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Building Power Through Racial Justice: Organizing the #BlackLivesMatterAtSchool Week of Action in K-12 and Beyond

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On October 16, 1963, author James Baldwin delivered his well-known “A Talk to Teachers” in which he argued that the United States was “desperately menaced . . . from within” (p. 325) by centuries of racialized cruelty. In his speech, Baldwin (1985) implored educators to “go for broke” (p. 325) in their attempts to address the racism operating not only in their classrooms but in the very fabric of U.S. society. Speaking at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin addressed New York City teachers who witnessed the active desegregation of schools across the country and the ongoing fight for racial justice in voting, housing, and employment. Yet 56 years later, Baldwin’s call to action is regrettably just as relevant to the modern educator. Our schools remain racially and economically segregated (EdBuild, 2019; Orfield, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014; Reardon & Owens, 2014) and racial injustices permeate our contemporary sociopolitical reality (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019; McKernan, Ratcliffe, Steuerle, & Zhang, 2013; Nellis, 2016; Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013).

Many educators in the current era, however, are breathing new life into Baldwin’s charge that teachers commit themselves to fight for racial justice. In this essay, we highlight one important example of that fight, the Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action. Entering its fourth year, we first contextualize this growing movement by discussing the historically problematic position held by teachers’ unions on issues of race before situating the National Week of Action within the current wave of social justice unionism. We then share our work as organizers of the higher education outreach for the National Week of Action and call on higher education faculty members and unions to join the fight.

Race and Teachers Unions: A Problematic Past

When the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was created in 1916, its purpose was explicitly twofold, to both protect teachers and to improve the quality of education for all students (Todd-Breland, 2018). Many teachers unions, however, have not lived up to this purpose, by both failing to adequately represent Black teachers and not prioritizing the improvement of the quality of education for Black students.

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For example, in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the unequal treatment of non-certified teachers—largely Black educators in the city—led to deep divides at critical moments. With a leadership that routinely ignored their interests and the interests of communities of Color, Black teachers looked to outside organizations to take up their needs and concerns (Todd-Breland, 2018). In Chicago, Black teachers created the Teachers Division of Operation Breadbasket, an arm of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, arguing that “the Black community of parents, teachers and students must attack both heads of the single snake of institutional racism: The Board of Education and the CTU” (Todd-Breland, 2018, p. 118).

This created fundamental racial rifts within one of the nation’s largest teacher unions, rifts that came to a head during strike actions. In the 1969 strike, for example, almost half of the Black teachers in the union crossed the picket line to show their dissatisfaction with the CTU around issues of racial injustice (Todd-Breland, 2018). As noted by Todd-Breland, many Black teachers simply “did not have faith” (p. 125) in the union leadership to fully represent the needs and interests of Black teachers and Black communities.

In fact, it is teacher unions’ historically contentious relationships with communities of Color that have been the impetus for some of the most dramatic conflicts and lasting defeats. One particularly significant example of this was in the 1968 New York City teachers strikes that were sparked by tensions in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools of Brooklyn. After transitioning to local community control in the wake of desegregation efforts, tension arose as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board—now run by Black and Puerto Rican parents and educators—sent letters of dismissal to 19 teachers and principals who were persistently resistant to the community’s demands for curricular, financial, and personnel changes (Erickson, 2013; Podair, 2008; Stivers, 2018).

As explained by Stivers (2018), “while tensions had long been simmering, these letters blew the conflict wide open” (p. 1). The Ocean Hill-Brownsville board believed that community members should control community schools, whereas the city’s United Federation of Teachers (UFT) was committed to upholding a “collective bargaining agreement built around a system of centralized governance” (Stivers, 2018, p. 1). When agreements could not be reached, the mostly white teaching force across the city went on strike, impacting nearly one million students. For weeks, students in Ocean Hill-Brownsville entered school through police barricades that separated picketing teachers from community-control proponents (Goldstein, 2014). As accusations of racism and anti-Semitism—many of the white teachers in the UFT were Jewish—grew, an agreement was reached in the city’s central offices, without the local board. The dismissed teachers would return to Ocean Hill-Brownsville with teaching assignments. Shortly after, the State sharply curtailed community boards’ power to influence the fundamental operations of their schools.

As articulated by Goldstein (2014), the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict was but one example of the urban teacher strikes in the late 1960s that saw teacher unions openly opposing Black and Hispanic community control in favor of job security for predominantly white teachers. These clashes ramped up the already existing racist rhetoric surrounding urban education and, as argued by Erickson (2013), created “lasting political and social divisions that prevented whites and blacks from uniting” (para. 29) on the damaging school reforms to come in the neoliberal era. By ignoring or—in many cases—working against calls for racial justice in education, teacher unions placed themselves at odds with the communities they served and weakened the power of both.

