The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and their Unions
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The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and their Unions
Stories for Resistance

Mary Compton and Lois Weiner, Editors
Lois and Mary dedicate this book to teachers all over the world who are defending public education, and, with it, human emancipation and hope.
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2.3 From James Tooley, “Welcome to easyLearn, Class 1,” The Times (London), April 17, 2006.

2.4 From a paper by Raymond Majongwe of the Progressive Teachers’ Union of Zimbabwe, prepared for the British Zimbabwe Society Open Forum in 2006.

2.5 Extract from a UK business, School Select, offering to help those parents who can afford a large sum of money to bypass schools’ admissions regulations and get their child into the school of their choice. “School Select—Professional Fees,” http://www.schoolselect.co.uk/fees.html (accessed August 12, 2007).
3.1 Burkina Faso, in West Africa, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Primary school enrollment was at 36 percent in 2004. Parents have to pay school fees. It is at present receiving the attentions of an army of consultants as part of the Structural Adjustment Plan from the IMF. Excerpt from a study issued by Education International, “Effects of Structural Adjustment Policies in Burkina Faso.”


7.1 At the end of 2006, 144 teacher union leaders in Pakistan were sacked and the unions banned. A subsequent protest meeting called a general strike to oppose the ban and privatization of schools. From the report “Trade Union Rights Campaign Pakistan (TURCP) in Sindh rejects ban on teachers’ organisations,” turc-p, http://www.turcp.org/articles/2006/10/23sindh.html (accessed August 12, 2007).


8.1 In a speech at J. E. B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, January 26, 2005, President George Bush outlines a proposal to extend educational testing and accountability requirements to public high schools across the nation. “President Discusses No Child Left Behind and High School Initiatives,” http://www.whitehouse.gov/news (accessed July 7, 2007).


27.1 Teachers’ actions in defense of public education from January to June 2007, compiled by Philip Hayes (North America) and Mary Compton.
Acknowledgments

The depth and breadth of this volume has been made possible by the labor of our contributors, and we thank them.

From Lois: I thank my husband and comrade, Michael Seitz, for his moral and political support and ready ear and my daughter, Petra, for reminding me that students can provide us with compelling insights about schools. My participation in the AFT local in Hayward, California, especially work with Lew Hedgecock, its president for many years, demonstrated the progressive possibilities of teacher unionism. Many years spent active in the New York City local of the AFT and more recently in the higher education local of AFT at New Jersey City University have informed my thinking about what’s needed to democratize and reinvigorate unions. This book reflects the ideas and idealism of many wise and committed union members with whom I’ve worked over these years, too numerous to name. They have inspired and instructed me, as has the international assemblage of scholars in the “Teachers’ Work/Teacher Unions” Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. A grant from the office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs at New Jersey City University provided release time from teaching to complete research for this volume. All of these sources of assistance have made my participation in this project possible, but the ideas I present are my sole responsibility.

From Mary: I would like to thank my husband Hugh Pope and daughters Blanche, and Faith for their support while I was carrying out this project at a difficult time. Thanks also to my daughters Clarrie and Helen for all their help with editing and for their patience. I would like to thank the National Union of Teachers and its members and activists for their comradeship in waging the fight for state education, which has never ceased to inspire me, and its leaders and staff for helping me in my time of office as president of the union, without which my eyes would never have been opened to the magnitude and coherence of the neoliberal assault. However in coediting and writing in this book I am representing my own views and writing in a personal capacity. Lastly, I am profoundly grateful to all the colleagues with whom I have taught over the years, whose hard work on behalf of children has given me the inspiration to fight with them for our rights and our futures. In particular I thank my job-share partner Clare Victor, who has always inspired my teaching and who supported me unstintingly through my period of office.
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PART I

