagues. However, educator activists in MORE and WE were in solidarity with their fellow educator colleagues. This study finds that MORE and WE embody what Fantasia (1988) calls "cultures of solidarity" in which the association of workers with one another can by itself be a revolutionary act because it changes both their reality and the workers themselves. Educator activists in MORE and WE spoke about building relationships, opening up spaces to talk about race, and engaging in collective struggle. As Fantasia (1988) argues, "These activities of 'struggling,' 'uniting,' and 'constituting' ought to be considered *processes* of class consciousness" (p. 9). Engaging with racial tensions requires a democratic space for members to arrive at new understandings, and MORE and WE engage in practices that fight oppression and help democratize teachers unions by involving rank-and-file members at the school site in the daily organizing, mobilizing, and decision-making processes of the caucuses and their unions. This study finds that in engaging mostly outside of the

caucus with fellow educators who express racist views, MORE and WE members reaffirm the importance of union democracy in the educational justice movement (Weiner, 2014). Social justice caucuses see social inequality, racism, and other hierarchical and oppressive social relationships as impediments to full democratic participation. Therefore, anti-racism is an integral part of social justice caucuses' fights for the democratization of the union. The process of democracy needs people of all races to feel empowered rather than oppressed in making decisions and effecting change (Guinier, 1994).

While the interview question for this study asked about fellow educators with racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, or xenophobic views, participants focused mostly on issues of racism. The interviews for this study were conducted at a moment in time when the Black Lives Matter movement was raising the country's awareness on issues of police brutality and the lack of responses to it. This social movement issue brought on by social protest was too powerful to ignore, and racial justice issues were at the forefront of participants' minds during the interviews.

Social Justice Unionism as Antidote to Dysconscious Racism

Nationally, over half of public school students are now students of color compared to an overwhelmingly White—84 percent—teaching force (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015). In New York City, about 85 percent of the student body is students of color (New York City Department of Education, 2018) and 58 percent of teachers are White (Disare, 2018). In Philadelphia, 86 percent of the student body is students of color (School District of Philadelphia, 2018) and approximately 71 percent of teachers are White (Mezzacappa, 2017). Many educators lack the training needed to understand the racial dynamics that exist in schools and classrooms. Studies of White pre-service and in-service teachers expose the seemingly race-neutral views of these educators (Sleeter, 1993; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Wilson & Kumar, 2017; Young, 2011). Picower (2009) found that pre-service teachers expressed a sense of anxiety in situations with people of color based on stereotypes, had deficit understandings of students and their families, believed White people were the real victims of racism, and kept silent about issues of race. Evans-Winters and Hoff (2011) and Shelton and Barnes (2016) found that pre-service teachers saw racism as a historical issue rather than a contemporary one. King (1997) calls it a "dysconscious racism" among White educators, who take for granted a system of racial privilege and societal stratification that benefit White people.

Dysconscious racism is an issue in schools but also in teachers unions. "From the start of mass public education, teachers unions, like most of organized labor, turned a blind eye to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment," Weiner (2012) argues, "The unions' unwillingness to acknowledge schooling's past and current role in reproducing social inequality and their reluctance to work as partners with activists to take on racism, sexism, militarization, and anti-immigration prejudice have weakened their credibility with groups who should be teacher unionists' strongest allies" (p. 193). Weiner's critique is epitomized in the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville United Federation of Teachers strike in New York City. Some historians explain the 1968 strike in terms of the opposing perceptions of New York City's Black and White communities and the misconceptions, misunderstandings, and missed opportunities these caused communities (Perlstein, 2004; Podair, 2002). Perlstein (2004) argues that "while the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) saw this 'community control' of ghetto schools as a threat to due process, job security, and unbiased, quality education, Black activists saw it as a prerequisite to democratizing school governance, to eliminating racism in education, and to opening school jobs to African Americans" (p. 1). The clashing worldviews intensified racial divisions that continue to exist in U.S. society (Perlstein,

2004; Podair, 2002). Similar clashes between militant teachers and civil rights activists also occurred in 1969 and 1970 in Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Los Angeles with the most violent confrontation erupting in Newark (Murphy, 2010; Shelton, 2017). These strikes encompass many of the contradictions and obstacles to racial justice that have historically plagued the labor movement and endure today.

