

**The position of public sector and public education unions
Seattle Education Association, Representative Assembly
West Seattle High School
October 23, 2006**

Thanks very much for all your work as teachers and as members of your union.

I really enjoyed reading all your resolutions on the WASL that question its purpose, use and validity.

I also want to thank you for helping to defeat the voucher initiative 173 and the charter school initiative 177 in 1996. I noticed too that you shifted from the defense to offense in 2000 and passed initiatives 728 and 732 to get more money in the schools and to fund cost of living increases for teachers. I was out of the country during your campaign for Initiatives 87 and 88, but it's important that you keep raising the question of public funding for public schools.

The idea that there is no money for schools and teachers here in Seattle in the midst of probably the richest part of the globe is absurd. When the rulers say there is no money, what they mean is that there is no money **for you, for the kids you teach or for the public schools you work in.**

I also want to thank you for the time you take to participate in your union and in these assemblies. It is here that we see how democracy works and experience how it works. How people come from diverse backgrounds and enter into a structured discussion and debate and arrive at a collective decision.

I was reading this book called Blood and Belonging about what happens when a civil order is replaced by an ethnic order, when people give up on the possibility of a civil society with democratic decision making. I think you should pick it up and read it.

I also want to thank you for the invitation to speak here.

I must say, though, that I was originally very hesitant to accept the invitation. I really did not want to think about the situation we are in, that the public sector is in and about what to do to save public education.

One of the rules is to "Always Keep the Enemy in Front of You." Lately I've been thinking the enemy is us. It is our refusal to look closely at what is happening to our country, have the courage to face it and decide what to do about it.

The position of the public sector.

The public sector and its unions are key to the possibility of a democratic society here in the United States. This sector and its unions still have organization, resources and leadership and they occupy contested territory. And, public education is central to this sector.

As a result of this position, the public sector is under attack, under funded and the target of a

strategic campaign to eliminate it: from the Nation at Risk report in the mid 1980s which blamed public education for the declining profit rate of American corporations to standardized testing designed and controlled by private, profit making multinationals (Pearson) to the punishment schemes of No Child Left Behind.

Privatization is not about efficiency, but about shifting power relations, about changing who makes social decisions, about eliminating the idea of “a public.”

If we do not name this strategic campaign, the “wrecking of public education” will be “our fault.”

Restoring the public sector.

If we are to defend and restore the public sector to a position of prominence and thereby preserve the possibility of a democratic society, we must:

Capture the time to think, analyze and plan about our position. Speed up is also not about efficiency. It is about denying us our need to meet and discuss our situation with our fellow workers.

Face our communities and build a commonality in our diversity and then develop a common agenda based on social solidarity.

Then, we must mobilize that agenda in a visible way that builds natural allies and does not alienate them. The visible action must be movement building, as the Quakers would say. (and it must create a new deal, a new political understanding about the definition of America)

We must demand massive new public funding by taxing the private wealth that has been ripped from working people over the past two and a half decades. We must reverse the “no new funding mantra” that has been with us since the GCERF Council report in 1992. (Governor’s Council on Education Reform and Funding).

If we do not restore the public sector to prominence based on public taxation of private wealth, we can see what will happen to our public sector unions.

We can look at what happened to the private sector unions.

Like you now, private sector unions were the focus of corporate attack in the 1980s beginning with President Reagan’s attack on the PATCO union and bolstered by the strategic campaign of the Business Roundtable.

In the face of this attack, private sector unions continued to face an employer that would not or could not deliver. The unions acted alone when they struck. When the strike weapon didn’t work, they began to feed upon themselves with two tier systems that sacrificed the younger workers for the old ones. They began to buy into the competitiveness nonsense and compete against other union locations for declining jobs.

They absolutely refused to face the community, build a common agenda based on a new social

understanding and create a new political deal with capital. They remained isolated and alienated from their natural allies: their members, other unions, women, people of color, community groups, small businesses, workers in other countries. They continued to support wars of aggression like Vietnam long after the American people called for peace.