Neoliberalism, Teachers, and Teaching
Understanding the Assault
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Teachers in every part of the world are in the forefront of the struggle to ensure that children receive an education—whether in U.S. cities, the mountains of Chavez’s Venezuela, in civil war-torn Nepal, in Europe’s towns and countryside, or in the refugee camps of Sudan. In prosperous nations, identified by global justice activists as the global north, teachers’ wages, their voice in policy, and the quality of their working conditions have been reduced. In the south, societies that lack power and wealth in the new global economy, teachers are working for a pittance, sometimes unpaid, too often poorly trained or with no training at all. In many parts of Africa they teach children in classes of over 100, sometimes under trees or squatting in churches. Textbooks are nonexistent, libraries and computers a distant dream, and basic materials in short supply. When wars occur, declared or not, schools are taken over and the children evicted, as has been done in Congo and by the Israeli army in the Palestinian West Bank. In Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean islands, schools were wiped out by the tsunami, and while luxury resorts are being built, school construction lags. In impoverished city neighborhoods in the “developed” world, from Paris and London to Berlin and New York, teachers are struggling against reduced school funding, racism, and social and economic dislocation to try to ensure that all children receive quality schooling.

As a classroom teacher elected President of the British National Union of Teachers (NUT), Mary had the unique opportunity to visit teachers’ conferences all around the world. The almost overwhelming social and political crises that
so many teachers face were debated at all of these events. Activists at the 2002 South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) Congress in Durban debated the merits of various funeral plans for members and their families who would be killed by HIV and AIDS, the lack of water and electricity in their communities, school fees for the poor, and delays in payment of salaries. SADTU members were often working in appalling conditions, all too often sick and dying and teaching children in similar straits. In addition to dealing with these social crises, which are exacerbated by policies of world financial institutions, teachers must simultaneously contend with the deterioration in public education, itself an outcome of reforms promoted and imposed by those very same institutions. Though the titles and acronyms of policies differ from one country to another, the basics of the assault are the same: undercut the publicly supported, publicly controlled system of education, teachers’ professionalism, and teacher unions as organizations. For example, much of the SADTU conference was taken up with issues that are also facing teachers in the UK—performance-related pay, wasteful and bureaucratic inspection processes, and increasing privatization. The conference of the Australian Educators Union (AEU) devoted a large part of its time to issues of teacher quality and how this could be monitored. The Canadian Teachers’ Federation conference Mary attended wrestled with the issues of national testing, monitoring, league tables (published comparisons of school test results), and inspections. Teacher unionists in Germany debated a whole raft of government measures touted as promoting quality control, a panacea for the problems in the German education system, which, according to official reports, is failing a large number of children of both the poor and middle classes. The very nature of education is being contested: the Fourth World Congress of the international organization of teacher unions, Education International (EI), held in Brazil, explored the theme “Education: Public Service or Commodity?”
Enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a covenant of the United Nations, is an affirmation that education is a basic right of all children. The millennium development goal for education set in Dakar, Senegal, in the year 2000 is universal primary education by 2015. Despite the apparent desire of the world’s leaders to make it possible for all children to be educated, many communities, schools, children, and teachers confront reforms that sabotage the explicit commitment to basic education for all.

Over the last couple of decades a new global consensus about reshaping economies and schools has emerged among the politicians and the powerful of the world. Whereas in the past governments—preferably democratically elected—have assumed the responsibility to ensure that all children are educated, schools and universities are now regarded as a potential market. In these educational markets, entrepreneurs set up schools and determine what is taught and how it is taught in order to make a profit. The assumption that schooling is a “public good” is under the most severe attack it has ever endured. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, teacher trade unionists are grappling with the increasing privatization of education services, the introduction of business “quality control” measures into education, and the requirement that education produce the kind of minimally trained and flexible workforce that corporations require to maximize their profits. Among scholars and global justice activists, these reforms being made to the economy and education are often called “neoliberal.” (Susan Robertson explains this terminology in her essay following this chapter.) Though the term “neoliberalism” may be new to many readers, the policies are not. They are experienced almost universally by teachers, children, and parents.

Many governments under the sway of neoliberal ideas have relinquished pursuit of the policies needed to provide a basic education to all, chief among these financing education adequately so that all teachers can teach and learners learn in conditions fit for that purpose. Clearly the millennium development goals for education will not be met. While rich northern nations spend billions of dollars prosecuting wars and have bottomless resources for the exploiting of new gas and oil reserves, the most precious reserves of all—the world’s children—stand at the back of the line. Nor is there an opportunity to develop education systems so that they can fulfill their true purpose—to enable people to live a full and creative life, or as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, to ensure that education is directed “toward the full development of the human personality.”

