

Workers Rights and America's Labor Movement: The Creation of the Network for Social Justice Unionism (NSJU)

Interview with Michelle Gunderson co-founder of the Network for Social Justice Unionism

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Social Justice Unionism Seeks to Build Labor And Student Movements

Earlier this month at the [Labor Notes Conference](#), rank and file labor leaders announced for the first time the creation of the Network for Social Justice Unionism (NSJU), a new infrastructure that unionists concerned with advancing social justice beyond the workplace hope to use to organize for a shift in the way the labor movement operates.

The NSJU seeks to encourage the creation of social justice caucuses in union locals across the nation and to establish working relationships between those caucuses to be able to support each other's struggles. Together, these caucuses hope to create a movement inside of organized labor that pushes union leaders across the country to do more to see that union power benefits not just workers themselves, but also the communities that unions are embedded in and rely upon.

Plans for the NSJU have [been in the works](#) for over a year, and NSJU members are optimistic that their work will not only be enthusiastically received by workers and social justice activists, but that it could eventually transform and revitalize an aging labor movement. The NSJU effort has its roots in recent struggles for change led by teachers, but seeks to encourage workers of all kinds to commit to lending their knowledge, resources, and influence to other ongoing struggles for justice beyond their workplaces.

NSJU co-founder Michelle Gunderson is a member of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) who helped start the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE). She sat down to talk about the creation and purpose of the Network for Social Justice Unionism and the potential of its work.

Talk about the Network for Social Justice Unionism. Where did it come from?

It came from a definition. What does it mean to be a social justice unionist? What that means, in my mind, is that we hold workers' rights in the same plane and in the same balance as students' rights and community rights. We don't hold our needs above students'. I will fight to the death for the right of a teacher to have good compensation and job security and due process as much as I will for my students to have text books or proper health care and the things that they need to do well.

The Network for Social Justice Unionism started from the Caucus of Rank and File Educators

and Labor Notes thinking together, and we believe that social justice unionism is actually going to be what saves unionism as a movement. We are the antithesis of the union thug. We are the people who aren't out for ourselves who aren't only about our work and our jobs. And we also are very much in favor of democratic union process.

That isn't always true in our unions and it scares leadership at times, but without it we're not going to get new members especially in right to work states and in places like Milwaukee where you have to opt in to your union. We have to decide to use the structure and the power that's already there. It's a good structure and there's a lot of power, but we have to be using it for our students and workers alike

Is the NSJU a response to some of the failures of labor? What are some of the things that the labor movement needs to work on the most?

Social justice unionism is about activating membership to actually do something, not just call the union when they have a problem. And it's about a lot more than contracts. So the NSJU is taking what used to be called the business model of unionism – where the union was only involved with things that involved work and your 8 hour day – and taking it to the broader political and social realm.

Social justice unionists realize that we don't live in vacuums and that our students live in a huge context. We can't teach unless our students are well, we can't teach unless our students have resources. And we can't teach if there's inequity in our schools and we have to fight those things.

Teachers as unionists are also changing. The National Education Association (NEA), for a long time, called itself a “professional organization” and shied away from being thought of as a union. We changed that narrative in CORE, and we changed it as social justice unionists.

We're willing to be militant about workers rights, and we also don't feel the need to separate ourselves as “professionals” from other workers. I'm as much a sister to an electrician as I am to a pediatrician, and I think that's a shift in thought. Absolutely, I do want to be treated professionally and honored for my educational status and for what I bring to this world, but I don't separate myself from my janitor at all.

What do you hope to accomplish with the new Network for Social Justice Unionism?

We can't make the change we need to see today without political change, and in both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), you have to have a certain amount of momentum before you can change those organizations. So we are hoping for caucus work around the country that can win union elections, especially the election in Los Angeles – the second largest local in the country.

Social justice unionists have to win union elections so we can push leadership to then become political and not always be just a rubber stamp for the Democratic Party. I can't speak for all social justice unionists, but I know for myself that whatever party is in power, I need to be able to push them to the left.

I used to think that if a local was working well and doing well by its members, it didn't need a social justice caucus. But I've changed my mind – I've had a shift in thinking. We in CORE have become the conscience of the CTU; we've become the eyes and ears of our union. Now

I think every local needs a social justice caucus.

What do social justice caucuses do that is different from the rest of the union?

First of all, for the union to make good decisions, there are constitutions and bylaws in place for good reason. We shouldn't make decisions quickly and arbitrarily.

But a caucus can move very quickly – we just have to call a meeting and get it done. We don't have to go through a committee process and have a resolution.

Many times in a union as large as CTU with 30,000 members, if you want change or you want something to happen, it's like turning an air craft carrier around. But if we have to respond quickly to something or we want something that's more radical than our union can participate in, such as the boycott of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), that's what the caucus is for.

We recently had teachers from CORE who were boycotting the ISAT state test. If the union backed that, they would actually be promoting an action that goes against Illinois school code. The CTU can't be put in that position, but a caucus can. So a social justice caucus can be a militant arm. And "militancy" is not a scary word.

Why should militancy not be a scary word? What is it?

I think we got brainwashed in the '60s to believe that militancy meant people who create molotov cocktails or bombs or people who harm others.

Militancy, in my mind, is when people are willing to put their bodies on the line, are willing to do acts of civil disobedience that don't harm others, but not willing to roll over and play dead for the bosses, for politicians, or for their union bosses. I look to militancy for change.

Given NSJU's roots in teacher unions, do you see any special intersections or relationship between social justice unionism and student activists who are working on social justice issues on their campuses or in their schools? What do you think that interaction should look like?

One of the most exciting things that has happened is that many higher education unions want to become part of our group. So what I see here is that when you start wanting democracy for yourself, and when you actually experience it, you want it for your students as well.

Both university and community college faculty members have already reached out to us about getting involved. We're unionizing higher education faculties at a great rate. Once the professors start experiencing union democracy in their own lives, they're going to want it for their students too. I think it's going to be a genesis.

From the beginning, CORE always involved students, so I think the model has always been in place that youth will be involved.

How does CORE involve students?

Well for one thing, they can become members if they want to be – associate members, that is. The only members with voting rights have to be CTU members, and that makes sense.

Students pay \$20, and I think that barely covers the cost of what we take care of.

Even at the conference last year, we invited leaders from Students United for Public Education, a national network of student education activists, and other student activists attend from around the country because they need to see what we're doing – to either accept, reject, or model after us.

I think that the interests [of students and teachers] are so convergent that we can't exist without each other. We need to be going through this together.

If there were to be a more structured or ongoing relationship between student activism and teacher activism, what do you think the first priority for should be for that collaboration?

Educational equity, especially parity in resources. And testing – the bias in testing, how testing controls education. It just has to be approached, and I think that that's a major point.

I also think that political action is something that we share in common as well. Adults need to recognize the political lives of youth and do what they can to support it.

The potential of the NSJU and the rise of social justice unionism is vast, and especially as the [student unionism movement spreads](#) to campuses in the US, it holds great potential to provide genuine venues for the labor movement to earn the respect and participation of the rising Millennial generation. NSJU is only getting started, and will remain an organization – and potentially, a movement – for radicals to keep an eye on.

Roshan Bliss is a student organizer, inclusivity & anti-oppression trainer, and democratic process specialist with a passion for empowering young people to defend their futures and democratize their schools. Bliss, a former occupy activist, serves as Assistant Secretary of Education for Higher Education for the Green Shadow Cabinet.

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