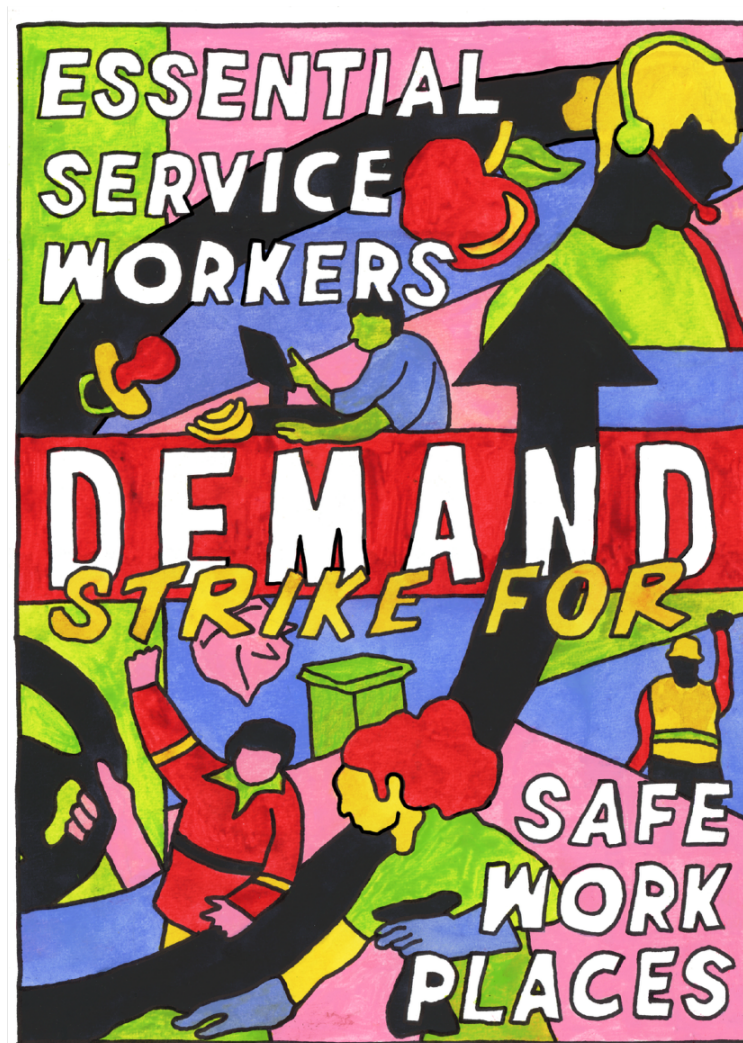


# RADICAL TEACHER

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## “What We Want is the Same Thing You Want”: Educator Union Organizing for the ‘Common Good’ during Covid-19

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In mid-February 2021, amidst mounting pressure from the local school district and the federal government to reopen schools during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) surveyed local parents regarding their stance on school reopening. The educator union's survey determined that 66% of Los Angeles Unified School District's parents wanted to remain with remote learning (Myart-Cruz, 2021) due to family health concerns. Thus, the UTLA articulated to local politicians that it would only sign an agreement to return to buildings if three health and safety demands were satisfied: "LA County is out of the purple tier [i.e., a tier indicating high Covid-19 rates]; Staff are either fully vaccinated or provided access to vaccination; Safety conditions are in place at our schools, including PPE [i.e. Personal Protective Equipment], physical distancing, improved ventilation, and daily cleaning" ("91% YES," 2021).

The Los Angeles mayor then presented the UTLA with a proposed new agreement in March 2021 that failed to sufficiently account for such health and safety demands but, if ratified, would have led to reopened school doors within the month with additional state funds as incentive. An overwhelming 91% of voting UTLA members voted against the mayor's proposal. The UTLA president, Cecily Myart-Cruz, reported: "This vote signals that in these most trying times, our members will not accept a rushed return that would endanger the safety of educators, students and families" ("91% YES," 2021). Further, pointing to the state incentivization of reopened school buildings through the provision of additional funds to districts offering in-person classes, while referencing the fact that the district serves over 91% Latinx and Black students ("LAUSD," 2021), Myart-Cruz stated: "[the state's incentivization] money will only go to white and wealthier schools that do not have the transmission rates low-income Black and [B]rown communities do. This is a recipe for propagating structural racism" (quoted in CBSLA Staff, 2021a).

