

H-Net Reviews

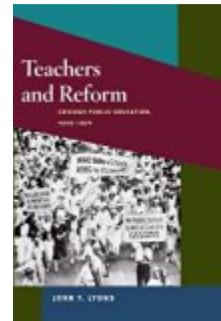
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John F. Lyons. *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1929-1970*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 312 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03272-1.

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Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



In *Teachers and Reform*, historian John F. Lyons wonders whether teachers' unions have ultimately been an impediment or guarantor of quality public education, a question that has lately become one of the most contentious in U.S. politics. As I read *Teachers and Reform* in Madison, Wisconsin, for example, tens of thousands of protesters rallied at the state Capitol to support the collective bargaining rights of public workers. Wandering among the crowd, it was often difficult to distinguish present-day slogans from those of 1930s Chicago. In both cases, homeowners, reeling from a foreclosure crisis and increasingly burdensome property taxes, denounced the unionized teacher as a "tax waster, tax spender, [and] tax eater," while teachers, suffering through pay cuts and layoffs, retorted that unions were "defending democracy and the public education system from self-serving business and political elites" who wanted to gut it (pp. 36-37). Boards of education in the 1930s, as today, demanded the flexibility of alternative certification programs, increased class sizes, and "mechanized" instruction, while unions complained that such reforms deskilled education, reducing "the teacher to an automaton, and the pupil to a memory machine" (pp. 21, 51). It was with an eye toward current events, then, that I finished the book, hoping for insight into the sources of each side's position and perhaps some sort of resolution.

Previous histories of teacher unionization have advanced two broad claims: that the ideology of professionalism, embraced by a white collar, largely female workforce, prevented teachers from engaging in collective action and trade-union tactics before the 1960s; and that once they did, unions quickly concerned themselves with bread-and-butter economic issues rather than broader social reform.[1] Although *Teachers and Reform* is not a

particularly argumentative book, Lyons sets out to challenge both of these assumptions. He believes that professionalism did not prevent but prompted Chicago teachers to build influential unions, and that economic concerns came not at the expense of social reform but in tandem with it. Ultimately, he argues, teachers "wanted to make more money *and* improve the schools" (p. 5, emphasis in original).

That statement seems a dodge, however, and is in no way warranted by the book's evidence. Frankly, I am unsure why Lyons included it or the handful of other pro-union platitudes in what is otherwise a rigorous and evenhanded history. The argument for broad-scale social reform only holds up during the Great Depression, when Chicago teachers first recognized the need for large-scale unionization. Various organizations already represented the city's public school teachers—most famously, Margaret Haley's Chicago Teachers Federation—but they remained segregated by race, gender, and elementary or high school status, in many cases serving as professional organizations rather than trade unions. These groups proved powerless after the stock market crash, as delinquent tax revenues forced the city to cut its teaching force by 10 percent, close dozens of schools, and pay its teachers in scrip. Teachers suffered while school janitors and groundskeepers, protected by powerful building trade unions, enjoyed far better pay and job security throughout the period. Thus, ironically, it was in an effort to preserve professional status that the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) became more militant, initiating a series of sick-outs (unofficial, one-day strikes in which union members call in sick), marches, and boycotts during the 1930s. The CTU promised that these campaigns would benefit not only teachers but also students and

the working class as a whole. Its leaders solicited and received community support in their fight against the school board. By 1937, they had achieved meaningful reforms regarding licensure and due process in hiring, the first steps to make teaching a credentialed rather than politically appointed profession.

Yet mass protest yielded only temporary results. Coalitions were fleeting, and reforms were easily captured by the city's Democratic machine, which simply took over the teachers' colleges, altered certification requirements, and "began to employ politically favored principals by manipulating the principals' exams" (p. 51). The school board soon convinced the union to dismiss its socially progressive secretary in exchange for back pay and by the 1940s "cordial letters began to be exchanged between Mayor Kelly, Superintendent Johnson, and the CTU leaders" (p. 87). Working within the political machine yielded longer-lasting benefits, union leaders found, even if it came at the expense of community relations. In exchange for their support, the Chicago school board adopted a single salary scale in 1944, ensuring that elementary school teachers would no longer earn less than those in high schools. Even more significantly, when the CTU threatened its first strike, in 1948, "for the first time, the Board of Education and the mayor stayed on the side of the teachers," forcing the city council to raise taxes in support of higher salaries (p. 112). The lesson for union officials was clear: to "depend less on the public for support and more on building a strong relationship with General Superintendent Hunt" and in so doing to eschew "the last vestiges of community politics" (p. 113).

