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Social Justice Teacher Activism
A key to union vitality

If you care about social justice in education, you have a very important stake in not only the continued existence of teachers unions but also in their transformation. (Weiner, 2012)

Premature obituaries

Misleading sound bites about putting students first[1] and refusing to leave children behind[2] have allowed policy makers, legislators and school district administrators across educational jurisdictions to shape public discourse about teachers' unions — suggesting that they are either dead, irrelevant or harmful to children. In some cases pro-labour activists have added to this grave image by proclaiming the death of collective bargaining[3]. While it is important to acknowledge and collectively fight the erosion of collective bargaining rights for public and private sector workers, it can't hurt to periodically replace the shovel with fertilizer — to reframe the discourse from death to life, from union demise to union vitality.

In this article, I try something new. I exchange my typical focus on structural inequities facing unions to a more agentic focus on union vitality. In particular, I explore the relationship between the British Columbia Teachers' Federation's (BCTF) 50 year commitment to social

justice and teacher union vitality in the province. Twenty-five career history interviews with BCTF-affiliated activists, and conversations with union-active teachers in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, England, Scotland, Wales and Tasmania have taught me that while social justice activism looks and sounds different in each of these contexts, the connection between activist teacher involvement and union vitality holds weight across provincial, municipal and national jurisdictions.

Defining terms I: social justice unionism

The term "social justice" has been used by individuals of all ideological stripes to rationalize a wide range of decisions — some of which have oppressive consequences for feminist, anti-racist, Aboriginal, environmental, and other discrete-issue activists. Despite its generic, historically problematic nature, I have chosen to rehabilitate the term because it is the organizational umbrella under which most Canadian teacher union activists dedicated to anti-oppressive activism operate. For the purpose of this paper, I define "social justice unionism" as the sum of four organizational qualities.

> Social Justice Unionism = procedural democracy + demographic diversity + community connections + anti-oppressive action

Procedural democracy is one of the key elements distinguishing a "social justice union" from a "business union." It implies that rank and file educators have a voice in shaping the operational norms and practices of their union. In contrast, decision-making processes in business unions are heavily structured by priority-setting General Secretaries, led by elected table officers and implemented by a cadre of full time administrative staff. Most Canadian teachers' organizations fall somewhere between these two conceptual models.

The second element of social justice unionism relates to employment equity. Senior elected officials, administrative staff officers and union-active teachers can more easily represent all teachers in the province if they *reflect the demographic, experiential and ideological diversity of their membership*.[4] It is difficult for an experientially homogenous

Executive Committee to understand, let alone to serve, protect or represent the teacher workforce as a whole.

A third element of social justice unionism involves building and maintaining respectful solidarity *relationships* with historically marginalized communities. Oppressive forces cannot be fought alone. While it is unfair to blame teachers for putting the entire nation at risk, as has been done for the last three decades in the United States and more recently in Canada, it is important for teachers to acknowledge that they are implicated in the reproduction of societal and educational inequity. In addition to challenging oppressive action and assumptions within the teacher workforce, teachers' unions can help reverse these patterns in Canadian society by supporting community-based activists in their social justice struggles. The key to building respectful, reciprocal relationships is to know when to take the lead and know when to follow.

Finally, unions cannot claim to be social justice organizations unless they are involved in anti-oppressive *action*. This action may include developing anti-racist curriculum, facilitating workshops on gay-straight alliances, building international solidarity relationships with unions in the global south, publicly interrupting the neoliberal celebration of individual choice, protesting unilateral employer contravention of teachers' labour rights, or celebrating teachers who are described by their students as fair, fun and respectful. In short, social justice unionism cannot be sustained by rhetoric alone. It must be a dynamic, activist endeavour.

Defining terms II: union vitality

In the current neoliberal context of eroding public sector union rights, organizational vitality is an important issue. When I speak about a union's vitality, I am referring to its internal and external relevance as well as its level of member engagement.

Union vitality = relevance (internal & external) + engagement

As membership organizations, teachers' unions must continue to be internally *relevant to the teacher workforce*. They must not only be

useful, but also be perceived by members to be useful. If too many public school teachers lose faith in the representative function of their federations, they may be more easily seduced by corporate education schemes. If, however, their union regularly demonstrates concrete support measures for teachers' occupational, professional development and personal needs, organizational vitality is more likely to be protected.

Union vitality depends not only on internal relevance to members, but also on *external relevance* to parents, students, community members, district administrators, educational policy makers, curriculum developers and others involved in educational governance. If unionized teachers' contributions to high quality public education are visible to a critical mass of students and parents, their status as vital institutional actors will be more easily maintained. This externally validated institutional vitality is the product of two related factors. First, it would be politically unwise for elected politicians to attack unionized teachers who are visibly supported by the majority of voters, and second, it makes good educational sense for senior school administrators who experience unionized teachers as partners in the provision of high quality public education to ensure union survival.