However, many analysts argue for the liberatory and transformative potential of educators and their professional organizations (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Connell, 2009; Sachs, 2000). This study joins research focusing on educators transforming public education through social justice unionism (Charney, Hagopian, & Peterson, 2021; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Peterson & Charney, 1999; Weiner, 2014). Social justice teachers unions organize around bread-and-butter issues, teaching and learning issues, and social justice in the community and in the curriculum in collaboration with parents, students, and communities (Peterson, 2014/2015), an approach that stands in contrast to more traditional, business/service-style teachers unions that focus narrowly on contract bargaining and serving as grievance agents for individual members. This model of unionism has developed in response to what some have identified as an assault on public education including standardized testing, mayoral control, school closings, school choice, franchised charter schools, philanthrocapitalism, the standardization of curriculum, and attacks on teachers unions that have maintained white supremacy and economic inequality in schools and cities (Picower & Mayorga, 2016).

Social justice caucuses form within business/service-style teachers unions as a counter-narrative or oppositional space and act as a political fraction that attempts to push the union toward social justice unionism. Union leadership is often constrained as it speaks for all members within the union and usually follows the letter of the labor law. Social justice caucuses, on the other hand, bring different and often dissident ideas and strategies into the union and can insist that conversations and imprudent or even illegal actions occur. Social justice caucuses frequently continue to exist if they have won control of the union. Members of caucuses in power have the unique potential to hold union leadership accountable to the original goals and strategies of the caucus that assumed control of the organization. After being elected to the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union, CORE remained active because it "can raise red flags and alarms, have the pulse of the members . . . be a critical conscience to raise concerns when the union is making bad choices" (Bradbury et al., 2014, p. 69). While this study focuses on social justice teacher caucuses, caucuses can form around progressive, mainstream, conservative, or reactionary views. Independent caucuses are different from union-sponsored caucuses, such as a women's caucus that is integrated into the union bylaws and is controlled by union leadership (Association for Union Democracy, 2018). While the union may have integrated caucuses, minority workers have organized independent minority caucuses to fight discrimination; many teachers unions had active Black caucuses fighting against racial discrimination throughout the civil rights movement. While caucuses have always existed within teachers unions, the recent growth of social justice teacher caucuses is a new and undertheorized phenomenon.

Researchers and social justice caucus organizers themselves describe social justice caucus struggles in terms of anti-neoliberalism (Nuñez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015). While fights for social justice are also central to caucus organizing, fewer researchers and caucus activists describe caucus struggles in terms of antiracism, and even fewer in terms of feminism (Brown & Stern, 2018; Maton, 2018; Owens, 2020; Weiner & Asselin, 2020). Nonetheless, fights for racial justice, the use of antiracist framing in organizing, and the recruitment of people of color to social justice

caucuses are key aspects of organizing and mobilizing as a social justice caucus (Asselin, 2019; Dani & Asselin, 2020; Maton, 2016; Schiller & BMORE Caucus, 2019). Social justice caucuses have been successful in calling out apartheid school districts and organizing against racist education policies (Bradbury et al, 2014; Stark, 2019). This study builds on research using an antiracist lens focusing uniquely on how educators in social justice caucuses engage with racist colleagues in their attempts to decrease racism in schools. This study contributes a glance on interpersonal relationships between educators, a microanalysis that is more limited in theoretical research (Weiner, 2014) and research centered on education policies (Bocking, 2017; Brogan, 2016).

Case Selection and Research Design

I chose to work with MORE because it is in New York City, which has the largest public school district in the United States, with more than 1.1 million students, and in the most highly unionized city in the United States at 21.4 percent overall and 66.8 percent in the public sector (Milkman & Luce, 2019). Due to the city's size and influence, New York City's education policies are often emulated across the country, and the UFT—representing about 185,000 members—is one of the city's most powerful unions. MORE's obstacles and successes in trying to transform NYC's education policies and the UFT's organizing style therefore have the potential to influence education and labor nationwide. I chose to work with WE because the caucus organizes in Philadelphia amidst massive neoliberal education "reform" efforts, including state defunding of public schools, market-based solutions in education over the past twenty-plus years, public school closures, and the proliferation of charter schools. Over 35 percent of public school children in Philadelphia attend a charter school, while the national average is at 6 percent (School District of Philadelphia, 2018). WE's obstacles and successes show an alternative way to fight back against the extreme privatization in education that has occurred in cities such as New Orleans and Detroit.

