

Redefining “best and brightest”

By Martin Haberman

I have the dubious distinction of having developed the most teacher-education programs in America. All of these efforts, whether successes or failures, have been directed at getting better teachers for children in poverty from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the course of 34 years of doing this, I have developed a job-interview system that can predict which candidates will be successful with children in urban schools.

It will come as no surprise to the readers of *In These Times* that the “best and the brightest” teachers are not 25-year-old white females from small towns or suburbs with high grade point averages who “always wanted to teach.” The profile of the “best and the brightest” for culturally diverse children in urban poverty is as follows:

- Didn’t decide to teach until after graduation from college.
- Tried (and succeeded) at several jobs or careers.
- Is between 30 and 50 years of age.
- Attended an urban high school.
- Has raised several children, is a parent, or has had close, in-depth, meaningful relations with children and youth.
- Currently lives in the city and plans to continue to do so.
- Is seeking and preparing for a teach-

ing position in only an urban school system. (Doesn’t believe “teaching is teaching” or “kids are kids.”)

- Has had personal and continuing experiences with violence and of living “normally” in a violent community and city.
- Has majored in just about anything at the university.
- May or may not have an above-average grade point average.
- Expects to visit the homes of the children he/she teaches.
- Has some awareness of or personal experience with a range of health and human services available in the urban area.
- Expects that the school bureaucracy will be irrational and intrusive.
- Is likely not to be of Euro-American background, but a person of color.
- Is likely to be sensitive to, aware of and working on his/her own racism,

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sexism, classism or other prejudices.

These are some of the attributes that, taken together, provide a thumbnail sketch. Taken singly, each has no predictive validity. Taken together they characterize but do not explain teaching success. I cite them here merely to provide a real-world alternative to “the best and the brightest” stereotype that emanates from blue-ribbon committees, national panels, foundations and other fantasy factories that have nothing whatsoever to do with children in poverty, their schooling or the preparation of their teachers.

In my current Milwaukee program, we prepare paraprofessionals with college degrees to become teachers. These are individuals who share most if not all of the attributes cited above. They also share the experience of living in poverty themselves. Indeed, many of them are currently living in poverty and need not recollect former periods of their lives. In many ways these new teachers are “at risk” themselves because of their income level.

Since they had all been carefully selected as having a commitment to the behaviors and ideology that matched that of great urban teachers, I knew they would be successful. What I did not anticipate were the effects of their own economic levels and the stress it creates during their first year. (In our program, the first year of teaching, with coaching, is in essence the preparation program.) Every year for the past three years we have had some beginning teachers experience the following:

- Death of a child or death of the teacher.
- Critical, life-threatening injuries to a member of the teacher’s immediate family.
- Violence at home (either abuse from a spouse or child abuse).
- Bankruptcy.
- Forced moving, i.e., the need to find a new residence for the family.
- Inability to secure affordable home or

car insurance.

- Serious illnesses requiring unforeseen surgery or rehabilitation.
- Chemical or drug dependency.
- Serious and continuing transportation problems.
- Marital problems of all types and severity.
- Child custody problems.
- Lawsuits related to a variety of out-of-school issues for which the teacher could not afford counsel.
- Poor nutrition, exercise and sleep habits.
- No preventive medicine for themselves or their families.
- Mental and emotional problems, treated and untreated.

I have been impressed, "floored" would be more accurate, by the ability of our teachers to weather these storms at the same time they learned to be satisfactory, superior or star teachers in extremely demanding urban situations.

The lesson I learned is this: Carefully selected "best and brightest" urban teachers who are themselves in poverty, close to poverty or recently in

poverty, can empathize with their students and teach them better. They know in their bones what it means for a child to "sneak" to school early so that he/she doesn't get beaten up and why it's important to have *un*locked school doors and to serve breakfast. They not only show great understanding for the children but for parents. Sometimes this also takes the form of tough love. Our teachers follow through and insist upon parents performing their responsibilities at the same time they exude empathy for life conditions they can appreciate and well understand.

The focus of our program is on preparing the inter-professional practitioner. Teachers cannot themselves perform the range of health and human services their children need, but they can learn to identify conditions (such as abuse) and, even more, expect and anticipate the needs of their children for services. Teachers can also be taught to help their children's families to make the connections they will need to get services they don't know they

need, don't know are available or don't know how to access.

Many in teacher education still advocate simplistic ethnic matching as a way to get diverse urban children the teachers they need. In my experience, this is only an important first step. Finding and selecting future teachers who have also experienced urban poverty—those who can connect their children's life experiences to school curricula—provides even higher potential for effective teaching. ▲

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This article is part of a continuing series on education edited by Alex Molnar, a professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The series, "Notes From the Back of the Class," covers a wide range of education-related issues. Contributions from readers are welcome. Manuscripts of no more than 1,000 words should be sent to Alex Molnar c/o In These Times, 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647.