The UTLA's story of pushback against management in their school district is representative of nation-wide tensions surrounding school reopening during the 2020-2021 school year in the U.S. broadly. Many districts across the country pushed for school reopening at this time, with few appearing to pay sufficient attention to the lived health and safety needs and concerns of students, families, and school workers (e.g., Madeloni, 2021). Meanwhile, many U.S. educator unions assertively and visibly organized for a "safe return to school" involving stronger health protections in school buildings. Such unions pointed to the ways in which community health concerns are bound up with the learning and working conditions of schools, and thus linked the health and well-being of children, families, and communities with those of educators. Such unions employed a range of tactics, including engaging in ongoing legal bargaining with districts about school conditions and, at times, outright refusal to follow employer directives, as in the case of educators in several cities who chose to work in the mid-winter cold rather than enter buildings that they deemed unsafe for students, families, and workers (e.g., Issa & Schuba, 2021; Maton, 2021a, 2021b).

Media coverage of the debates on school reopening gave voice to many groups with strong opinions about who

was to blame for many school doors remaining closed. One visible faction blamed educators and their unions, asserting that they were driven by selfish motives such as wanting to work less (e.g., Snowball, 2021). Meanwhile, many U.S. educator unions—including the UTLA, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), Boston Teachers Union (BTU), Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), and others—framed organizing efforts as driven by social justice unionist philosophy and the effort to democratically organize for the common good.

*Social justice unions* are democratic worker organizations that seek to advance equity, justice, and common good issues that benefit their dues-paying members alongside the public more broadly. They tend to embrace a range of tactics, including those relying upon traditional bargaining and negotiation processes as well as more assertive tactics such as protests, workplace walk-outs, and strikes (Dyke & Bates, 2019; Stark, 2019; Maton, 2016, 2018, 2022b; Weiner, 2012). They strive to partner with local communities, pointing out with a common refrain that "teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions" and that they are fighting for "the schools our students deserve."<sup>1</sup> (Maton, 2022a). One core element of this movement is the effort to center common good issues within labor organizing practices. For the purpose of this article, the *common good* is defined as the resources that are needed for the life preservation and growth of society's members. It includes those elements that allow for humans in a given society to protect and enable their lives and encompasses considerations extending beyond individual people, including environmental conditions and the availability of universally accessible resources.<sup>2</sup> Common good issues can include those of equitable access to resources in public health and education, as indicated in the example of UTLA described above, thus exhibiting how efforts to advocate for public health and enhanced learning conditions in schools may be understood as efforts to advocate for the common good.

In this article, I draw primarily upon popular media and artifactual union-published sources, alongside initial data from interviews with educator unionists, to tease apart what common good issues were taken up by social justice educator unions during the 2020-2021 school year and why they chose to take up this range of issues, as well as to consider the stakes of this frame for union organizing within and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, this article seeks to build a stronger understanding of how common good issues are construed and employed by educators' social justice unions.

## Social Justice Unionism and the Common Good

Business unionism is the most common union organizational model in the U.S. today. Here, the union operates like a top-down business that provides legal services to members such as collective bargaining processes and contract enforcement, representational services, and other group services like securing health plans, insurance, and group legal services. In contrast, social justice unionism

embraces grassroots democratic organizing approaches while expanding upon what it sees as the myopic focus of business unionism.

Social justice unions elevate principles of union transparency and democracy, equity-related issues, and demands affecting union members and local communities. They embrace assertive tactics (e.g., walkouts, protests, and strikes) alongside what might be considered more traditional demands (e.g., wages and benefits) and approaches (e.g., legal processes such as contractual bargaining) (Bradbury et al., 2014; Fletcher & Gapsin, 2008; Maton, 2022b; McAlevy, 2016; Weiner, 2012). Social justice unions tend to value active member engagement in democratic union decision-making approaches while prioritizing *both* the provision of necessary services to members *and* the achievement of gains benefiting the common good. Recognizing that their collective and legal position provides political influence and a platform for effecting change, educators' social justice unions employ common good positions to advocate for the material, cultural, and institutional facilities benefitting local communities and the public (Belsha, 2019; Maton, 2022b; McCartin et al., 2020). For example, in their quest to nourish and expand the relational nexus between schools and local communities, such unions might organize around expanding the rights of immigrants, public access to food and shelter, the right to be protected from police violence, or the health and welfare of students attending public schools. As seen in their tagline phrase "teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions" (Maton, 2022a), social justice unions position rank-and-file educators' working conditions as inherently intertwined with the daily lives and socioeconomic and health-related needs of their students and local communities. Overall, social justice unions seek to prioritize the needs of rank-and-file members alongside those of the working class more broadly while using enhanced union democracy as a method for achieving such goals (Bradbury et al., 2014).