This study began with key educator activists in New York City's Movement of Rank-and-File Educators and Philadelphia's Caucus of Working Educators. In attending the two caucuses' events, I built relationships with caucus members before this study was conceived. The selection of participants was guided by purposeful sampling with maximum variation using the snowball method to identify more participants. I worked with educators across a spectrum of subject areas, teaching experience, and grade levels, most of whom were active within the caucuses while some were not. I conducted audio-recorded interviews with nineteen educators in New York City between April 2017 and July 2017 and six in Philadelphia between October and December 2017. MORE and WE include counselors, nurses, teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, psychologists, librarians, and other staff who work with students every day. This study oversampled teachers who make up the majority of the caucuses.[1]

This study is also informed by my experience over four years as a participant observer in New York City and one year in Philadelphia. These observations involved attending and participating in approximately 125 hours of meetings, conventions, trainings, and rallies. I also collected many documents during this time at meetings and events, including: newspaper accounts

[1] Throughout this paper, I use the term "educators" rather than "teachers," especially when referring to social justice caucus members. A teacher is someone who is qualified to teach through having a certification and treats teaching like a job. An educator is someone for whom teaching is a passion and a deep personal commitment and who builds relationships with students and attempts to improve their learning conditions. There are many educators working with children in schools who do not have a teaching certification. In some cases, I use the term "teacher" if it is used in a citation or when referring to the job of the teacher in its technical signification.

about the caucuses or written by caucus members; caucus and union websites and social media; and caucus and union distributed documents.

The research design for this study focuses on MORE and WE and uses scholarly articles and books written by and about the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) as context for social justice unionism. The largest section of this study comes from participant observation and interviews with MORE members. Once I began attending monthly WE meetings and conducting interviews, I found more similarities than differences between the two caucuses. For example, educators in both caucuses mentioned actions in support of the Black Lives Matter movement as fracture points within their caucuses. The research with WE built on and expanded the research with MORE. Therefore, the interviews and participant observation with MORE were theory generating, the interviews and participant observation with WE produced similar themes, and the literature on CORE confirmed my analysis.

Analysis Using Constructivist Grounded Theory and Educator Feedback

I analyzed my data on a continual basis through constructivist grounded theory, which recognizes that theory is co-constructed in an active engagement between the researcher and participants throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2010). In writing up the findings, I relied extensively on the voices of educators, highlighting the knowledge of activists as being as valuable as that of academic scholars (Maddison & Scalmer, 2006). I name the educators without referring to the caucus that they belong to in order to focus the reader's attention on issues that can be generalized beyond the specific caucuses rather than on the individuals within each caucus. I also use research about the work of the Chicago Teachers Union to show that the issues facing MORE and WE are also found in CORE, which is often used as a model for other social justice caucuses. To be more specific, while both MORE and WE struggle with a few caucus members who demonstrate racist tendencies, racism is a problem inherent in our society that reaches far beyond individual members of the caucuses. While identifying organizers' caucus affiliation may identify variation both within and across caucuses, the aim of this study is to more broadly highlight the shared experiences of activist educators in social justice caucuses rather than offer an internal comparison and critique of MORE and/or WE.

Valuing educators' feedback about my analysis, I shared the findings of this study with four participants from MORE and two from WE. Inspired by Dodson and Schmalzbauer's (2010) interpretive focus groups, I asked individual educator caucus activists, "Am I portraying what is really going on, are there things I have not fully represented or are missing, and does anything need further clarification?" I incorporated the insights and feedback that I received from caucus members into the findings in order to better reflect the views and experiences of the educators. Their feedback also informed my overall analysis and conclusions.

Findings

This article argues that when engaging with fellow educators who have racist views, social justice caucus activists participate in practices that increase rank-and-file participation in the union and in the workplace, furthering union democratization. In referring to the democratization of the union, I rely on the democratic ideals that MORE and WE seek in organizing as social justice caucuses. In its mission statement, MORE (2018) states, "We insist on a strong, democratic union emerging from an educated and active rank and file." In its platform, WE (2018) asserts, "WE believe in democracy. We believe that we, the members, are the union.

Our active participation is what makes our union strong." For MORE and WE, union democracy involves active rank-and-file participation in the activities of the union.

