

Teachers Unions



PHOTOGRAPH/SHUTTERSTOCK

and the War Within

Making sense of the conflict



“The fact is that, too often, NEA has sat on the sidelines of change, naysaying, quick to say what won’t work and slow to say what will. It is time for our great association to lead the reform, to engineer change, to take the initiative, to be in the vanguard.”

—BOB CHASE

President of the National Education Association, in an address to the National Press Club, February 5, 1997

“We must be the agents of change. We must lead our professions. We must define what good teaching and learning looks like. We must ensure that all of us work together to meet the needs of the whole child. We must be student-centered union leaders. And we must play the long game.”

—JOHN STOCKS

Executive director of the National Education Association, speaking to the union’s Representative Assembly, July 4, 2014

SEVENTEEN YEARS and a host of education reforms separate public declarations by its highest-ranking officials that the nation’s largest labor union should become a leader of education reform. Children who were just entering the public school system when National Education Association (NEA) president Bob Chase addressed the National Press Club in 1997 are adults now, perhaps with children of their own. NEA executive director John Stocks issued the same call to arms in 2014.

The notion was not a new one, even in 1997. In that same speech, Chase admitted he was not the first to call for the union to be an agent of change. “In 1983, after the *A Nation at Risk* report came out, NEA president Mary Hatwood Futrell tried to mobilize our union to lead the reform movement in American public education,” he said.

Futrell failed at that task, as did Chase, as did his successors, as will future NEA presidents. The failure is the inevitable result of the difference between what teachers unions are and what they would like others to think they are. This difference manifests itself as two messages: an internal one, meant for the unions’ leaders and activists, and an external one, meant for education policymakers and the public at large. In the good old days, the two audiences were always separate. But in today’s world, where everyone with a phone or Internet access can act as a reporter, the two messages can overlap, causing confusion and contradiction.

The teachers unions now face an environment in which their traditional enemies are emboldened, their traditional allies are deserting, and some of their most devoted activists are questioning the leadership of their own officers.

by MIKE ANTONUCCI



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Moment of Truth

The events of the last five years have led the two national teachers unions to what normally is referred to as “the moment of truth.” But truth is tricky to define when perceptions are an integral part of the unions’ influence. Even weakened, together the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) constitute the single most powerful force in American education policy. Nothing moves forward without an answer to one question: What will the union do?

Will the NEA and the AFT continue to exert veto power over education reform? Are their recent setbacks the beginning of an irreversible decline? Will they become more militant or less as the years go on?

Predicting the future is a hazardous business, but if what’s past is prologue, we can at least make a reasonable estimation that assumes no unprecedented, revolutionary change in direction. Considering the quotes above, that seems to be a safe assumption.

A Nation at Risk may have jolted the education world, but it had no effect on the growth and power of teachers unions. They enjoyed substantial boosts in membership each year, as the hiring of teachers and education support employees grew at historic rates. There were periodic national efforts at education reform, such as Goals 2000, but the unions weathered these storms, and the winds eventually died down.

The first sign that the world was changing around them was the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. Staunch union allies such as Representative George Miller of California and Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts co-authored the bill, and it passed Congress by wide margins, with more Democratic votes than Republican ones.

The accountability provisions of the law bedevil the unions to this day, but the large increase in federal education spending ended up

helping the unions’ bottom line, as still more teachers and support workers were hired.

By 2008, both unions hit their high-water mark, with a combined membership approaching 4 million and annual revenues at all levels estimated at nearly \$2 billion. But all was not well.

The 2008 Democratic presidential primaries were a series of mishaps for the teachers unions. The AFT, with its large plurality of members from New York State, inevitably endorsed Hillary Clinton. There was strong sentiment within the NEA to do likewise, but NEA president Reg Weaver hailed from Illinois and was a strong supporter of Barack Obama. Still, he could not sway a sufficient number of the union’s decisionmakers, and the NEA was as divided on whom to endorse as was the Democratic Party.

The situation was further complicated by Obama’s embrace of education reforms the NEA found anathema. He gave moderate praise to performance pay. As a U.S. senator, he was the only Democrat to introduce an NCLB-related bill that the union opposed. The NEA analysis of the proposed legislation

President George W. Bush signs the No Child Left Behind Act into law, with Representative George Miller and Senator Edward Kennedy behind him (from left)



PHOTOGRAPH / WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PAUL MORSE.

claimed it favored “1) establishing a teacher evaluation system using gains in student test scores; 2) allowing ‘community stakeholders’ to have a role in designing teacher evaluation systems; and 3) providing merit pay for teachers based upon gains in student test scores.”