Finally, union vitality depends on wide-spread *member engagement*. As increasing numbers of teachers participate in union initiatives as workshop presenters, grievance officers, committee members, school representatives, researchers, table officers, campaign planners, and activist organizers, fewer of them will internalize reform-induced rhetoric about "good teachers" and "corrupt union leaders". This resistance to government messaging is a product of two related factors. First, vilifying rhetoric is difficult to maintain as the proximity between audience and target increases, and second, wide-spread teacher participation in union activities means more members will have the inclination and skills to hold their elected leadership to account.

So…what does social justice unionism have to do with union vitality?

None of the BCTF- affiliated teacher activists I interviewed engaged in social justice work *because* they believed it would lead to organizational vitality, but in most cases their organizational commitment to a broader range of union struggles grew through their activist experience. Over

time, this organizational commitment enhanced the federation's capacity to represent a wide range of member interests.

Some teachers became union-involved because they had experienced sexism, racism, homophobia or colonialism in schools and wanted to use federation resources to protect the next generation of students from similar violence. Others who were shoulder-tapped by their colleagues in the early years of the feminist and anti-racist networks became deeply engaged and politicized by this work. Some teachers who began their careers without much activist experience fell into union rep positions at their schools then developed a commitment to social justice work because their local happened to be affiliated with the left-leaning provincial electoral caucus. Finally, a number of novice teachers who sought out professional development support from their union became aware of social justice issues because so many of the workshops, conferences and PD opportunities were led by members of the two activist networks.

The first group of activist teachers used collective grievances to institutionalize social justice programming in their union, while the second, third and fourth groups became direct beneficiaries of the professional development and political action opportunities made possible by the federation's growing institutional commitment to social justice. There were many persistent, vociferous detractors in the early years, but one of many long-term, unintended positive consequences of the BCTF's commitment to social justice unionism was the growth and preservation of union engagement, relevance and participation across the teacher workforce.[5] This growing diversification of organizational engagement correspondingly strengthened the federation's commitment to social justice. The following top ten list codifies this relationship.

10 lessons learned from the BCTF: Links between social justice activism & union vitality

The table on the next page traces bi-directional links between social justice unionism and union vitality at the BCTF. The evidence behind these claims comes from my doctoral dissertation — an institutional case study of social justice unionism at the BCTF between 1967 and 2007[6 7].

Social Justice Unionism	Organizational Vitality
Feminist and anti-racist networks active from the early 1970s till the late 1990s diversified teachers' entry points into union involvement.	Member engagement improved among teachers who did not aspire to traditional union roles (eg. school rep, grievance officer, local table officer).
Many teachers who were struggling with instruction, assessment and classroom management took advantage of the federation's PD offerings — a growing number of which were infused with a social justice analysis.	Improved classroom practice among the membership led to more equity-minded educators in the province. Many activists reported that their level of support from parents and students improved as a result of this learning.
Once a critical mass of social justice activists became invested in and knowledgeable about their union, they began to advocate for internal procedural democratization during Annual General Meetings.	Membership engagement (among pro- and anti-social justice advocates) increased as more and more members experienced what it was like to have a say in their union's priorities.
The promise of an institutional commitment to social justice caused an increasing number of under-represented groups within the teacher workforce to seek programmatic support.	Some of these groups gained programmatic support within the union allowing them to successfully bargain anti-harassment language into their contract, and race-relations positions into their respective school districts.
The federation's legal victories in the name of human rights (eg. supporting free speech for teacher activists & fighting contract imposition) showed teachers that an organizational commitment to social justice could complement rather replace traditional labour movement priorities. Beyond these provincial decisions, the union sought out and won support from the International Labour Organization after the newly elected government attempted to categorize teaching as an essential service.	Union vitality was enhanced across the province following legal decisions that came down in favour of the BCTF. Also, the ILO ruling on six pieces of provincial legislation helped the federation build an international reputation among unionized teachers.
The BCTF's commitment to social justice unionism helped teachers who had internalized government claims about self-serving unions draw a clearer link between teachers' working conditions and students' learning conditions (eg. bargaining anti-harassment language into local contracts is a social justice issue that simultaneously supports teachers and students).	Union vitality is served when teachers and community members have reason to believe that the link between working conditions and learning conditions is more than a rhetorical claim.