In the following sections, I will present the different practices: Building relationships fights isolation and opens spaces for engaging in difficult conversations about racism. These practices provide a basis for raising consciousness which is strengthened and mutually reinforced through the experience of collective action. Building relationships, having difficult conversations, and engaging in collective protest actions help democratize teachers unions while building cultures of solidarity and fighting dysconscious racism in schools.

Building Relationships

In schools, educators are often isolated in their classrooms and divided by grade or subject. In addition, teachers' feelings of limited control over their work, intensified work demands, and scarcity of time and resources imposed on schools by reformers "of all political persuasions" have led teachers to more individualistic tendencies (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 151) and "to leave justice and equality behind. Instead they find themselves having to focus on test scores, pacing guides, and scripted instruction" (Au, 2009, p. 4). Claire, a White middle school Special Education educator, reflects, "Only when we feel like things are scarce do we not take the time to have hard conversations and teach people or help them grow as teachers. . . . Only when we feel like we don't have enough time do we give up on folks." Claire highlights how intensified work demands aggravate social interactions in schools and prevent spaces that help educators learn and grow.

However, educators in social justice caucuses push against the narratives of individualism and blame and fight fragmentation in schools. "When teachers do not live up to our expectations, we need to ask: What are the conditions of this teacher? Did they get the support they needed?" explains Janelle, a White high school English educator, "I mean everything is a process. Nobody is born knowing everything. I've worked through a lot of my own biases and racist tendencies, and I'm constantly reflecting and learning." Janelle first questions teaching conditions, including overcrowded and under resourced schools, abusive administrators, and lack of control over curriculum and scheduling, before vilifying her colleagues and also suggests support and opportunities for growth rather than dismissal. She acknowledges the value of time for reflection and learning, time that Claire earlier mentioned was currently scarce in schools. Social justice caucuses purposefully create spaces for learning and reflection so that all members can, like Janelle, work through their "own biases and racist tendencies." As a member of the caucus herself, Maton (2016) led nine WE members in an inquiry group focused on structural racism and racial justice, which led the caucus to shift its organizing frame from one mostly centered around neoliberalism to one that highlighted structural racism throughout its organizing and mobilizing (Maton, 2018). In addition to inquiry groups, social justice caucuses also provide reading groups (Riley, 2015, 2021) and conferences and workshops as spaces to reflect and learn about structural racism and racial justice. In 2017, WE members led a workshop called *After Charlottesville: Confronting White Supremacy in Ourselves, Our Schools, and Our City*, which as stated on its informational flyer, included "a historical overview of white supremacy in the United States and Philadelphia, breakout groups, sharing of resources, and planning for next steps." At its 2017 annual convention, MORE members led a workshop on organizing to reverse the disappearance of Black and Latinx educators from NYC public schools, sharing the statistics and creating a space for White educators to reflect on the structural and relational racism causing Black and Latinx educators to leave public schools.

In addition, while unions and caucuses may focus on larger, unifying issues to win elections or maintain leadership in divisive times, social justice caucus activists in MORE and WE do the laborious work of building relationships with union members they disagree with. Rod, a high school Special Education educator of color, believes, "We can't underestimate just basic down home relationship building. . . . We've got to make an effort to build community amongst our members, really make an active effort for people to have the opportunity to get to know one another, bring people together and hash out some of these differences." For Rod, relationships are key to engaging colleagues with racist views. Karen, a high school English educator of color, agrees, "If we're not connected in any way, there's no reason that anyone is going to trust me. . . . I think I'm being a realist in saying people don't just move because you want them to move. People move because of relationships."

In taking the time to build these relationships, social justice caucus activists are fostering a more democratic union that has an active rank-and-file presence in the union and in the workplace. Edna, a White high school History educator, explains, "A lot comes from one-on-ones or buddy-type organizing work. You have someone you trust, you can check in with, who's explaining things to you, who is investing in you; . . . you need to trust people, which is democracy." Both MORE and WE have invited organizers from Labor Notes, a media and organizing project that supports labor movements built from the bottom up, to come train caucus members through their Secrets of a Successful Organizer workshop on how to have successful one-on-one conversations and build community when organizing. Both caucuses then practiced these conversations and other relationship building skills during their monthly meetings. Educator caucus activists challenge traditional, fragmented school cultures by building relationships with all of their colleagues, even those with racist views. In all of the interviews, members of MORE and WE chose to get to know their coworkers rather than vilifying them.