Their political and economic strength was decimated. They now represent less than 8% of workers in the private sector and their national federation, the AFL-CIO, has split in half.

All of us paid a big price for this decline in union power. Let me cite some statistics from Kevin Phillips, an author and former advisor to President Nixon. These statistics are from Mr. Phillips book, Wealth and Democracy.

From the mid 1970s to the 1990s, 70% of all earnings went to the richest 1% of the American people.

Between 1979 and 1989, the net worth of this richest 1% doubled. Between 1989 and 1999, their net worth increased 10 times. Their average net worth rose from \$230 million to \$2.6 billion

In 1999, this top 1% (2.7 million people) had as much to spend as the 100 million at the bottom of the income scale.

Between 1980 and 1999, the assets and profits of the 500 largest US corporations tripled while they eliminated 5 million jobs.

And, what happened to us? We were sped up – two wage earners now earn what one used to earn. We work more hours. Our leisure time fell, hypertension rose, and so did our tax burden.

If we want to see what will happen to the public sector itself in the absence of a sustained campaign, we can look at New Orleans.

We could, of course, look at Iraq too. Look at Paul Bremer's edicts, how he immediately privatized the whole structure of Iraqi society after our invasion and occupation, but it's probably easier for us to see what happened in New Orleans.

What happened was not as a result of a natural disaster, nor the result of governmental inefficiencies or incompetent FEMA managers. My students called it a "structured hurricane."

First, way before Katrina ever landed, there was a systematic public dis-investment in New Orleans. Remember that Louisiana is the second poorest state and New Orleans is the second poorest city in the nation, next to Washington, D.C. New Orleans is a highly segregated city, with a desperately poor school system, a century old pumping plant and a levy system that was ordered updated in 1965, but was, as of the arrival of Katrina, still not completed. Remind you of anything?

After Katrina, everything public was systematically locked up: public schools, public housing, public hospitals, even, in some sense, public safety.

Locked public schools meant the largest union in New Orleans, the teachers union was eliminated.

The only federal dollars for school relief was for private charter schools as predatory foundations descended on the battered city to help in the privatizing.

Plans were laid to convert the locked public housing into private condos.

Market prices replaced available health care as the public Charity Hospital remained closed.

Policing was shifted to private military firms fresh from the Iraq war. There was even a firm called Distinctive Shooting International made up of former Israeli commandos hired to guard the gated communities of the rich.

And, what was the federal response to the community resistance against this massive privatization of public wealth? The largest military mobilization on domestic soil since the Civil War.

What happened to New Orleans' public sector after Katrina was not the result of governmental in-efficiency, but the efficient implementation of a corporate policy to eliminate the public sector.

There is another lesson for us from New Orleans. No one is coming. We are on our own and we need to face it.

What can we do to restore the public sector? I don't think we need to suffer the fate of private sector unions, nor the fate of the public sector in New Orleans.

First, we must place ourselves within the history of struggle that is THIS PLACE. Call upon it. Mine it for strategies, tactics and community alliances. Seattle in particular and Washington State in general is a site, a place of major social innovation.

The paramount duty language of our state constitution, thanks to our Populist heritage, is probably the strongest language in the nation. It's a belief that public education is the infrastructure of a democratic life.

The Municipal Reform Party of Seattle in the early 1900s and Mayor Bertha Landes recognized the importance of a public sector for fire safety and for electric energy. (Seattle City Light)

The organizers of the public Port of Seattle saw it as a defense against the Railroad monopolies that sought to control all commerce and the price of Eastern Washington commodities. These publicly elected port districts are unique in the United States.

The Seattle General Strike of 1919 was the only one which reached stage two where there was a temporary substitution of governmental authority by the striking workers. Nothing moved but the tide unless the General Strike Committee said so.

The Commonwealth Federation of Washington in the mid-1930s was defining what the New Deal was going to be, just like we need to define what the "new deal" should be at this time.

