

John F. Lyons
Teachers and Reform:
Chicago Public Education, 1929–1970.

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What is the role of teachers' unions? Should they exist (if at all) simply to support material conditions for teachers—salaries, benefits, job security, teaching conditions, etc? Should they also be advocates for improvements (however defined) to our public schooling system? What about speaking out on the larger social issues affecting children and communities at large—poverty, sexism, racism, civil rights and so on? And, whatever these goals might be, what kinds of strategies should (or shouldn't) unions employ to achieve them?

From the early inception of teacher unions, and continuing today, these are questions which teachers everywhere argue about, both individually and through their many organizational publications. Not surprisingly, the dominant media also continues to weigh in on these questions, and their observations and opinions are a matter of record. What is unfortunate, however, is the lack of critical independent studies of Canadian teacher unions—ones which explore their histories, cultures and activities, and particularly ones which examine closely the underlying forces at work (internal and external) which make them what they are. In this regard, things seem not to have changed much since Andy Spaul's review of the Canadian teacher union literature in this journal in 1991, which he entitled "Fields of Disappointment: The Writing of Teacher Union History in Canada."

Things are different in the United States, where critical studies of teacher unions seem to abound both at the national and local level, including those with a specific focus on issues such as gender, race, etc. Among many others, Marjorie Murphy's study of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Wayne Urban's exploration of the rise of teacher unions in three American cities, and Kate Rousmaniere's biography of Margaret Haley, certainly stand out. To my mind, John Lyons' detailed study of

the emergence and subsequent development of the Chicago Teachers' Union now joins this oeuvre.

Beginning with an examination of the reasons for the decline in influence and ultimate demise of Margaret Haley's once-powerful Chicago Teachers Federation during the first decades of the twentieth century, Lyons' initial chapters outline the influences at work which both assisted in, and simultaneously conspired against, the development of a new union structure. These included the obvious effects on teachers and schools of the First World War, the tumultuous 1920s era of labour union growth and subsequent state repression, and the devastating consequences of the Great Depression. By the end of the 1930s, however, teacher leaders had managed to form one "united" Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) of elementary and secondary school teachers. Yet, the following decades would see considerable internal battles in relation to the fight for equal pay for women teachers. Among other basic internal struggles for the new union was the issue of whether to side with the existing city bosses (in the hopes of at least some respite over their crushing economic conditions), or with the growing militancy of citizens' reform organizations, which were pushing to reform a highly bureaucratic system where jobs and programs were determined by political favour, rather than expertise and general public need.

Lyons is at his best in his three chapters covering the turbulent post-World War Two era, exploring with detail and balance a wide variety of significant social/political themes which directly impacted on schooling, teachers and teacher unions during this period. In Chapter 4, "The Cold War in the Chicago Public School, 1947–1957," he documents the ambiguous role which the CTU, and its national parent, the AFT, took over the union's position on loyalty oaths, and in its varying support of teachers accused of communist leanings. Even the knowledge that the Chicago Police Department's "Red Squad" was "following suspects" and compiling files on teachers they suspected of harbouring left-wing, or simply progressive sympathies, apparently occasioned little opposition from union leaders. According to Lyons, one particularly insidious activity of state officials, in regard to the evolving civil rights struggles, was their work in simultaneously promoting a "black scare" by putting "African Americans who supported civil rights under suspicion of communism." At one Chicago high school alone, "investigators put no fewer than sixteen teachers under suspicion for communist beliefs, the majority of them African American" (123).

Not surprisingly, this form of race politics played directly into the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and again, Lyons provides a very detailed description over the ensuing two chapters about the union's role in relation to the increasing community struggles to integrate the extremely segregated student population in Chicago. To be sure, a number of white teachers in the system took strong stands in support of these struggles—volunteering to teach in mainly black schools, joining parents in demonstrations and marches against city hall, and supporting (unsuccessfully) pro-integration resolutions at union meetings. Unfortunately, however, the union leadership was able to count on appealing to the majority of white teachers in the system to support an official stance of stark opposition to any attempts by civil rights organizations to promote the integration of students in schools, to improve material

conditions in schools located in racialized neighbourhoods, or to work towards more racially balanced teaching staffs. Ironically, this resistance to racial equity ingratiated the union with city politicians who were equally antagonistic to integration; as a result the union was able to parlay these dubious connections into support for another long-sought after goal—sole collective bargaining rights. As Lyons notes, Mayor “Daly, under attack from the civil rights movement, appeased the CTU and granted” them these rights (170).

In the final chapters, covering the 1970s and including further observations to the present, Lyons is able to return to the questions raised at the beginning of this review. While the union did carry out its first legal strike in 1969, it found itself facing considerable opposition from minority members and community organizations as a result of having ignored their concerns for decades. In the words of one ardent teacher unionist who, along with many others, crossed the picket line to continue teaching, “I’m a member of the teachers’ union by choice. I’m a member of the black community by birth. I was born into it and I will die in it. So that was my first commitment” (202).

In conclusion, however, Lyons notes that during the 1990s and since, the union has seemingly changed directions, and become more active in working with community organizations, governments and foundations to support schooling reform initiatives relating to culturally sensitive curriculum and educational policies. At the same time, the internal membership struggles persist to this day, as teachers more interested in a larger social agenda continue to tussle with their colleagues who are opposed in principle, and/or who hold solely to “bread and butter” issues. As a source of deep understanding of teachers’ unions, this study is highly recommended—along with the hopes that, at some point, equivalent Canadian publications may be available for comparative study.