Social justice caucuses embody Fantasia's (1988) cultures of solidarity that emerge as "oppositional practices and meanings" (p. 17) and "ground consciousness in life activity, in social being" (p. 9). The organizing and mobilizing of activist educators in MORE and WE is by itself a revolutionary act because it changes both their reality and the educators themselves. The practice of building relationships is necessary to creating cultures of solidarity even when challenges arise.

Difficult Conversations

Building upon interpersonal rapport and relationships, educators in social justice caucuses then engage in the difficult conversations and debates that most unions shy away from. Educators in MORE and WE want spaces to educate and dialogue with fellow educators who express racist views. Ciara, an elementary Special Education educator of color, affirms: "It's about coming to it with humility and saying, 'My god, there's work to be done within our group or our communities' and that means holding spaces, workshops . . . help form common understandings because if you create polarized sides, that's all you're going to create." Ciara highlights the importance of open, honest conversations to build common understandings around controversial issues. MORE and WE members take the time to have difficult conversations about race because questions of race, racism, and anti-racism are omnipresent in schools. Rod describes a situation in which a White union member did not agree with him in a conversation about rezoning to integrate schools. Rod explains:

> First off, I didn't take offense to that perspective. I wouldn't have felt uncomfortable engaging in a more extensive or serious discussion with her. . . . This is a commitment that we should make. We need to be encouraged to have those conversations amongst ourselves. . . . I do think that the union should be actively and proactively having discussions, encouraging our chapters to have discussions around these issues and have our members actively thinking and grappling about these issues, explicit political education, which is not happening right now. . . . That would be the first step in terms of engaging people that have some very problematic views.

Rod wants a union that provides more political education about racial justice issues. He educates others through his social justice caucus in an attempt to fill some of these gaps. Rod provided another example of having conversations with elementary school teachers who wanted to be able to suspend elementary school students. In response Rod argued, "What are the demographics of your teachers? What are the demographics of the students? Look at the research. You see the Black and Brown kids always getting suspended. See the poor kids always getting suspended. See special ed kids are always getting suspended." While he may not have immediately changed his colleagues' minds about suspensions, Rod believes it is important to share the facts about school suspensions.

Rod, like many MORE and WE members, believes conversations about tough racial issues are necessary to change the consciousness of his fellow educators. "I focus a lot of time on building up levels of consciousness or understanding when it comes to [issues of racism]," Malcolm, a high school African American history educator of color, added, "Whether that be through professional development or through dialogues with other caucus members who are creating opportunities for caucus members to go outside their own comfort zone and their own bubbles." Social justice caucuses create spaces for political education and the building of consciousness. Both MORE and WE have invited to their yearly conferences speakers focusing on racial justice issues within schools and labor unions. At the 2015 MORE annual convention, authors from the edited volume *What's Race Got To Do With It?: How Current School Reform Policy Maintains Racial Inequality* (Picower & Mayorga, 2015) shared their findings with workshop participants. At the 2015 WE annual convention, the keynote talk was titled "Race, Class, and the Future of Our Union."

This study was conducted during the election of President Trump in 2016 and so many of the examples that caucus members gave of engaging with racist colleagues were focused on the racism and xenophobia of many Trump supporters. Claire explained, "I am figuring out a way to be in solidarity with folks who are making mistakes like that. Like to be able to say, 'Hey colleague! It's really messed up that you voted for Trump and here's how it makes me feel. Can we talk about why you did that?'" Claire believes in finding ways to have difficult conversations with fellow union members. Steve, a White high school History educator, added, "I don't trust the politics of anyone who is a Trump supporter . . . But I talk to them. At my school, I wouldn't let them just get fired if I could do something about it. As chapter leader, my responsibility is to represent the members and to make sure that they get their rights respected." This was echoed in most of the interviews with social justice caucus members who understand that a union represents all of the teaching staff in a school no matter their politics, and so it is important and necessary to have conversations with all members. For caucus members who play union leadership roles at their schools, they all mentioned fairly representing their colleagues as union members rather than dismissing their grievances or cases based on their differing ideologies and/or racist views.

