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The Labor and Working-Class History Association

Launch of LAWCHA's Teacher/Public Sector Initiative

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Today we launch the teachers/public sector toolkit, a set of resources that we hope will contribute to dialog on teacher and public sector unionism. We are asking for help in disseminating and adding to this toolkit, which is accessible under teaching resources.

It consists of a short history of teacher organizing and unionism by Adam Mertz, and sources for learning and teaching more about the subject. Those sources include documents, books, articles, charts and graphs and full presentations that could be used by teachers, unions, educators to promote dialog. Finally, we will continue to promote dialog about these sources through our teaching blog.

We think of as a work in progress. We hope you will join this conversation, promote it as a resource, and share with us other materials that might help us build on these initial selections. We want to continue to develop this as a resource for understanding and contextualizing the struggles that teachers and public sector

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workers face. As we continue on this project, we will hope to further develop this material so it can be used in multiple ways and venues.

We believe this historical material provides context to understand the recent assault on the public-sector education workers and connect it to a wider and longer attack on worker power. For teachers, this assault on rights and power is funded by huge private foundations and facilitated by a political agenda that includes a dismantling of the very notion of a public good and public sector. Teachers and other education workers are facing a massive crusade for corporate-style education reform on a neoliberal model. Much of what is cast as a “reform” agenda promoting “choice” and “efficiency” is a mask for a systematic effort to make education and students into private profit centers. It is part of a wider campaign that has deepened inequality and transferred public resources into private power centers. Campaigns that seek to replace teacher-directed education with corporate prepackaged education are now a common experience in school districts across the country.

This is not just an assault on teacher benefits and autonomy but also includes elements such as high-stakes testing and privatizing more of the elements of the public education sector. Studies show that tax dollars funneled into charter schools have done little or nothing to improve education, but the drive for charter schools remains at the center of privatization strategies. This is a politically driven agenda that seeks to deny rights and access to collective bargaining to public-sector workers as a core principle and strategy.

This program, already well under way at the dawn of the twenty-first century, escalated after the financial crisis began in 2008. In Wisconsin, the state that first inaugurated public- sector collective bargaining in 1959, Governor Scott Walker and the Republican Party dismantled a system of public collective bargaining. The right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council prepared and promoted legislation across the country for programs that funnel money to profit centers. Republicans have been joined in this assault by leading Democrats who have used the financial crises to enact austerity policies against public-sector workers. Certainly that was the case in Chicago, where Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, the former Clinton administration assistant, has led the charge against the teachers unions. In that city a manufactured crisis caused by tax breaks and subsidies to political patrons resulted in pension and education shortfalls.

Finally, these policies connect to a global neoliberal austerity campaign with many

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gendered and racialized elements at its core. Certainly there have been creative responses to this crisis, the most notable of which is the recent efforts of the Chicago Teachers Union to fight privatization of education and school closures, break free from business-as-usual collective bargaining and politics, and boycott high-stakes testing. We think that knowledge of the history can build teachers' understandings of the possibilities and limits of these struggles and that considering the patterns of how worker power has been built in the past can give insight into present struggles. Some of the models of how teachers have built power may not work anymore, but there are a number of past campaigns that might inform these current struggles.

This project received vital support from Adam Mertz, a graduate student at University of Illinois-Chicago, who is former teacher and is studying teacher unions. LAWCHA hired Adam from proceeds from their dues. Thanks to Adam for his hard work.

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