Social Justice Unionism: A New Way Forward

Learning from the lessons of this problematic past, a new model of teacher unionism, termed *social justice unionism*, has been gaining momentum in recent years (Behrent, 2015; Cohen, 2019; Peterson, 2014). As is often repeated in teacher union circles, teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions. Social justice unionism takes this adage to heart—recognizing the sociopolitical variables that impact working/learning conditions—and seeks to integrate the larger interests of students, parents, and communities into the more traditional demands of teacher unions (e.g., work expectations, salary, etc.). More concretely, social justice unionism means actively working for equitable, democratic, and justice-oriented education practices and reforms, and doing so by committing to a bottom-up union structure

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where the rank-and-file membership leads through their relationships with the community at large. As argued by Behrent (2015), social justice unionism has become a “necessity” in the neoliberal era in which “the only way teachers unions can survive and make real gains for teachers and students is by allying with the communities they serve” (p. 1).

This approach to teacher unionism gained prominence after the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), a social justice union caucus within the CTU, took leadership of the CTU in 2010. Similar caucuses now exist in over 20 localities, and many have joined together under the umbrella of the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators (UCORE). These caucuses focus their efforts on working for and with communities toward a more socially, economically, and racially just education system, and many—like the Caucus of Rank and File Educators in Chicago—have gained leadership positions in their unions. In Massachusetts, Los Angeles, and most recently Baltimore, educators have elected union representatives who believe that the power of collective labor should be used to work for just systemic change.

The Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action

The Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action provides us with an important example of what this current wave of social justice unionism looks like in practice. In a dramatic departure from the past, the National Week of Action shows how modern teacher unions have consciously chosen to align themselves with the interests of students and communities, particularly the interests of students and communities of Color.

In September 2016, teachers at John Muir Elementary School in Seattle, Washington, organized a day of community uplift and solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Aiming to convey that Black lives mattered at John Muir, teachers wore T-shirts reading “Black Lives Matter/We Stand Together/John Muir Elementary,” and stood alongside dozens of Black men who lined the school’s walkway “giving high-fives and praise to all the students who entered” (Au & Hagopian, 2017, p. 1). With a contentious, racially charged election looming in the background, this seemingly innocuous event was met with right-wing denunciations, hate-filled emails, and a bomb threat. It was this pushback to the Seattle educators’ open valuing of Black lives that sparked Philadelphia’s social justice union caucus, the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), to immediately begin organizing the first Black Lives Matter Week of Action.

Within weeks, WE teachers were collecting curricular resources, developing lesson plans, and organizing community events centered on the 13 guiding principles of the Black Lives Matter movement. As stated by WE organizer, Tamara Anderson, “we just wanted to shine a light on the fact that the Black and Brown children of Philadelphia and the communities they live in continue to get the short end of the stick . . . we simply wanted to stand up for our schools and communities” (personal communication, August 7, 2019). From January 23rd to 28th, teachers across the city did just that. They sparked conversations with colleagues, parents, and administrators, wore solidarity T-shirts, engaged with students in their classrooms, and hosted events addressing everything from incarceration to Black feminism, to issues facing LGBTQ youth of Color.

At the conclusion of a week that saw strong community engagement and widespread press coverage, organizers quickly turned to make the next iteration a nationally coordinated action. By the second year, the Black Lives Matter Week of Action swelled to over 20 cities and locales, becoming the Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action. Local organizations, educational scholars, and even several unions and districts began openly endorsing the effort, with social justice caucuses and supporters leading the organizing. Additionally, a clear set of national demands were added to the already constructed city-specific demands from early organizers in Philadelphia. In 2018 and 2019, the growing nationwide coalition called on schools to (a) end zero-tolerance policies, (b) mandate Black history and ethnic studies, (c) hire more Black teachers, and (d) fund school counselors instead of school police.

The collective vocalization of clear demands centered on racial justice has led to their integration into teacher union efforts beyond the National Week of Action. In Philadelphia, the Racial Justice

Committee of WE—sparked and led by Black teachers—grew into a multiracial city-wide organizing space where educators meet monthly to work toward the stated demands. In support of the Philly specific demand for mandatory anti-racist training for all school staff, the Racial Justice Committee constructed its own four-day anti-racist training, which has been successfully presented to dozens of the district’s educators. The National Week of Action’s demands are also evident in the collective bargaining agreement achieved by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) after their 2019 strike, which included a contractual guarantee for counselor-to-student ratios and additional resources for ethnic studies. Similarly, the CTU’s 2019 strike agreement included specific language committing to restorative practices for school discipline, among other victories. This expanding commitment to the demands of the movement highlights how the Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action has provided crucial opportunities to build power through organizing for racial justice, which do more than merely strengthen a union but also lead to tangible change for educators, students, families, and communities.