Social Justice Unionism	Organizational Vitality
BCTF-affiliated social justice activists supported the work of community-based social justice organizations — building local and global solidarity networks, providing access to local buildings after hours, writing letters to landlords in high poverty areas to reduce the incidence of tenant eviction, attending rallies, volunteering meeting skills, and providing under-resource groups with material support.	Growing numbers of the non-teaching public began to respond positively to federation campaigns. Participants attributed this and other signs of externally-validated union vitality to the growing social justice ethos of the union.
The large number of initiatives planned by social justice activists allowed the BCTF to maintain a consistently high level of activity between contracts.	While it was always necessary for unions to balance highly visible campaigns with less visible strategic planning, their well-resourced networks of social justice activists added a level of consistency and ongoing relevance to the large number of teachers who were neither filing grievances or directly involved in strategic planning.
Over time, activists noticed a demographic, experiential and ideological shift in leadership of the BCTF. A growing number of administrative staff and elected officials who had come up through the social justice networks began to represent teachers through an anti-oppression lens.	Whether it was because of their social justice experience or some other combination of personal competencies and relationships, union leaders who had come up through the social justice programs had an easier time communicating union positions to the teacher membership. Interview data suggests that their responsive manner helped decrease teachers' perceptions about the distance between the provincial office and the field.
A small group of social justice minded activists and staff worked with school districts on a range of curriculum-based action research projects, most recently in an action research project supporting inclusive education.	Through these collaborative projects, the BCTF's reputation, not only as a defender of contracts, but also as a supporter of educational improvement grew. The deliberate nurturing of union-district relationships by federation staff helped build the external relevance of the union in the eyes of some superintendents, thereby contributing to externally-validated union vitality.

This top 10 list traces the winding, indirect, and in some cases unintended positive influence BCTF activists have had on their union's social justice commitment and vitality in recent organizational history. While it would have been impossible to predict, drive or mandate these

objectives five decades ago, federation activists, staff and elected officials have managed to represent an increasingly diverse cross-section of the teacher workforce, build collaborative relationships with students, parents and superintendents dedicated to social justice, improve upon the democratization of union processes, and use union resources to reduce the levels of harassment and inequity in schools. Tracing historical patterns of institutional change after the fact allows us to learn about these incrementally implemented, internally-driven teacher union reform outcomes. These hard fought changes not only improve the federation's ability to represent of the teacher workforce, but also make it difficult for corporate forces to fragment the union.

Conclusion

While nearly all of the 25 activists I interviewed experienced prolonged periods of inequity within their federation, the BCTF has moved a long way toward social justice unionism over the past five decades. It has diversified its representative functions, improved access to union decision-making structures, partially democratized its internal organizational processes, and formalized a number of social justice principles, policies and programs into its operations. It has accomplished these feats, not by directing members to quietly follow a single charismatic leader, but by doing what unions do best — representing the needs of its members. Hard working groups of previously under-represented teachers demanded fair representation, and by doing so transformed the cultural ethos of their union.

I know there are many individuals, far more experienced in union governance than myself, who believe that social justice unionism will bring about the death of teachers' organizations — elected officials who are concerned that vociferous debate about social justice issues at annual meetings will lead to internal fragmentation; teachers who wonder why their dues are going to feminist initiatives instead of contract maintenance; administrative staff who worry about declining organizational resources being directed from collective bargaining to workshops on gay-straight alliances; and General Secretaries who worry about a loss of executive control brought about by an organizational shift from business unionism to social justice unionism. I may not be able to convince these individuals that social justice unionism is a

viable movement, but I hope to show them that it works with rather than against their industrial and professional development concerns.

If the BCTF case demonstrates anything, it is that a long term, internally-driven commitment to social justice unionism not only fails to erode union vitality, but actually enhances organizational relevance by improving teacher representation and member engagement. Unionized teachers would be better off fighting capitalist, neoliberal policies than resisting their colleagues' demands for procedural democratization and social justice.

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ENDNOTES

1 Putting Students First Act, Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1st Session, 40th Legislature (2012)

2 No Child Left Behind, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Senate & House of Representatives of the United States of America, 107th Congress (2001).

3 McClelland, M. (July 6, 2011). Life after the death of collective bargaining, *Mother Jones*.

4 District supervisors and school administrators who are responsible for hiring teachers should similarly ensure that new hires reflect the demographic diversity of every kindergarten classroom in the province, state, district or other educational jurisdiction.

5 Similar arguments have been made by others (Compton & Weiner, 2008; CTF, 2007; CTU, 2012; Froese-Germain & O'Haire, 2007; Kuehn, 2006; McAdie, Giles, Makan, & Flessa, 2007; NCEA, 1994; Peterson & Charney, 1999; Weiner, 2012; Winzer & Mazurek, 2011).

6 Rottmann, C. (2011). *Organized leadership for equitable change: Union-active teachers dedicated to social justice.* Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Toronto.

7 Many others have written about social justice teacher unionism, but in the interest of maximizing accessibility, I have chosen not to include a long reference list.

8 Stay tuned for a forthcoming article written by BCTF researchers about these legal battles.