

Power on the Job
Julie Washington/UTLA
May 5, 2006—Labor Notes Conference

How incredible is it that a kindergarten teacher from south central Los Angeles is standing here speaking about creating Power on the job. What has brought me to this point is one thing...you see I simply love teaching.

I am one of the luckiest people in the world. My job, my profession is my passion in life. I believe providing and ensuring a quality public education is vital to supporting the fundamental building blocks of creating and maintaining a democratic socially conscious society. I believe that I have a duty to speak to inequities in the system and fight for equal access to opportunities.

I worked at Normandie Ave. elementary school, a school that is cradled in the most violent and crime ridden area in Los Angeles and I wanted to be where I could make a difference. But I eventually found out that the twenty children I nurtured and loved every year in my classroom did not make a difference. My efforts were not effecting any long term change for the students or the school community.

My kindergarten students whose eyes would twinkle with curiosity and wonder, ready and eager to learn, somehow transformed into dull-eyed, low achieving, disconnected and disinterested fifth graders.

Somehow this magical reform known as No Child Left Behind that the powers from up above had thought up for us just didn't seem to be working. It seemed to be leaving plenty of my children behind! And though many of us screamed out about the inequities and rigidness inflicted upon us and our students our cries fell on deaf ears.

No Child Left Behind was the law of the land and we had our marching orders. Teachers almost immediately became the "problem" and seemed to be the sole reason why achievement was low. It didn't matter about lack of educational funding, overwhelming class sizes, lack of textbooks, proper materials and /or incompetence of the district and its machine. Social constructs and barriers to achievement such as poverty, violence, drugs, language differences, health issues, institutionalized racism and sexism were said to be excuses.

Teachers are the target and the easy scapegoat.

- Scripted programs: in Los Angeles the choice was Open Court. The publisher is said to be friends with President Bush. With one size fits all curriculum there is no room for teacher judgment.
- Limited scope of teaching: bread and water diet, no content, nothing to hook a thirst to learn.
- Accountability has become the buzz word and seems to apply only to the actual workers. Tests and tests and then tests some more! Teacher surveys have indicated that in some of our lowest performing schools upwards of 20% of school time is focused on testing.

As the chapter chair and area director, teachers were calling me at home, meeting me in the parking lot with complaints and concerns. So I went to my union leadership. Surely my union was developing ways to fight back against this tidal wave that was so obviously formed to wipe out public education. What was the plan? What was my unions plan?

To my horror I found they had no plan. They were for the most part complacent or worse even actively supporting some of the most stifling parts of the district's so called reform. How could my union leadership be so disconnected from what was going on at the site level? Why didn't they care? Were they just a bureaucracy machine themselves? Why hadn't they formed an alliance with parents, community members, and other unions to fight back? I thought that unions were from the people and about people.

Realizing I could not fight this battle by myself I joined a progressive caucus within the union called PEAC progressive educators for action. One evening we had a steering committee meeting I will never forget. We decided to put a slate together to run for the offices of our union. And we laid out the strategy to win.

That strategy was simple: we were going to go site to site to site to organize. We needed to listen to what members thought was important, what were their priorities and issues.

We spoke to the social justice platform of our slate. We dared to ask the membership to not just wait for union leadership to do something but rather to step up to the plate and become the union. Don't wait for someone to save you, save yourself!

We had hundreds of teachers all over Los Angeles making calls and providing support for the campaign. There was hope and excitement. An incumbent had never lost a city-wide election in UTLA. Our bids for office were long shots, but it was worth it if we could push our issues so that leadership would be forced to deal with our priorities.

Who knew that we would capture all four of the city wide seats we ran for? And we would sweep the board of directors with a clear $\frac{3}{4}$ majority, it was just unbelievable! But the message was clear, our members were tired of business as usual.

Since we have taken office we have begun the steps to becoming a real union. One of the first things we have needed to do is to come to grips with the fact that change is sometimes painful and slower than desired.

Sometimes just when you think you've identified the enemy or barrier and you discover it's really a lot deeper than you think.

The officers visit sites several times a week to keep our fingers on the pulse of our membership and to offer encouragement and support to the site rep. and all members. This also helps to promote more frequent site meetings.

We meet regularly with the other six unions that are employed by our district. We are developing plans to support each others efforts. Last Wednesday our AFT vice president and the vice president of the administrators union went to SEIU negotiations meeting to show solidarity. Even though they were both kicked out the statement was made loud and clear. We are united with our fellow union brothers and sisters!

We have formed real alliances with community based organizations. Our school reform package that was just revealed a couple of weeks ago was developed in collaboration with several CBO's and parent groups. We want teachers and other staff along with parents and community organizations to lead the effort in school reform. This collective will demand to have a voice in school reform.

With this added focus the effort becomes much more global. We need to scrutinize state funding. As most of you know we have a governor who can not be trusted. We have a governor who raids school funding with one hand and attacks teachers, nurses, firefighters and police with the other. His actions in my opinion, turned out to be a blessing in disguise: it showed the nation the power of public servants. Even the terminator himself was not a match for all of us united! We need to maintain those relationships and ties created in his battle and build upon them. Because the fight is bigger than any one of us can handle.

With the adjustment for regional costs, California ranks 43rd among states in educational spending per student. There is a direct correlation between California's shameful lack of funding and California's schools pitiful academic standing. California in all of its liberalism is one of the three most segregated states for Latino and African American students. If we are truly going to bring equity to our school system we have to form strong alliances with parents, community and independents who are committed to change. We have to develop short and long term strategies that resonate with the public and provide support for other group's struggles as well. We have to hold politicians accountable and stop rubber stamping certain party members who are not responsive to the working class and to the poor.

Even though I have become a vice president in the second largest teacher's local in the country, I am and will always be that plain kinder teacher who loves her babies. I left my babies to fight for them. I believe in public education, to me it is the social justice issue of this decade. And it is the responsibility of my union to fight to preserve and improve it! And to speak for those whose voices would be drowned out. At the risk of dating myself: Power to the People!