Caucus members believe that undoing racism is a lifelong journey and understand that even the most racially aware caucus members still need spaces for reflection and growth. "Yes, I think that there's implicit racial bias within members of our group," Ciara stated. Referring to standardized testing, policing in schools, and tracking, among other policies, she added, "We work in institutions that perpetuate these policies, so I can say I'm anti-racist, I support Black Lives Matter, but then we go back to work and we are happy to be compliant to so many policies and practices that are racist." MORE and WE are representative of the overwhelmingly White teaching force and struggle to recruit and retain members of color. A member surprised others in one of the caucuses by undermining the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools. In the other caucus, a member spoke against restorative justice and the counselors not cops campaign. Both members were given the space to share their thoughts followed by a larger group discussion with other caucus members. Social justice caucus are imperfect spaces continuously working through racial tensions engrained so deeply in the fabric of the United States.

Nonetheless, educators in MORE and WE are committed to having difficult conversations and committing time and resources to raising consciousness because they believe that consciousness can change. "I think that racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia are all learned," Claire affirms, "and they can be unlearned although that's hard and it takes a lot of work." Educators in social justice caucuses commit the time and hard work to build solidarity, collectivity, and inclusivity into their caucuses, unions, schools, and beyond. As Ciara adds, "I think that if we approach people, other human beings, from the space that they can't change and they're not human beings, teachers too, then what are we doing? As a society, we're not going to transform." Educators in MORE and WE understand that it is through acts of solidarity that consciousness changes, that rank-and-file participation in schools and unions is built, and that trust and increased involvement in the decision-making processes of the caucus and union grows.

The practice of building relationships is necessary to creating cultures of solidarity. Strong relationships then allow for difficult conversations in productive rather than divisive ways and increase engagement and participation in schools and unions fighting against isolation and fragmentation.

Collective Protest Action

While essential, relationship building and difficult conversations are not sufficient. Reflecting on social movement theory Anyon (2014) states, "Raising people's consciousness about their oppression through reflection and talk (as in critical pedagogy classes) is not enough: Physical and emotional *support for actual participation in public contention is required*" (p. 11). Building cultures of solidarity in divisive times means building relationships and having difficult conversations that lay the groundwork for higher stakes, oppositional collective actions. Educators in social justice caucuses engage themselves, their colleagues, and allies in collective struggle. Karen explains, "We have to have the hard conversations. . . . [In addition] if you have fought alongside somebody and you have common victories together, then when somebody does say something [racist] there's already an in; . . . you have a bond." Karen described talking to other teachers, ones who are married to members of the police, about the Black Lives Matter movement after successfully organizing a union together at her previous charter school. Coworkers who may not agree politically are able to overcome the fault lines between them when fighting for something they both want. The collective action creates a stronger bond between coworkers and an opening for more fruitful political discussions now that a relationship has been created. Derek, a White

middle school English educator, confirms, "I'm not going to exclude [Trump voting educators] from organizing because they have shitty ideas. In fact, the only way their ideas are ever going to change is if they are engaged in working with people and being involved in struggle with people who are different from them." Derek then explained how some of his Trump voting colleagues signed his petition in favor of a Know Your Rights training for immigrant students and parents at their majority Muslim school after Derek led his coworkers into collectively fighting a grievance against their principal. Howard, a White high school educator of African American and World History, had a similar experience engaging with racist colleagues:

> When my school was facing turnaround[2], we organized to stop that and . . . a lot of our core organizing committee in the building was just out and out Trumpville. This guy really believed that race was real, essential and nonetheless was all about supporting his coworkers of all different colors to stop the turnaround of our school . . . I think it's about . . . focusing on issues of agreement first.

Howard was able to engage his colleague in a productive discussion about the relationship between school closures and structural racism after fighting against the charterization of his school.

For educators in MORE and WE, collective action involves small victories in local schools and city-wide wins. After multiple years of organizing through one-on-one conversations, petition campaigns, and holding events for the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools without union support, MORE's resolution for the United Federation of Teachers in New York City to support the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools finally passed in the fall of 2020. The resolution had previously failed to pass because UFT leadership declared it a "divisive" issue for fear of alienating educators and members of the public who support and/or are related to police officers. UFT members had previously overwhelmingly voted against the week of action. In April 2019, in Philadelphia, WE, standing with its allies, organized, testified in support of, and delivered a petition to the Philadelphia City Council signed by more than 3,000 people including 2,500 PFT members demanding an end to the ten-year tax abatement and toxic conditions in city public schools and for fair funding of schools, libraries, and housing. WE members testifying linked the abatement to racial justice, arguing that the wealthy developers benefiting were overwhelmingly White, while the city's public schools serve a majority of students of color. One WE organizer argued, "[My students] see that when White people want fancy condos, we find the money. . . But when it comes to our children, especially our Black and Brown children, with leaks in their classroom and lead in their paint and broken toilets and unsafe doors, we can never find the money" (Windle, 2019). In July 2019, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf announced the state would spend over seven million dollars to remove lead paint, mold, and asbestos from Philadelphia's public schools (Graham, 2019).