There is an old saying that “a lie gets halfway round the world before the truth gets on its running shoes.” The lie making the running in schooling is that private corporations and entrepreneurs are much more able to make education
work for the poor than teachers, communities, and their elected representatives in government. And when one listens to politicians and reads in the media about the benefits of bringing the private market and business methodologies into education, one can often feel like teachers have hardly begun to tie the laces on their running shoes. The voices for privatization and neoliberalism have virtually the whole of the world’s media at their disposal to speed them on their way. Rebutting the “private good, public bad” propaganda is complicated by neoliberalism’s hijacking of ideals and terms borrowed from those who have spent their lives campaigning for education for all and opportunities for the poor and oppressed. Hearing news reports and politicians’ statements of lofty goals, one might think there is nothing closer to the hearts of the international financiers, accountants, and politicians than the needs of the poor. It is only when you look at the actual effects of the policies of world financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank on “developing” countries and their education systems that you realize that nothing could be further from the truth. As many researchers, including those writing in this book, document, the World Bank’s structural adjustment programs have destroyed perfectly adequate education systems in countries like Zambia and are threatening to do the same in many others. As readers will see in the excerpts from neoliberal reports, websites, and corporate financial bulletins with titles like “Why school fees are good for the poor,” when it serves their purpose, neoliberal gurus are quite willing to ditch the rhetoric of social justice and equality and lay bare the true face of their education policy.

Teachers are in a war being fought over the future of education, and though at times it might seem as though we are losing the war without firing a shot, we have a potentially powerful weapon in our hands—our solidarity and organization into powerful teachers unions. EI, which brings the teaching unions of the world together, has over 29 million members. Although researchers and activists engage in a lively global discourse about the need to wrest education back from the private entrepreneurs and corporations who want to turn it into a cash cow and a source of flexible labor, the debate contains very little discussion—from nongovernmental organizations that do advocacy work (NGOs), from academics, and even from unions themselves—of the role that teacher unions can and must play in reversing these policies. Our shared commitment to illuminate the neglected role of teacher trade unions, to analyze their potential power to win an alternative type of education, underlies our work of bringing together the essays in this book.

Public service unions, and in particular education unions, do have power. And yet it often feels as though the tremendous potential force that is contained
in those 29 million teachers organized into trade unions is not being used. The economic system that dominates the world, capitalism, has become global—its strategy and propaganda have a global reach and logic. Yet we in the trade union movement, despite some traditions of international solidarity, are a long way from achieving an equivalent global coherence. And even on a national level trade union leaders are often too ready to accept the rhetoric of politicians as the reality and adapt accordingly, instead of standing up boldly and opposing them—if necessary through job action.

Ironically, the potential power of teachers and our unions to derail neoliberal reforms like privatization is often more apparent to our opponents than it is to teachers and union leadership. In a draft report for the World Bank, “Making Services Work for Poor People,” economist Ritva Reinikka argues that teaching unions impede equitable development of services for poor people by diverting scarce resources toward teachers’ pay. Reinikka cites teachers’ failure to “perform their duties in a reasonable fashion” as “probably the biggest constraint to making services work for poor people.” Conveniently omitted in this and other World Bank analyses is the fact that teachers’ pay is appallingly low and sometimes nonexistent in many developing countries.

In the face of this kind of rhetoric and in the context of the global assault by private capital on state education services, how are the unions responding, and how should they work to defend services for the poor? Is there any indication that teacher unions and their leaderships have the will to face up to this situation and reverse it? These are the issues our book takes up, through contributions by teachers and researchers throughout the world. The book is informed by the firsthand knowledge Mary and Lois have had in their careers as classroom teachers and union activists, as well as by their different roles outside the classroom. Since leaving her job as a New York City public school teacher, Lois has been a college professor and researcher who educates urban

Vignette 1.2

In particular, recent progress in primary education in Francophone countries resulted from reduced teacher costs, especially through the recruitment of contractual teachers, generally at about 50% the salary of civil service teachers. . . . All IFC education investments must provide a satisfactory financial return. The definition of “satisfactory” is dependent on IFC-wide strategic investment directions.
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