Many factors facilitated the shift away from social reform—the consolidation of the CTU's power structure, the disintegration of rival unions, and McCarthyism all played a role—but rank-and-file sentiment seems to be one of the strongest. While increasing numbers of teachers unionized during World War II, "most simply paid their membership dues and used the CTU's credit and legal services [but] did not want their union to prioritize social reform or to become involved in wide-ranging community and political matters" (p. 77). The union's acquiescence to machine politics was underscored with the release of the Heald Report (1946), an exposé that found rampant cronyism in the system and led to an overhaul of school management. While Lyons is quick to point out that "the CTU and its predecessors had kept political control of the public school system before the public eye for nearly a decade" and that "most of the revelations in the NEA [National Education Association] report had

been previously unearthed and widely publicized by the union," by the time of the report's release, the CTU was also "conspicuously absent from the list of organizations that had asked the NEA to investigate the schools" (p. 109).

Again, the strain in these sorts of sentences (and there are several of them) makes one wonder how Lyons can persist in claims of socially progressive unionism. How, for example, is one to read the last item in this list of CTU accomplishments? "Teachers curbed some of the excesses of the Chicago Democratic political machine, attained equal pay for female and African American teachers, influenced the allocation of funding for public education and teachers' salaries, protected academic freedom from Cold War excesses, acquired the right of collective bargaining, and helped to reform the schools to meet several of the demands of some sections of the black community" (pp. 6-7). These are all worthy achievements, but meeting "several of the demands" of "some sections" of the black community is an awfully tendentious introduction to the widespread racism that would further estrange the union from the community in which it operated. While Lyons insists that "the CTU, as much as any other predominantly white educational association or even teachers' union, promoted the demands of its black members," he admits that "while espousing racial equality, the CTU did little in practical terms to challenge racial discrimination in the hiring of black teachers, the assignment of black teachers away from white schools, or the unequal segregated system of education" (p. 66).

Racial segregation has been profoundly inscribed in Chicago's schools from the 1940s to the present, as Lyons's statistics make clear. "In 1964," he writes, "only four percent of black teachers worked in 'white' schools and until 1963 not one black principal worked in a 'white' or 'integrated' school" (p. 136). In 1957, the average enrollment in predominantly black elementary schools was 90 percent higher than predominantly white schools. Black parents complained that teachers dragged their children into closets; kicked them; beat them to the point of injury; and "called black students 'niggers,' 'pickaninies,' and 'trash' to their faces" (pp. 146-147). Meanwhile, a principal "called parents who objected to violence against their children 'liars' and refused to see them" (p. 146). Less extreme forms of racism were as damaging. Some teachers merely "thought black children were 'more excitable'" or "that black children seemed 'harder to handle' and had 'low morals,'" or that "Negroes have an inclination to theft." Many "did not believe African American children could reach the scholas-

tic level of white children and paid less attention to them” (p. 147). Racist classroom practices created a seemingly permanent rift between civil rights and teachers’ rights. Black parents, upset that teacher transfers allowed the best instructors to flee their schools, demanded a halt to the practice, which union members saw as an inviolable workplace freedom. Any suggestion that black students should receive special treatment, or that parents should have power over teachers’ working lives, was treated as a threat to their professionalism. “If am the teacher the classroom is my domain,” one aspiring teacher wrote. “Parents keep out unless of course I call them in for some reason. Otherwise parents are strictly a nuisance” (p. 149). Unfortunately, the intervening decades of community-control experiments, standardized testing, and charter schools suggest that the feeling was mutual.

Teachers and Reform is a straightforward, well-written study of education in a major U.S. city, obviously applicable to courses in urban history, labor studies, and the history of education. One might compare it to Dorothy Shipps’s *School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago, 1880-2000* (2006), which reaches similar conclusions about the importance of teachers and professionalism, although the two are fundamentally different books. Whereas Shipps talks much more about the business and political influences on Chicago classrooms—and spends a single chapter on the crucial mid-century years that

Lyons explores in depth—*Teachers and Reform* offers more insight into the relationship between unions, politicians, and the public.

Some of Shipps’s material might have come in helpful, however, if Lyons really hoped to rehabilitate the unions. Low expectations for minority students, resistance to parental involvement, and refusal to accept accountability measures were some of the contemporary criticisms that I hoped he might resolve, or at least mitigate; if anything, his book reinforces them. A better tactic would have been to emphasize the reality that Shipps makes explicit: that big business was (and is) the dominant interest group in public education; and that unions, for all their flaws, at least provide a counterbalance to the ongoing regime of tax cutting and privatization in education. That was the message that I heard resounding from the steps of Wisconsin’s Capitol and if Lyons hopes to reclaim a legacy of community-based protest, that seems to be the rallying cry for the unions’ revival.

Note

[1]. These positions are taken, respectively, by Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT & the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Wayne Urban, “Teacher Activism,” in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, ed. Donald Warren (New York: MacMillan, 1989), 190-209.

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