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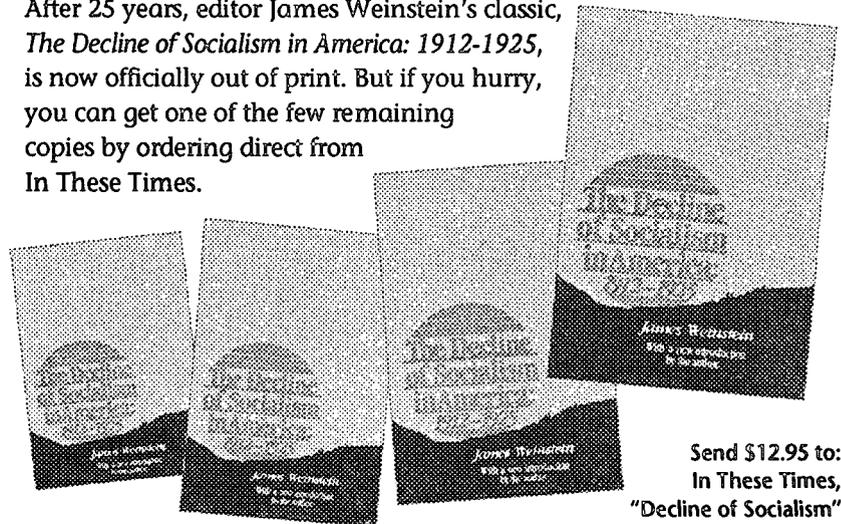
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In praise of NAFTA

By Tim Wohlforth

American labor was wrong to invest so much of its political clout in attempting to defeat the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This is true not simply because labor lost the battle and thereby weakened its potential influence, but also because its position was fundamentally wrongheaded. A victory would only have propelled labor further down a dead-end road.

NAFTA was negotiated by the Bush administration in the interest of American corporations, and Clinton's side agreements did not change its essentially corporatist character. Both Mexico and the United States are governed by parties that represent the interests of capital, not labor. World trade is conducted on the basis of capitalism. Labor needs to defend its members within this framework.

The heart of the NAFTA debate was the question of free trade vs. tariffs. It is difficult to believe that those who argued "Not *this* NAFTA" would find satisfaction in any NAFTA negotiated within a capitalist framework. So the question boils down to this: Given the nature of the world economic system, are workers as a whole helped or hurt by tariff barriers? I would argue that the working-class cause is significantly set back by protectionism.

It is unfashionable on the left these

days to read Marx. This fact is regrettable, because Marx's thinking offers valuable lessons for today. Marx believed that capitalism was historically progressive because it expanded the productive forces of humankind. This process was in the interests of working people. It created the productive infrastructure needed for a more humane socialist society and at the same time created, educated and trained a working class capable of overthrowing the capitalist system. Marx strongly favored free trade as well as the development of capitalist relations throughout the world.

Were Marx alive today, I envision the following alignment: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich and Karl Marx on one side of the NAFTA debate, with Lane Kirkland, Jesse Jackson, Ralph Nader, Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan on the other side.

There were many workers in Marx's day who opposed industrial development, seeking to defend their increasingly outdated craftsman way of life. These workers sought to destroy the new machines of the industrial era. Their ideological descendants today seek to resist the technological transformation of the smokestack manufacturing industries as well as the internationalization of the labor process. Their efforts will be as futile as those of the Silesian

weavers and the hand glass blowers of more than a century ago.

Free trade is progressive because it encourages industrial growth, innovation and productivity. It leads to greater economic integration of the world. This, in turn, sets the stage for political integration and could reduce the danger of world war. Of course, a more peaceful world will not come automatically. It will require the intervention of labor and the left to oppose nationalism and militarism.

Protectionism discourages innovation and productivity growth and slows worldwide trade. It leads to international conflict, raising the danger of war, while encouraging chauvinism among workers. Consider the current spate of Japan-bashing, crude comments about the Mexican people and anti-immigrant prejudices in the labor movement.

Popular opposition to NAFTA stems from the threat of losing jobs to Mexico, a process that would continue with or without NAFTA. With the shrinkage of jobs in many American industries, particularly union-represented low-skilled ones, this fear must be addressed. But job loss is the result of more than runaway shops. The productive process itself is being transformed. This is not a matter of "deindustrialization," as some claim, but of the development of new methods of production that require much less labor.

This means a net job loss *unless* there is a large expansion in the market for the end product. Since the economies of countries like Mexico are growing more rapidly than that of our own country, free trade with them should open more markets for our high-technology products. The tendency for lower-skilled labor-intensive tasks to shift to low-wage countries, both in Asia and Mexico, is irreversible under capitalism—short of adopting a policy of complete autarchy. So what can labor do to defend itself? It can adopt a different