As a result, the NEA did not get around to endorsing Obama until after he had clinched the nomination. They worked hard to help elect him in 2008, but it was clear that he felt no special obligation to the unions when he named Arne Duncan as U.S. secretary of education, instead of union favorite Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford.

Duncan has since become the *bête noire* of the teachers unions, but his selection and subsequent actions signified a clear continuity in education policy from Obama the candidate to Obama the president. Coupled with the growing influence of Democrats for Education Reform, it was now OK to be a Democrat without kowtowing to the unions on every education issue.

But let’s not go crazy. When the recession hit, the Obama administration’s first instinct was to protect the jobs of educators. Secretary Duncan claimed the stimulus package of 2009 funded more than 300,000 education jobs. Follow-on legislation, the so-called “edujobs” bill of 2010, was purported to save 160,000 more.

As mammoth as the spending was, these were short-term fixes. Education hiring actually grew 2.3 percent during the recession, but then fell off a cliff when the money ran out. Educators experienced the Great Recession about two years after everyone else.

Reductions in force meant fewer teachers-union members, which meant reduced revenue for the unions. Budgetary concerns also provided the impetus for Republicans seeking to curb the power of teachers unions, the primary example being the passage in 2011 of Act 10 in Wisconsin, which greatly restricted the bargaining power of NEA and AFT

President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan visit a school in Chicago in December 2008, just after Duncan’s nomination

affiliates in the state, and ultimately reduced their dues-paying membership by more than one-third.

Right-to-work legislation followed in Indiana and Michigan, and in places where teachers unions were already struggling—like Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee—membership fell by 20 percent or more. The 3,000-member University of Hawaii Professional Assembly left the NEA and became independent.

Today, the NEA’s membership is down more than 9 percent over the last four years. The AFT claims its membership is steady, though it has maintained it by affiliating unions outside



PHOTOGRAPH / GETTY IMAGES



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the field of education, and not by recruiting a horde of new teachers. The percentage of teachers who are union members has dropped (see Figure 1).

A House Divided

The question dogging both national unions and their affiliates is how to turn this state of affairs around. There seem to be two alternatives, roughly analogous to a choice between war and diplomacy.

One faction, existing in both unions, wants to man the barricades, fight over every inch of territory, and take no prisoners. It sees education reformers outside of the union sphere as either corporate privatizers seeking to grasp some of the \$640 billion this country spends annually on public schools, or their tools.

The most identifiable leaders of this militant faction are Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, Alex

Caputo-Pearl of United Teachers Los Angeles, Bob Peterson of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, and Barbara Madeloni of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

The establishment faction of the unions includes the leadership of both national teachers unions. Both the NEA and AFT have severely restricted paths to power, making it unlikely that any of the militants will rise to the national presidency. When union challengers upset incumbents, however, it is almost always because the challenger successfully painted the incumbent as too accommodating to the education powers that be.

To avoid becoming losers in the game of “more teacher-protective than thou,” the leaders of the national teachers unions have to co-opt the militant message without alienating the education world at large, or the general public. This is a tricky dance, and it's not uncommon for NEA and AFT executive officers to make conflicting, if not contrary, statements depending on which ears are listening.

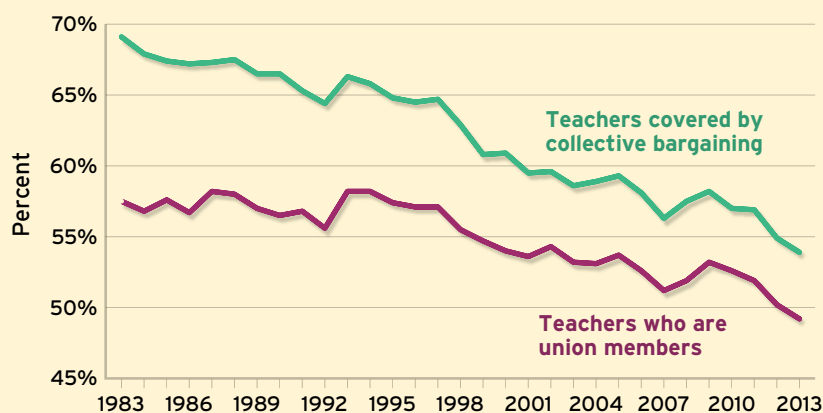
When union officers address an audience of union activists, the world is described in Manichaeian terms. Standardized testing is not just misused, it is “toxic.” Opponents are not just opponents, they are adversaries “who want to destroy our democracy and our public schools”—for money. These enemies are identified by name: the Koch Brothers, the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity, Pearson, Inc., Democrats for Education Reform, Michelle Rhee, and Arne Duncan.