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike of 2012 is commonly thought to mark the early stages of a U.S.-wide educator unionist shift toward social justice unionism that centers common good demands while seeking to protect and strengthen public education. Starting in 2008, members of CTU formed the Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE), a union caucus (i.e., rank-and-file group) of like-minded social justice unionists. Rank-and-file CTU members organized through CORE engaged in ongoing protest against school closures in close partnership with local parent and community organizations, and presented a major challenge to the corporatization and privatization of public education in Chicago from 2008 and on (McAlevy, 2016). In 2010, CORE members were elected into top leadership positions in the CTU and succeeded in pushing out the former "business unionist" leaders. Through community partnerships, CORE built enhanced trust between the CTU and local parents and communities of color and those facing economic insecurity. Thus, when the CTU later struck in 2012, with demands that included a nurse and social worker in every school, local parent and community groups offered significant support for striking educators by organizing a concurrent parent organization and participating in numerous union actions

such as union pickets, rallies, and marches. The success of CTU's 2012 strike is often attributed to the strength of the union's community partnerships, and it succeeded in garnering significant national and international visibility for the educator social justice unionist movement (Brogan, 2014; McAlevy, 2016).

Since the CTU's 2012 strike, an increasing number of educator unions and organized groups of rank-and-file union members (i.e., caucuses) have been similarly using their political power and position to elevate social justice unionism principles and common good demands (Dyke & Bates, 2019; Maton & Stark, 2021; Stark, 2019; Weiner, 2012). As Myart-Cruz illustrates previously, such unions are actively identifying and pushing back against historically-situated systemic factors such as structural racism and capitalism (e.g., Maton, 2018, 2022a), thus shifting the terrain of what people expect of unions and labor.

The United Caucuses of Rank-and-file Educators (UCORE) was formed in 2014 to bring together and provide mutual support for what are now over forty active social justice caucuses in cities and states across the U.S., including Baltimore, Los Angeles, Massachusetts, New York City, North Carolina, Philadelphia, Rochester NY, Seattle, and West Virginia (Stark, 2019). Social justice caucuses like CORE are frequently, although not always, at the forefront of pushing their broader unions to embrace social justice unionism. In some locations, such as Boston, union leadership has embraced social justice unionism without the active support of a social justice caucus, while in other locations like Philadelphia, caucuses act as moral guides and political influences on their broader union even while not technically elected into leadership positions (e.g., Maton, 2021b). The educator strikes in Arizona, Chicago, Denver, Kentucky, Los Angeles, Oklahoma, West Virginia (e.g., Blanc, 2019; Dyke & Bates, 2019), and other states and cities in 2018 and 2019, marked the growth in educator unions' willingness to embrace social justice unionism by mobilizing assertive tactics around common good demands. Covid-19 appears to have continued, and perhaps intensified, this trend.

## What Common Good Issues are Unions Advancing during Covid-19?

Social justice unions have tended to emphasize the impact of broader systemic issues on the learning resources and health protections offered by public schools. This section highlights how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, such unions have called attention to: (1) the need to resolve longstanding trends of underfunding U.S. public schools; and (2) the need to recognize and mitigate the effects of systemic racism and classism on public school resources.

