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The Education and Labor Collaborative: Organizing a Coalition for Authentic School Reform

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Introduction

Imagine how much easier and effective the work of unionists would be if a generation of children graduated from US schools understanding their right and duty to be heard, the power of joining together in common cause, and the knowledge, political savvy, and skill to speak on their own behalf. And imagine how much easier the work of teachers would be if, through unionization, the lives of working families improved and the resources they need to support their children's education were more widely available.

In the Fall 2006 [Working Class Notes](#), Patrick Finn and Mary Finn painted such a scenario and asked readers to consider the possibilities for a truly radical education movement that would be built by a coalition of educators, community organizers, unionists, and teacher unionists rather than the autocratic, top-down "reform" movement of the dominant *education as business* model. Rather than educational goals meeting the needs of the Business Round Table, we could press for educational goals benefiting our students and communities.

A group of teacher educators (Rob Linné, Andi Sosin, and Leigh Benin) were working on developing a rationale and exemplars for teaching the labor movement as a doorway to more effective critical pedagogy and activism. Seeking compatible contributions for [Organizing the Curriculum: Perspectives on Teaching the US Labor Movement](#), they answered the Finn's call for action. [The Education & Labor Collaborative](#) (ELC) is the result of their combined efforts. This article briefly describes what impelled the authors to act on their concerns and what those actions have entailed to date, in the hope that other

educators, teacher educators, unionists and teacher union activists will see the importance of linking our respective fields and will be moved to join our efforts.

Literacy with an Attitude

The Finns' inquiry began shortly after the 1999 publication of the first edition of Patrick's book [*Literacy With an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in their Own Self-Interest*](#), when it became clear that the Freirean "organizing approach to teaching" he saw as necessary to educate working-class students in their self-interest, was not likely to become standard classroom fare unless there was a popular demand for it. Who better to create such demand than the working-class students' union member parents who knew the benefits of organizing through personal experience? And who better to support such parents than the labor unions to which they belonged?

With an endorsement of the Laborer's International Union of North America (LIUNA), and funding from the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, Patrick developed the outlines of a teacher education program that could prepare teachers to provide such an education. The major components of the program are:

- a) undergraduate liberal arts courses taught from a working-class perspective (such as history of the labor movement, working-class literature, the sociology of poverty, etc.),
- b) teacher preparation in social constructionist and Freirean pedagogy, and curriculum that informs students about work, their job rights, and the benefits of collective action,
- c) internships with labor and community organizing groups.

The ideal institution of higher education to house such a teacher preparation cohort would have a labor studies department as well as a department of teacher education¹.

Conversations with education and labor faculty at UCLA expanded the Finns' exposure to both progressive pedagogy and progressive labor organizing. Especially helpful was an introduction to the "popular education" aspects of progressive labor organizing². The fact that popular education is so well aligned with the Freirean pedagogy advocated in LWA strongly reinforced the Finns' view that progressive teacher educators could benefit from collaboration with progressive labor educators. (Schurman in Finn & Finn, 2007).

The potential role of teachers unions in creating a bridge between education and labor was clarified for the Finns through the work of the [*Labor in the Schools Committee of the California Federation of Teachers*](#) (CFT), especially the [*Collective Bargaining Education Project*](#) developed by Los Angeles Unified Schools teacher Linda Tubach (Tubach in Finn & Finn, 2007). The search for cooperation between education and labor also introduced the Finns to the newly elected progressive leadership of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which provided major support for the 2nd Annual Education and Labor Collaborative Forum described below. Which brings us to the Finns' colleagues who answered their call in *Working Class Notes*.

Organizing the Curriculum

As teacher educators, Rob Linné, Leigh Benin, and Andi Sosin, were motivated to begin an inquiry into labor education in the schools by a lack of knowledge among their teacher candidates. It seems many younger teachers and teacher candidates expect fair wages and a professional working environment, but are unaware that before teachers won collective bargaining rights in the 1960s and 1970s, teaching was a much less secure and remunerative career and the work environment was often far from professional. These beginning teachers have been educated in a corporate-dominated curriculum, and are too often ignorant of the history of their own profession and unappreciative of the labor movement's influence in securing the professionalism of their positions (a professionalism that is rapidly eroding under current reform movements). The danger inherent in this ignorance is that teachers could continue to lose protections and autonomy it took decades of serious struggle to win. The only way to avoid this lesson the hard way is, ironically, through labor education. This labor education should begin in public school and extend through teacher preparation.

Yet schools of education today devote little time, if any, to explicating power relations in education, or providing information to new teachers about the reasons for teacher unionism. Historian Howard Zinn (1999), argues, "If teacher unions want to be strong and well-supported, it's essential that they not only be teacher-unionists but teachers of unionism. We need to create a generation of students who support teachers and the movement of teachers for their rights." Teachers who appreciate the historical role of the labor movement are more likely to be successful in fostering critical awareness of our corporate dominated political system, our corporate dominated media culture, and our increasingly corporate dominated schooling system.

Over the past few decades, critical pedagogy has made some inroads in our schools, but remains rather marginalized. Progressive educators must be aware by now that 1) we are losing the reform battles on our own; and therefore, 2) only an organized coalition that includes the power of teacher unions and the labor movement can be effective force for change. The Education & Labor Collaborative seeks to build necessary alliances. Early in the process some unionists recognized the importance of such a collaboration and have committed time and resources. Joel Sosinsky of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters joined the steering committee of the ELC and Mike Mulgrew of the United Federation of Teachers joined the advisory board and helped facilitate the first ELC Forum.