The only force standing in their way is the teachers union—“the champions of equity,” who “define solutions that drive excellence and success for all students,” as described by former NEA president Dennis Van Roekel in his keynote address to the Representative Assembly in July 2014. Union activists, in the words of John Stocks, spoken two years earlier, are “social justice patriots” who “put the power of our soul to work to defend democracy, to fight for equal opportunity, and to create a more just society.”

That plays well with the troops, whose enthusiasm and commitment are needed to advance the agenda. Unfortunately for

Steady Decline (Figure 1)

The percentage of teachers who are union members has now fallen below 50 percent, and the percentage of teachers who are covered by a collective bargaining agreement hovers just above that level.



NOTE: Data include elementary, secondary, and special education teachers across both public and private schools.

SOURCE: Hirsch and Macpherson, Union Membership and Coverage Database, 2014

the teachers unions, the wider world is not an echo chamber of their beliefs. To the general public, many of whom have little idea what the NEA and the AFT actually do, it sounds more than a little hyperbolic and self-congratulatory.

The external message cannot be so bellicose. Both the NEA and the AFT need allies, including those who might not sign on to the totality of the unions' vision for public education and American politics. Even with their opponents, they cannot escalate every confrontation to Armageddon. Compromises occur.

Union officers are also aware that it is detrimental to their

Superman, a documentary about families trying to get their kids into charter schools. It was especially critical of teachers unions.

Union activists often depict the Gates Foundation as the mastermind behind corporate education reform. But in 2009, when the foundation announced it would award \$335 million to a number of school districts and charter schools to promote teacher effectiveness, the union response was a far cry from the anticorporate rhetoric it regularly delivers to its internal audience.

"These districts, working with their unions and parents, were willing to think out of the box, and were awarded millions



PHOTOGRAPH / AP PHOTO / CHARLES REX ARBOGAST

cause to be constantly saying "no" to so many proposals for school reform. Thus the external message is devoted to depicting an organization that is forward-thinking and innovative when it comes to operating the nation's schools.

The problem for the unions' establishment wing is that the internal message leads their devotees to believe that such compromises, collaborations, and accommodations are selling out the movement. They are not always wrong about that.

While both national unions decry the corporate influence on education, they have partnerships with large corporations on many levels: sponsorships of union events, discount arrangements and credit cards as part of member benefits packages, funding for joint projects, etc. The NEA even went so far as to team up with Walden Media on a book-buying initiative for needy children. Walden Media produced *Waiting for*

Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, addresses a crowd during a rally in September 2012

of dollars to create transparent, fair, and sustainable teacher effectiveness models," said AFT president Randi Weingarten.

"Collaboration and multilevel integration are important when it comes to transforming the teaching profession," said then NEA president Van Roekel. "These grants will go far in providing resources to help raise student achievement and improve teacher effectiveness."

The NEA's own foundation received \$550,000 from the Gates Foundation to "improve labor-management collaboration." The AFT accrued more than \$10 million from the Gates Foundation, until internal pressures forced the union to end some of the grants. And of course, the Gates Foundation helped bankroll

the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which both unions continue to officially support (see “Teachers Unions and the Common Core,” *features*, Winter 2015).

The militant wing is mostly hostile to CCSS, seeing the standards as part and parcel of the corporate education-reform agenda. The establishment wing has been forced to triangulate by defending the standards but attacking the way they have been implemented.

The split between the two factions was illustrated at the 2014

that has met with withering criticism from the unions’ militants. Barbara Madeloni of the Massachusetts Teachers Association made her reputation and her ascent to power based on her opposition to and boycott of the evaluation. Their biggest bone of contention is the fact that the videotaped lessons delivered by teacher candidates to their students are contracted out to be scored by Pearson, Inc.

If that’s all there were to it, it would simply be a standard union response to corporate influence over teacher education. But edTPA was developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE), whose adviser is the illustrious and union-beloved Linda Darling-Hammond. SCALE partnered with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), another union-beloved (and -financially supported) organization to develop edTPA.

The edTPA is apparently scored entirely by classroom teachers and university professors, and is similar to the assessment used by the union-beloved National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. NEA vice president Becky Pringle and AFT president Randi Weingarten sit on the edTPA Policy Advisory Board. The NEA promoted the assessment on its website. As

with CCSS, the AFT passed a resolution praising the design of edTPA while lamenting its implementation and the role of Pearson in scoring the assessment.

