

Seminários em Estudos Globais do Trabalho

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“The attack on teachers’ unions, and unions’ strategic response in the U.S.”

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Abstract: Over the past decade, teachers’ unions in the U.S. have been under unprecedented attack. There are several different sources of this attack – including ideological, political and religious opponents – but the single most powerful source is the biggest employer organizations, dominated by finance and technology companies who see huge potential profits in the privatization and digitization of schooling. The attack on teachers’ unions aims ultimately to dismantle the public education system, doing away with the notion that common people have a right to a decent education, fundamentally degrading what it means to teach or to learn, and condemning all but the wealthiest children to a narrow, standardized and uninspiring education that revolves around learning to follow directions and sit still while being bored.

Through a series of fights and failures, it has become clear to many US teachers unions that they are not strong enough to win by themselves, even if they engage in prolonged strikes. In response, the best unions have developed two new strategies: first, bargaining and striking not only for wages and working conditions, but also for their students’ right to a high-quality education; and second, using those broader bargaining demands to build broad alliances with parents and community organizations, in order to pressure elected officials to do the right thing. This strategy was remarkably successful in a series of strikes from 2012-2019, though it is far from being universally adopted. The COVID crisis has led to new attacks on teachers and their unions, and requires new strategic responses – but the basic logic of articulating bargaining demands that capture educational quality as well as working conditions, and mobilizing broad community support around those demands, remains the critical framework for developing successful union strategies.

Bio: Professor Gordon Lafer is co-Director of the Labor Education & Research Center at the University of Oregon, USA. He is also a Research Associate with the Economic Policy Institute and a Fellow with the National Education Policy Center. Lafer holds a PhD in Political Science from Yale University and is founding co-chair of the American Political

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Science Association's Labor Project, and has written widely on labor, economic and education policy. He has also served as an organizer and strategic planner for several labor unions, including unions representing hotel workers, nurses, school teachers, university employees and construction workers. At the start of the Obama administration, Lafer served as Senior Policy Advisor for the U.S. Congress' Committee on Education and Labor. From 2019-2023, he was an elected member of the school district board of directors for a 16,000-student school district in Eugene, Oregon.

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