As the circle of the collaborative has grown, unions, teacher unions, universities, and university faculty unions have joined in to support the efforts of the collaborative. ELC members have reached out to their institutions in both academe and organized labor for funding and in-kind donations that have so far been sufficient to defray expenses. Voluntary time and networking with teacher union leadership have resulted in the location of the first Education & Labor Collaborative Forum of 2008 at the United Federation of Teachers in New York, and at the United Teachers of Los Angeles for the

second Forum in 2009. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 237 in New York City contributed their union hall for the Centennial Commemoration of the Uprising of the 20,000 on November 22, 2009.

Rationale for Education and Labor Collaboration

Both education and labor suffer from the failure of schools to educate working-class students in their collective self-interest. This failure is grounded in a lack of:

- Respect for the working classes,
- Knowledge about the role of organized labor in a democracy,
- Understanding about the social, political, and economic structure of society and its role in education,
- Information about the benefits of collective action.

The challenges associated with this failure, and actions and strategies with potential to address it, were the topic of the day-long planning meeting at Adelphi University's Manhattan campus in October, 2007 that resulted in the establishment of the Education and Labor Collaborative (ELC).

The first step taken by the ELC was the 1st Annual Education and Labor Collaborative Forum co-sponsored by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and held in their Manhattan headquarters March 28-29, 2008.

Timed to coincide with the 2008 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, the 1st ELC Forum's panelists and workshop presenters included teacher educators from eleven universities and union leaders and educators from eleven labor organizations in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. The following themes emerged from addresses and audience interaction during the two plenary panels and in the concurrent workshops:

1. Effective public education and vigorous labor unions are the twin pillars of democracy in a capitalist society. Recently, both pillars have been greatly weakened by the free-market approach to education and the economy. Educators in the academy (kindergarten through graduate school) and educators in the union movement (both in departments of labor studies and in union hall and shop floor classes) can strengthen the resurgence of democracy through collaboration.
2. To educate K-16 students in their collective self-interest, teacher preparation programs must help teachers understand the social class structure in the U.S. and their own place and that of their students in it. If teachers become aware of their own class positions, they will identify, sympathize, and teach their students to value and defend labor. Organized labor must demand and collaborate in such social justice preparation of all teachers.

3. Union educators have a tendency to consider the nuts and bolts of organizing and steward training as their primary objectives. They often ignore or reject economic structural analysis because they believe it is too abstract for their audience, and it makes them susceptible to red-baiting. Forum panelists insisted this does not work. What works is relating students' biographies (what's my economic class?) to structural analysis of class (how does the economy work?), that is, connecting the personal to the structural.
4. Union members often identify more with their community than with their union. Organized labor has begun to collaborate with community organizers who seek similar social and economic policy reforms. Education reformers, who have long desired closer relationships between local schools and communities, are now also turning to community organizing to create the powerful movements necessary to demand equitable education policies.

The 2nd Annual ELC Forum, co-sponsored by the United Teachers of Los Angeles and held in their headquarters April 24-25, 2009, moved the dialogue to action planning. A Friday evening showing of labor films was followed Saturday by presentations and workshops on the theme of Teachers, Parents and Workers Organizing for a New "New Deal." Seventy participants brainstormed four action plans and designated members volunteered to take the lead for each.

1. Promote a National ELC Forum sponsored by the AFT: In 2008 the AFT endorsed the California Federation of Teachers and New York State United Teacher resolution calling for a National Education and Labor Collaborative Forum. This team will follow the progress of the planning for what should be a 2010 event at the AFL-CIO National Labor College.
2. Establish an ELC Communication Network: Many expressed the desire to continue the dialogue and this team has taken responsibility for designing a means for doing so electronically.
3. Union Orientation: Encourage teachers unions to negotiate a clause in their contracts for funds to provide new teacher orientation, as well as professional development education, about unions for teachers who do not know what it means to be a member of an "organizing union," as United Teachers of Los Angeles designates their organization.
4. Promote the Importance of Labor Curriculum: This team's goal is to expand teachers' and teacher educators' knowledge and use of labor inclusive curricula such as the "Collective Bargaining Education Project," as well as other materials and methods that are widely available.

Directions

The Education & Labor Collaborative is working on refining these goals and building a base of support through online networking as well as face-to-face meetings and symposia. For example, currently we are focusing on the upcoming 100th Anniversary of

the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in the Spring of 2011 as a way to gather support for the idea of labor education as a requisite component of progressive and critical education. The ELC's steering committee has partnered with the [*Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition*](#), (RTFC) to facilitate a range of events commemorating the Centennial, including artistic performances, symposia, teach-ins, curriculum development, as well as a permanent memorial to the victims. The RTFC campaign is catching the attention of a growing number of labor and political leaders, and as the Centennial approaches we hope to recruit sponsors in memory of each of the 146 fire victims.

The centennial commemoration of the Triangle Fire as an important moment in history has the potential to be a culturally significant event that could bring labor consciousness back to the forefront of American discourse and help generate new interest in the labor movement. Therefore, we are working to coordinate involvement by labor unions and politicians in seeking to have the March 25th week designated by New York City, New York State and the federal government as an annual *Triangle Fire Remembrance Week* in which curriculum in all grades and subject areas will focus on the importance of the Triangle fire and its outcomes.

The coming years represent important times in the battle for our schools and our democracy. We believe these difficult times also hold opportunities for education as more and more citizens are turning a critical eye to our political and economic systems. We can either cede the debate to Fox News and let corporate media educate our youth, or we can work together to advance a more appropriate education for all young people. Please join us.

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¹ An earlier account of intersections between education and labor can be found in *Worker Education*, T. Brameld (Ed.), 1940.

² Alinsky calls community organizing “popular education” in his first book.