Educator unions have pointed to the impossibility of "catching up" to the infrastructural and resource needs necessitated by Covid-19 following the lack of substantial public investment in schools over several decades (e.g., Owens et al., 2016; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015). Prior to the pandemic, educators in many U.S. locations had already brought attention to the dearth of learning resources, including books (e.g., Hendry, 2018), lack of available

hygiene products and clean water (e.g., Burke, 2020), and gaps in the provision of children's health and wellness resources such as nurses and social workers (e.g., Jaffe, 2019a, 2019b), along with widespread environmental hazards in schools such as inferior ventilation systems and unmitigated asbestos (e.g., Ruderman et al., 2018). During Covid-19, unions across the U.S. built on this earlier work through highlighting the challenges of providing sufficient safety protections for children and workers in schools during Covid-19, when many buildings entered the pandemic with already crumbling infrastructure due to decades of disinvestment.

***Crumbling public infrastructure has been perhaps most visible during Covid-19 in the substandard ventilation systems and air quality of many public schools, and particularly those serving economically insecure and racialized youth.***

Crumbling public infrastructure has been perhaps most visible during Covid-19 in the substandard ventilation systems and air quality of many public schools, and particularly those serving economically insecure and racialized youth. Educator unions in Boston, Philadelphia, and elsewhere have sought to highlight the public health-related implications of such infrastructural weaknesses. For example, the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) has repeatedly pointed to the lack of HVAC in the vast majority of local public schools alongside the plethora of school windows that should, but do not, open for the provision of fresh air. Such factors have led to inadequate ventilation in the majority of Boston public school buildings (Evans, 2020), and yet the union believes that the district has repeatedly sought to minimize the health-related impacts of such infrastructural weaknesses. Through striving to improve the environmental conditions of schools, educator unions like the BTU have pointed to the ways in which student, family, and community health and well-being are linked to that of educators. They have sought to remedy public health gaps in order to simultaneously improve the learning and working conditions of schools, and in this way have oriented much of their organizing work around common good demands during Covid-19.

Educator unions have also been at the forefront of identifying and striving to mitigate Covid-19's exacerbation of racial and class inequities. Data shows that Black and Brown communities have consistently been among the most hesitant to return to in-person learning (Walsh, 2021), and several educator unions have explicitly named the classism and racism inherent in district reopening policies and have centered their organizing on elevating the voices and demands of racially and economically marginalized communities.

During Covid-19, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) sought to apply its continued strong public presence, which was first achieved by its 2012 strike, through pushing for

the demands of the majority of its parents and students, of whom 64% qualify for free and reduced lunch and 89% are Black/Indigenous/People of Color (BIPOC) ("Demographics," 2021). In 2020, the union released a range of common good demands, including meals for quarantined students who were low-income students, access to free Covid-19 testing for the public, and enhanced access to internet and technological resources for young people in Chicago ("CTU, allies," 2020). When the district sought to force schools to physically reopen amidst an upsurge in Covid-19, the union worked with its longstanding parent and community partners to design and release a survey reporting upon parent preference for remote versus in-person learning. The survey found that just 25% of eligible students planned to attend in-person learning, and that the vast majority of parents of color did not wish to send their children physically back into public schools at this time. In response, the union drew upon its established ties to parent and community groups through advocating for strengthened access to remote instruction—rather than physically reopening school buildings. The CTU's March 2021 press release, authored by Jesse Sharkey, emphasizes:

...it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the families we serve simply do not trust claims of equity from the mayor and [district]... Educators and parents spent months asking for improvements to remote learning, because that is what would provide the best educational outcomes. Educators and parents were ignored... It is incumbent on the mayor and her CPS [district] leadership team to [at] last listen to parents and students, in addition to teachers... ("Less than," 2021).

During these confrontations, the CTU allied with parents and communities of color to recommend spending time and money on improving the quality of online learning rather than focusing on reopening schools in unsafe conditions (Maton, 2021a; Issa & Schuba, 2021; Schuhrke, 2021). Such efforts sought to draw attention to disparities in how race and class shape the provision of education, and the ways in which district policy tends to respond to economic and social priorities that substantially diverge from those of local marginalized communities.

Social justice educator unions tend to value working on common good issues that affect students, families, and communities both within and beyond schools, and to prioritize working in partnership with local community groups in an effort to achieve tangible results. As such, issues of immigration are of concern to many social justice educator unions. For example, in the Trump era, BTU member Rosemary Connors described in an interview how the BTU became very concerned with the "immigrant crisis at the border and the children" and so "we [i.e., the union] spoke out, wrote and spoke out at union meetings about our position on that... we made alliances with the Boston Educational Justice Alliance and other groups to try to move things forward." Connors stated that this issue was of concern to educators because they embraced a "holistic view of the issues that our families are facing." Thus, the union identified a need connected with children and sought to partner with other area organizations to advocate for issues

affecting communities marginalized along racial and citizenship dimensions that extended beyond the classroom.