The Group Health Cooperative was a nationally unique prepaid health care system attached to a hospital of its own.

The CIO militancy of the 30s and 40s created in Washington State one of the highest union densities in the private sector and made Washington famous for its union militancy.

The work of the Black Construction workers movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s made national news as it successfully cracked the racist, exclusionary policies of the craft unions in Seattle.

On November 30th, 1999, the alliance of union, environmental and youth groups brought the World Trade Organization to the attention of the world. When those kids were planning to shut down the WTO Ministerial, they met in the Seattle Labor Temple. And, each time they came into that meeting hall they passed by a pictorial exhibit of the Seattle General Strike.

Plus, besides all this history of social innovation that you could mine for ideas and strategies, you are in the place that has the largest concentration of wealth in the world. What you do here to confront that private wealth for the public good is de facto international, global news.

In addition, you are in a place that is the center of the corporate effort to privatize knowledge, to move knowledge from a public arena (teachers, schools, libraries and universities) where it can be used for public benefit to a private arena where only those with money can make use of it.

These new trade agreements, like NAFTA, all have a chapter that enforces on all its signatory nations the privatizing effects of US Patent Law. What you do to maintain knowledge as a public benefit here in Seattle is de facto international, global news.

Second, we need to remember our own public sector union history.

I don't think public sector unions grew in the late sixties and early seventies because of JFK's executive order allowing collective bargaining rights for federal employees.

I think public sector unions grew because of Memphis. Because King and Wurff (the leader of AFSCME) met in Memphis in 1968 and symbolically and then literally merged the public sector union drive with the civil rights movement.

I also think public sector unions grew because of the merger of this movement with the Women's liberation movement. Public education unions are, by and large, women's organizations.

Here in Washington State you won significant victories with your own collective bargain law and the creation of the Public Employee Relations Commission in the early 1970s and the Basic Education Act of 1977 – making Washington the first state in the nation to commit to fully fund basic education.

My point here is public sector union victories were not won in isolation, but with the strategic alliance of a broader social movement.

Third, we need to place ourselves within an International (Tri-national) Context.

In 1994-95, we created the Tri-national Coalition for the Defense of Public Education to see more clearly what was happening to public education and to broaden our strategic options to stop the

privatization of public education.

We learned how trade agreements like NAFTA are changing domestic policies by circumventing public forums and public decision-making, but, most importantly, we learned how unions such as the teachers' federation in British Columbia and the Mexican teachers affiliated with La CNTE have built an intimate connection with their communities.

Many of you saw Jill Friedberg's film, *Granito de Arena*, about the struggle of the Mexican teachers' movement to democratize their unions and to preserve public education. One of the main themes of that film was about the need for the Mexican teachers' movement to remember to face their own communities and mobilize for a broad social agenda.

I think you can see the result of that "facing" the community by what happened when the Oaxacan state police attacked a very traditional teachers' encampment in the center of the city of Oaxaca on June 14, 2006. Over 300,000 people marched in the streets to protect their teachers and the mobilization remains alive to this day.

Jill Friedberg is now down in Oaxaca filming that social movement. I hope you'll consider helping her out with the film she will be making and inviting Oaxacan teachers to talk about how they remain connected to their communities.

In conclusion:

Like New Orleans, no one is coming to our rescue. It's a hard thing to say, but I think it is a fact that we need to face. We must face our situation and use our resources to create a new political deal.

We need to structure our unions to capture time to think, to face our community, to create a new social agenda, to visibly mobilize for a new deal based on massive public funding of social needs through public taxation of private wealth.

Public sector unions and most especially public education unions have the resources, leadership and strategic position to do this.

I also think public school teachers have enormous legitimacy to speak to the public and lead social movements. Mexican teachers not only teach in the classroom, but they are the leaders of social struggle. I think we, as teachers, can learn a lot from those Mexican teachers.

Again, thank you very much for all your work and for your invitation to speak. I want to wish you best of luck with your deliberations this evening.