Collective action raises consciousness and increases rank-and-file participation. Edna believes "you can trust someone that is right there in a walkout with you, holding a sign next to you." And Lisa, a White occupational therapist serving elementary and middle school students, who was working in Chicago during the 2012 teachers strike, reports:

> I just remember this feeling in Chicago during the strike and after; there was this real palpable sense of just how pervasive racism is in society. It was crazy to me because racism is so normal in regular life, like you don't really notice it. In

[2] A designation assigned to schools underperforming on standardized tests that leads to a dramatic intervention, including but not limited to school closure or transition to becoming a charter school.

> Chicago, as a result of that strike, it felt so visible. It was so easy to identify. It was crazy. I was like wow, that's consciousness.

While MORE and WE are not in leadership of their unions, they organize actions to create solidarity and common understanding through struggle. Collective action creates bonds between members while also making highly visible to all the racism pervasive in schools and society. It gives members a voice and increases rank-and-file participation and decision-making in actions that improve working conditions and learning conditions.

Discussion

Caucus activists foster relationships that lay the groundwork for cultures of solidarity. Building upon interpersonal rapport and relationships, educators in social justice caucuses then have difficult conversations and debates with the potential for communal consciousness raising that further strengthens their cultures of solidarity. MORE and WE activists take on Freire's (1990) call for "conscientização," or "consciousness raising," which is "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 19). Freire argues that dialogue is a key aspect of liberation by helping develop equal relationships between people so that there is a constant sharing of fellowship and solidarity through inquiry, critical thinking, and the unveiling of reality. He explains that "solidarity requires true communication" (p. 63) and that "a true revolution must initiate a courageous dialogue with the people" (p. 122). Confronting racism is a critical first step in raising consciousness among educators, thus building the necessary power to transform their unions and schools. In addition, by highlighting racial justice in their organizing work, social justice caucuses are redefining Fantasia's (1988) cultures of solidarity. In centering racial justice, these educators are ensuring that cultures of solidarity do not resemble those of the controversial 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville United Federation of Teachers strike and instead work to link the racial justice struggles of educators and the communities in which they teach.

However, caucus organizing is imperfect. This study attempted to show social justice caucuses as a potential way to organize and mobilize educators to challenge the many injustices engrained in public schools and in society in the United States. Nonetheless, MORE and WE are works in progress with activist educators learning while organizing. Racism permeates every aspect of US society and social justice caucuses are not immune. MORE and WE have experienced racism within their caucuses which has led to internal reflections, reassessments, political education, and reorganizations within both social justice caucuses. Relatedly, both caucuses struggle to attract and retain educators of color and forming meaningful relationships with communities of color (Maton, 2016; Brogan, 2016). Nevertheless, caucuses are providing an experimental space for educators to build cultures of solidarity committed to racial justice.

While relationships build trust and difficult conversations build consciousness, collective protest activities amplify and solidify those trust and consciousness building practices. Educator activists believe political identities change through protest activity, confirming McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's (2001) analysis of fifteen cases of contentious action in institutional politics, which shows that collective action shifts the identity of actors and redefines relationships. Contention leads to the formation of new political actors. In addition, Maddison and Scalmer (2006) argue that "acting in public together reinforces the attachment a person has to a movement. . . . The point of protest, in other words, is not just instrumental; it can be the glue that binds activists together to make a movement" (p. 80). Building relationships, having difficult conversations, and engaging

in collective protest activity mutually reinforce one another in order to help democratize teachers unions by involving rank-and-file members at school sites in the decision-making processes of the unions. Weiner (2014) argues that while social justice caucuses mobilize members, collaborate with parents, and broaden contract demands to improve working and learning conditions, union democracy and a focus on rank-and-file participation in decision-making are often left out of union reform efforts.