## Why Are Unions Advancing Common Good Issues during Covid-19?

In a previous article, I discuss how a U.S. social justice caucus, Philadelphia's Caucus of Working Educators, draws upon race- and class-based frames while seeking to trigger public school policy change (Maton, 2018). I show that they use critical identity-based frames in ways that serve both ethical and strategic purposes, and thus hold moral and practical implications for social justice union organizing (Maton, 2018; also see Maton, 2021c, 2022a). Similarly, my current research finds that U.S. educators' social justice unions seek to advance common good demands during Covid-19 due to a combination of ethical and strategic purposes. Such unions engage an ethical set of perspectives while seeking practical outcomes for education workers and the public. They align their ethical goals with the strategic organizing dimensions of their work, and vice versa, in order to enhance their capacity for effecting tangible change in the public arena.

Unions appear to act on a sense of ethical obligation—or, in Sharkey's words above, an "incumbency"—to align their common good priorities with school policy ("Less than," 2021). Educator unions seek to challenge the existing systemic "order of things" by drawing attention to, and offering critical analyses of, the effects of schooling on the lived experiences of workers, students, families, and communities. They present and advocate for a range of possible solutions and strive to shift political perceptions of, and policy responses to, matters of equity and justice. For example, caucus members in Philadelphia had consistently critiqued their district's provision of PPE and ventilation equipment, including individual small window fans which the district provided as a primary ventilation mitigation system for large classrooms (Maton, 2021b; Wolfman-Arent, 2021). When the district emphasized a sudden and urgent push to reopen schools in early February 2021, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers' (PFT) president Jerry Jordan released a press statement highlighting that the district's sudden urgency stemmed from "sheer cruelty and a callous disregard" for human lives (Jordan, 2021b). Jordan pointed out that the district had not fulfilled its commitment to the provision of sufficient PPE and ventilation systems, nor released data reflecting the safety of school buildings:

And the data that we do have is troubling. Entire schools have maximum occupancy of zero according to air balancing reports. We have repeatedly asked for real, concrete solutions, and instead have been presented with a dangerous window-fan installation program that further jeopardizes the health and safety of our educators and young people (Jordan, 2021a).

Accompanying this statement was a call for educators to refuse to enter school buildings on the following Monday in response to the district mandate for school reopening that day. Here, the union emphasized the "jeopardy" presented to workers and students by school reopening, which in turn implies the health risks for the district's families and

communities, of whom over 85% are BIPOC (Fast facts, n.d.). By drawing attention to the value of human life, this ethical appeal implicitly allies the union with community and neighborhood needs, exemplifying the power of social justice unionist organizing for the common good.

Other unions have more explicitly called upon race and class in their ethical appeals. For example, in Myart-Cruz's discussion of the negative effects of school funding policy on "low income Black and brown communities," quoted in the article's introduction, she asserts that the district and state are responsible for "propagating structural racism" (CBSLA Staff, 2021a). Here, she articulates an ethical stance that the district is not only failing to provide for equity across economic and racial groups, but—perhaps even worse—is replicating and advancing systemic oppression. Such calls for common good issues serve to situate the union as doing the "good work" of supporting equity and justice.

There are also strategic purposes for social justice organizing for the common good. Through appealing to community members and allying with their causes, unions are able to build enhanced public support. For example, the CTU has exhibited longstanding commitment to building community alliances, including through partnering with community and parent groups in protesting the closure of over sixty public schools by the district in 2013 (Lewis, 2013; Maton & Stark, 2021). When the CTU engaged in a highly visible strike in 2019 over contract negotiations, the union embedded common good issues within its demands—including for accessible and affordable housing, and increased numbers of nurses and social workers in schools. Dennis Kosuth, a CTU member and school nurse in Chicago, credited the union's partnerships with winning legal agreements such as the district commitment to a nurse in every school. He stated: "I think none of this stuff that we've won, we've won on our own. I mean, if you look at the last strike in 2019, it was in conjunction with SEIU, who represents a bunch of educators in the system, and with an alliance with parent organizations. And that goes back to the 2012 strike of having those alliances with community organizations."