The National Week of Action and Higher Education

For the past two years, we—two white women who teach at higher education institutions with active unions—have worked with teachers in WE to organize the higher education outreach for the Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action. Efforts to connect with colleges and universities began with a statement of support developed for professors and scholars during the 2017 effort. As voiced in the statement, academics who sign on express their support for and solidarity with the teachers and community members in their work to make Black Student Lives Matter in our schools. In 2017, over 150 academics added their names.

As the Week of Action turned toward a national coalition in 2018, we wanted to be a part of doing more and turned the initial sign-on into an organized mailing list. We constructed the statements of support for 2018 and 2019 to compile contact information for those adding their names, which led to a nationwide solidarity list of over 350 faculty members and scholars. In the lead up to the 2019 National Week of Action, we began contacting these academics about taking their support beyond the public sign-on. We provided links to order buttons and T-shirts, post-secondary lesson plans to use in classes, and even documents to support the organizing of campus-specific events.

From this outreach, a handful of faculty members joined in these actions. One professor wore the National Week of Action T-shirt to a guest speakership, and another volunteered to organize the growing higher education mailing list. Others hosted racial-justice-centered events, like the open-mic style “Speak Up,” organized by Rutgers University faculty, and the critical analysis of *Get Out* hosted by West Chester University of Pennsylvania’s faculty. These activities, in addition to the over 350 solidarity sign-ons, marked a growing movement in support of the School Week of Action from those in higher education. Additionally, they showcase a budding commitment within the academic community to seeking racial justice in our institutions. We believe, however, that it is time to do more.

A Call to Action

As organizers, it is time we set our sights higher and take our work to the next level. We mustn’t, as Baldwin (1985) warned, allow ourselves to perish from “a lack of vision” (p. 331). It is time to move beyond collecting individual signatures to getting tangible organizational union support to take up the demands of the National Week of Action. It is time to move beyond merely including National Week of Action resources in our classrooms, wearing T-shirts, and hosting events to pushing our unions to integrate these actions into the ongoing work of their members and their collective bargaining. Higher education faculty and staff, as well as the unions that represent them, should follow the lead of our K-12 counterparts who have been engaging in social justice unionism that centers racial justice year-round. Beginning with a firm and active commitment to the Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action is the perfect first step to take.

Many of the National Week of Action demands map easily onto the post-secondary sphere, and the movement, as a whole, provides critical guidance for constructing demands that might be more specific to

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institutions of higher education. The demand to hire more Black educators is one that is in dire need of our efforts in the academy, in which a full 76% of faculty members are white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Likewise, we need to fight for our schools of education to enroll and support more pre-service teachers of Color to continue to build the pipeline of a truly diversified future teaching force. More pointedly, we need to prepare those pre-service teachers to be able to take up liberatory educational practices in their eventual classrooms, to understand union membership, and to work for justice in their own schools, districts, and communities.

With increasingly vocationalized degree programs, we need to push to maintain—if not expand—our offerings in ethnic studies—particularly Black history, philosophy, literature, art, and music. We need to fight for enrollment and retention of students of Color within our institutions, restorative justice in our student codes of conduct, and we need to fight against the massive debt accrued by millions of students each year, disproportionately by students of Color.

We must recognize and lift up the work of our colleagues of Color who have been fighting to carve out space for themselves and Black and Brown students long before the National Week of Action started. All too often, these faculty of Color have carried the load of addressing issues of racial justice on our campuses. This is a call to action, then, especially to our white colleagues and our unions, to join in and to carry the load of this work forward. It is time for higher education unions to be on the front lines of racial justice instead of blocking it or merely symbolically supporting it. It is time for faculty to create racial justice organizing committees within our unions and also with our institutions' students, staff, and communities, to ensure issues of racial justice are continually centered. Often these fights begin with a diversification of the union leadership and transparency of union structures and practices, all goals we must work toward.

The Black Lives Matter at School National Week of Action has become a springboard for building union power through commitments to racial justice. By centering issues of racial justice within the everyday work of teachers and teacher unions, educators across the country now stand with the students and communities most impacted by the harsh cuts and policies imposed on public education. This standing with communities has been a critical component of the successful actions we've seen in Chicago, West Virginia, Los Angeles, and beyond. As public colleges and universities fall similarly under attack, we contend it will be a critical component in any successful action yet to be seen in higher education. Faculty within the academy must recognize the potential of building power through racial justice. At this critical juncture for post-secondary education, genuine change in our individual institutions and our system of higher education at large depends on it.

Author Biography

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