At a time when the unions need all the allies they can muster, they are looking askance at the ones they already have. “If we are attentive to the broader assault on public education by the forces of neoliberalism,” said Madeloni, “we have to critique Darling-Hammond at the very least for naïveté about these forces when she allows herself and her work to be taken up by them, when she allows the discourses they use to bash teacher education to become part of her rationales.”

These are amusing little infights unless you have some responsibility as an education policymaker and you need to know if the unions favor or despise CCSS or edTPA. It is little help to hear that the answer is both.

The edTPA reaction also illustrates why the unions maintain a long and growing enemies list. The national-union officers are especially adept at co-opting the anger of the militants and



Dennis Van Roekel, former president of the National Education Association, speaks at an event in Idaho, April 2011

AFT Convention. The delegation from Chicago introduced a resolution to place the AFT in full opposition to CCSS, but it was handily defeated in committee, a committee dominated by New York City’s United Federation of Teachers, the backbone of the AFT’s establishment wing.

Instead, AFT delegates passed a resolution stating the union would “continue to support the promise of CCSS, provided that a set of essential conditions, structures and resources are in place.”

The edTPA Battle

The disconnect between the two messages of unions as leaders of education reform and unions as defenders against education reform can sometimes reach comical levels.

The edTPA is a teacher-candidate performance assessment

focusing it on the approved targets—“toxic tests,” corporate reformers, and a host of nefarious individuals. Otherwise, the more radical activists might spend time examining their own leaders’ complicity in the current state of affairs.

The Long Gamble

The teachers unions are under duress. Their efforts to simultaneously exist as the champions and opponents of education reform are meeting resistance even internally. Their public image has never been worse. How do they plan to turn this around?

The clues are in the address made by John Stocks to the NEA Representative Assembly delegates: “play the long game.”

Times are bad, but bad times don’t last forever. As long as the unions can head off any more reversals in state collective-bargaining laws, and stem the bleeding in right-to-work states, they can await a more positive correlation of forces. As the economy rebounds, teacher hiring will increase, though prob-

mentioned the GPS 2020 project by name in public in more than five years.

In 2011, the NEA put together a Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching, which actually delivered several levelheaded and worthwhile recommendations. The commission inspired the union to release a “three-part action agenda to strengthen the teaching profession and improve student learning.”

One of the commission’s recommendations was to “address internal barriers to organizational engagement about teaching quality and student learning.” It called on the NEA to “transform the UniServ Program, making UniServ directors advocates for educational issues to advance NEA’s professional agenda.”

UniServ directors are the union staffers who are collective bargaining specialists, political operatives, and experts in the finer points of school finances. A proposal to find a way to make them “advocates for educational issues” was presented to the delegates at the 2012 Representative Assembly. It was



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ably not to previous levels. A few key governorships, a few key legislature flips, a couple of new U.S. Supreme Court justices, and the momentum could shift quickly.

Renewed membership growth and an increased revenue stream will not only improve the unions’ bottom line, but it will quiet the internal dissent. Unions are well aware that no one wants change when things are going well.

There are two problems with playing the long game. The first is that if you keep getting trounced in the short game, you don’t last long enough to win the long game. The unions need a major victory in the short term to stop the death spiral. The second problem is assuming that your strategy is the correct one and only needs time and better circumstances to work. Such thinking stifles internal reforms just as effectively as it stifles school reform.

People have been waiting patiently for the teachers unions to champion school reform since the days of Al Shanker, who served as AFT president from 1974 to 1997. But the reality never seems to match the rhetoric.

In 2008, the NEA unveiled the “Great Public Schools for Every Student by 2020” project, in which the union committed to “creating models for state-based educational improvement,” “developing a new framework for accountability systems that support authentic student learning,” and “fostering a constructive relationship with U.S. Department of Education leadership.”

The last goal has clearly been a failure and no one has

overwhelmingly defeated on a voice vote.

The lesson is that while many union members, particularly younger ones, might join the public in hoping for teachers unions that embrace change, the folks who run the unions are comfortable with their traditional mission: the protection of teachers in the workplace and of union prerogatives everywhere.

What we are likely to see in the future is simply more of what we have seen in the past and are still seeing in the present. The NEA and the AFT will be the obstacles in the road, blocking the way of new ideas, even those generated from within. Their adherence to a mission designed for the world of the 1960s will cause them to follow in the footsteps of the private-sector industrial unions, albeit several decades later.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters was a massive political and social force in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, the union still exists; it still can deliver PAC money and campaign workers, but no one worries about the power and influence of the Teamsters anymore.

Even if their current difficulties continue, the NEA and the AFT will never disappear. But their days of dominating the education environment are on the wane. In the future, we will look upon them as we now do the Teamsters, as remnants of an earlier age.

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