Earlier trust-building ventures assisted the union's ability to join a coalition of unions, community groups, and state and local elected leaders to propose and advocate for health and wellbeing protections for Chicagoans during Covid-19, including access to free testing for people in need, meals for quarantined low-income students, and policies to tackle the digital divide ("CTU, allies," 2020). Jennifer Johnson, Chief of Staff for the CTU, discusses the union's commitment to such partnerships during Covid-19 in a one-on-one interview:

We work really closely with community partners throughout this, [and] we're in multiple coalitions. Our political coalition, the United Working Families Party, the grassroots collaborative labor coalition, our grassroots education movement, which is our community partner coalition. And so, we've been in dialogue with all of these partnerships, which are both, like I said, labor and community, and so we're not doing this in isolation, right? We're getting feedback from our parent groups who have been largely on the same page.

Partnerships between the union and local parent and community partners are identified as allowing for, and strengthening, the union's commitment to strategically organizing for the common good.

Educator unions also strive to elicit strategic change in resource distribution within and beyond public schools. For example, the BTU seeks to shift the lived experience of students, families, and educators within schools and society through advocating for common good demands including tenants' rights. In late November 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the Massachusetts State Senate omitted housing stability amendments from its budget, despite nation-wide trends in housing insecurity amidst the economic shutdown caused by Covid-19. The BTU sent a political action update to its members, asking them to call or email policymakers and otherwise take action to support what they understood as a law that would negatively impact many of the district's students and families ("Political action," 2020). The union thus allied with local communities in order to advance concrete common good issues that would benefit the families that they serve—and the public more broadly. While it might be argued that the BTU could have gone further in employing more assertive direct action tactics in its efforts to advocate for improved housing security for Bostonians, it is clear that there is movement amongst social justice-oriented educator unions toward advocating for enhanced funds, resources, sociopolitical and environmental conditions that will directly benefit the public. In this way, such unions combine an ethical perspective (i.e., that such advocacy work is morally necessary) with a strategic orientation (i.e., that partnering with local communities will enhance relationships of trust amongst the union and public, and thus strengthen their ability to organize and achieve gains in the long-term).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that through applying their legal and political power to issues that support the social, health, and economic wellbeing of the public broadly, and not simply their members, social justice unions are able to position themselves as a central part of a social movement for social, educational, racial, and economic justice. Social justice unions apply legal powers to negotiate better learning and working conditions in schools, such as through establishing collective agreements, memorandums of understanding with the employer, and other aspects governing the conditions of schools. In the cases of Chicago and Los Angeles during the 2020-2021 school year, such legal power has included bargaining with school districts for access to clean classrooms, water and hand soap, and ongoing access to food and nutrition during school shut-downs, along with health resources such as masks for children in schools, Covid-19 vaccination access for children and other local community members, and adequate school ventilation systems. During this period in Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, and Chicago, unions used grassroots job action as a method of exerting political power in order to advocate for common good issues. This was displayed in instances such as when they organized car caravans and teach-outs to demand safer schools. Social justice unions

position school workers as bound together with local children, families, and communities through their mutual dependence on the public health, wellness, and economic resources and conditions afforded by public schools.

Educators' social justice unions advance common good issues while seeking to dismantle systemic oppression. Covid-19 has brought such dynamics further into the light and it is vital that we pay attention to what issues unions are advocating for, and why they are rising up, within and beyond the global health crisis. The stakes are high in social justice unionist efforts to advance common good demands because the health and wellbeing of local communities, and society broadly, depends upon this work.

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## Notes

1. Starting from around 2010, numerous North American unions have employed and popularized such phrases (for example, see Caref, 2018). Partnership with local communities has been a central mission of such social justice organizing efforts, made visible, for example, through the CTU's ongoing effort to ally with local communities through countering neighborhood school and hospital closures (see Maton, 2021a; Maton & Stark, 2021), and the UTLA's efforts to increase city green space and support for immigrant defense (see "Our contract agreement," 2019).
2. This definition is adapted from philosopher John McMurry's (1998) definition of "the civil commons" (p. 24).

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