In referring to the democratization of the union, I rely on the democratic ideals that MORE and WE seek in organizing as social justice caucuses. For MORE and WE, union democracy involves collective, rank-and-file participation in the decision-making and activities of the union, leadership accountability to members, and transparency. However, the two caucuses' definitions of democracy are dynamic and adaptable as they organize for justice for workers and for communities in schools in particular and in society as a whole.

When asked a question about how to relate to educators who express racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, or xenophobic views, social justice educators in MORE and WE noted the importance of practices that deepen union presence at the workplace and increase participation in the union. MORE's and WE's relationship building, difficult conversations, and protest activities respond to Weiner's (2014) call for "union democracy as well as social justice commitments. . . . Deep, thorough union democracy depends on the union having a presence in the workplace where members understand that *they* are the union." Social justice caucuses act like the union they hope to create by mobilizing rank-and-file members through relationships, conversations, and protest activities that shift the struggle from an individual to a collective one, fighting against educator isolation and workplace fragmentation. Fletcher and Gapasin (2008) confirm that union democracy includes putting structures in place for internal debate and referenda, dialogue, and genuine membership education that develops leaders and encourages differences in opinions. While union leadership is often constrained as it speaks for all members within the union and usually follows the letter of the labor law, caucuses can insist that conversations and imprudent or even illegal actions occur. Social justice caucuses, like MORE and WE, create alternative spaces for debate and political education within the union.

In addition, Weiner (2014) argues that "when unions are not democratic, even if they fight for social justice, they perpetuate hierarchical relations that disempower working people, allowing bigotry and oppression to remain embedded in social relations." Many of the social justice caucus activists in MORE and WE are committed to addressing issues of inequality and power and believe that union democracy, if it is to be realized, is incompatible with inequality, racism, and oppressive social relationships. Ciara confirms this analysis: "And as far as union democracy, I think that coming to that space with a social justice lens is how you create democracy within a union." Since social inequality is seen as an impediment to democratic participation, the fight against racism is an integral part of social justice caucuses' fights for the democratization of the union. Many of these struggles are outside the realm of collective bargaining and yet remain central to caucus organizing and mobilizing. The example of confronting racism as a necessary part of the democratization of the union is an important lesson learned from the experiences of both MORE and WE. Democracy does not automatically lead to an end to oppression unless both are fought for simultaneously (Guinier, 1994). Social justice caucuses fight oppression through practices that democratize their union, and at the same time, the focus on racial justice drives the need for greater union democracy.

Conclusion

This study of MORE and WE joins the many labor activists, scholars, and educators who believe labor unions will not survive unless they become social movements that build broad coalitions and embrace the wider fight for social, economic, and racial justice beyond the workplace (Weiner, 2012; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Peterson, 2014/2015). While adding to the literature on fights for racial justice by social justice caucuses (Bradbury et al, 2014; Maton, 2016; Schiller & BMORE Caucus, 2019; Stark, 2019), this study uniquely focuses on how caucus members relate to colleagues with racist tendencies on an interpersonal level. It provides concrete examples to Weiner's (2014) theoretical work highlighting the importance of union democracy in the educational justice movement and to the theory that "antiracist practices are those that champion consistent democracy" (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008, p. 182). Engaging with racial tensions requires a democratic space for members to fight dysconscious racism and create cultures of solidarity. In addition, this study not only brings a racial justice lens to the study of social justice caucuses but also a labor studies lens to the study of anti-racism in the field of education. Educational scholarship rarely focuses on teaching as a labor process and most of the critical research about the intersection of teacher unionism and race occurs in historical rather than educational studies (Weiner & Asselin, 2020). This article places the study of teachers unions and anti-racism within the field of education by highlighting the role of educators in social justice caucuses in altering interpersonal relationships in schools. When engaging with fellow educators who have racist views, social justice caucus activists participate in practices that deepen union presence at the workplace and increase participation in the union by involving rank-and-file members at the school site in the daily organizing, mobilizing, and decision-making processes of the caucuses and their unions. Revitalizing the labor movement demands the laborious daily work of building ongoing relationships with union and community members of all points of view; forming spaces for communal consciousness raising; engaging in collective protest activity to create stronger bonds and change political identities; and foregrounding fights for racial justice in organizing, mobilizing, and contract demands.

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ISSN 1920-4175