

## Teachers as Leaders in Newark

The following is taken from an interview with Leah Z. Owens who is the founder of Teachers as Leaders in Newark (TaLiN), whose purpose is to empower teachers in the classroom to be more engaged with the community, to better serve students, to better understand the need and purpose of unions for teachers and the need for teachers to organize as teachers. TaLiN uses social media to communicate opportunities for teachers to take on leadership, and sponsors a lecture and discussion series around topics relevant to teaching in the Newark schools. A recent topic addressed was "Introduction to Political-Economy" which drew an audience of not only teachers but also high school students and other members of the community.

Asked about youth involvement, Ms. Owens responded: Those who do get involved are usually part of some structured program, a prime example being the Youth Media Symposium. TaLiN is partnering with the Boys and Girls Club with the goal of bringing in more college student volunteers. Part of the challenge to motivating more involvement is that parents and teachers do not know how to steer students. She states, "There's a fine line between sharing information and making up the minds of the students." As adults, though, "we need to be able to help students recognized their strengths" and how to leverage their strengths either toward greater community involvement or taking more ownership of themselves and what they want to do for their future. "The challenge is not enough adults are helping to mentor the youth."

Among the major issues students of Newark face, according to Ms. Owens, include a need for mentorship, preferably from young adults with experience living in Newark or a Newark-like environment who can help the youth realize that there is a way to make your way forward through the challenges. Youth also have an economic need for jobs that are local and do not require travel that often exhausts what little earnings many jobs afford. There also needs to be more activities around interests that youth have, and those who do put forward such activities need to use better strategies in how they promote the activities so they are more accessible to the thousands of Newark youth who need positive outlets for their time.

Asked about how organizations like NJ Youth United Against War and Imperialism can outreach to Newark students, Ms. Owens suggests: "Focusing on one or a couple of schools at a time to attempt to build some sort of an alliance" would be most productive. She suggests going on the school websites to see if they have a club or organization that sounds like it might have interest in similar issues and trying to make a connection with the group's officers or faculty advisor.

She also recommends "one on one" conversations as opposed to passing large amounts of information out indiscriminately. "People will respond more when you sit down and you just talk with them," she recommends. Through this process you can identify what the students you are reaching out to actually need and go from there toward building alliances.

Ms. Owens recommends to us that we make contact with teacher organizations such as TaLiN and NJ Teacher Activist Group (NJ TAG) and that perhaps such teacher organizations can refer students to our efforts. She also mentioned that she would be willing to take some of our papers and get them into the hands of other teachers. She also suggested that we ask for writers to help create the articles for the next issue of the paper.

**Ms. Owens's organization TaLiN can be reached at: [www.TaLinNewark.org](http://www.TaLinNewark.org)**

## Student Teacher Unity - The Only Way Forward

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why it was he felt comfortable making huge cuts to public schooling, while private schools (like the ones his children attend) remained unharmed. Christie's response was: "It's none of your business!"

Graceful, Christie. Very well-thought out response. As it turns out, New Jersey judiciaries have been wondering the same thing. On March 22, 2011 a judge ruled that Gov. Christie's cuts were unlawful because they were "slanted to heavily towards poor districts", this being a violation of the Abbot vs. Burke case. The rulings produced during the case led to the requirement of the state of New Jersey to equalize public education funding for all students. That means that districts with high poverty rates receive additional state funding to account for the debilitating—and well-researched—effects of poverty on student's learning.

Spotswood High School (where I and all of the teens from Milltown, Helmetta, and Spotswood attend high school) has also felt the sting of Gov. Christie's budget cuts. Last year, numerous teachers were given the heads-up that there was potential for the termination of their jobs. A few did lose their jobs and some classes were cut, including the cooking class. There was the threat of losing an arts class and two language courses. Luckily, the school managed to hold onto the classes.

In order to battle the budget cuts, some school districts around the country had to make up for lack in funding by charging fees for extra-curriculars. Said fees would contribute to covering the cost of salaries for the staff that run the courses. Why should students and their parents have to pay for staff salaries when that's the state's job? Because budget cuts to education have made doing so nearly impossible.

This issue had directly affected students all over the country, so why should we not get a say in all of this? Students should participate in any way they can. Whether it's starting an organization in their school to help discourage teacher layoffs and cuts made to the curriculum, or just getting the word out there, students can influence school board and governmental decisions. We don't always have to accept what the "big guys" tell us, especially when we know they're wrong.



## TAG Organizing NJ Activist Teachers Into Fighting Force

The following is an interview with Katie Stafford, a NJ teacher and co-founder of NJ Teachers Activist Group

### What is TAG?

A "TAG" is a Teacher Activist Group (also called a Teacher Action Group). There are several of them across the United States—San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, New York City, and now New Jersey. You can read about the National Network of TAGs at

[www.teacheractivistgroups.org](http://www.teacheractivistgroups.org). Each TAG has a similar agenda, and ours includes advocating for equalized educational opportunities for all children, the abolishment of high-stakes testing, and community-based education; fostering and facilitating collaboration and mobilization among teachers locally, regionally, and nationally; supporting teachers in becoming teacher-activists; creating and implementing curriculum that explicitly teaches social critique and liberatory action; and encouraging teachers to use their classroom as sites for inquiry into democratic and liberatory teaching practices.

### How are you spreading the word to other teachers?

We are partnering with community and state organizations to get the word out, networking through different activism groups already in

place, utilizing social media such as Facebook and Twitter, blogging, and contacting teachers personally to spread the word to their colleagues. We are also holding two screenings of "The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman"—one at Rutgers Newark and one at Montclair State—which we are promoting through local media, including newspapers and community calendars.

### Our group is interested in a student - teacher alliance around issues of education, war, austerity, etc. How do you think such an alliance can proceed?

Such an alliance is a brilliant idea and a natural fit. A few ideas for activities that students and teachers can take on together: 1) plan to attend rallies/protests/solidarity events together; report back to your classmates. 2) Collaborate with teachers to create class activities that incorporate information about these issues into the classroom and create opportunities for authentic and critical dialogue about the issues, their causes, and possible solutions. 3) Plan a community event to raise awareness of a particular issue. 4) Pair up with a teacher to co-write an op-ed on one of these topics.

### We believe our organization and youth activists can benefit from mentoring from teacher activists - is your organization interested in training and helping start up youth organizing around issues of concern?

Absolutely—one of our goals is to create curriculum for that purpose, to foster activism and critical democratic action among students. We would absolutely welcome the opportunity to mentor youth activists in a more direct manner, as we also believe that a broader youth movement is necessary to secure lasting change. **How can students support teachers in their demands around collective bargaining rights, education privatization and related issues?** Solidarity, educating other students, getting parents involved, writing op-eds, participating in protests, writing to your US and State legislators

**Teachers interested in building an activist core in NJ as well as students interested in gaining support from activist teachers should contact: [kate\\_strom@yahoo.com](mailto:kate_strom@yahoo.com) . For more info about the Teacher Activist Groups around the country, see: <http://www.teacheractivistgroups.org/>**



Courtesy of Asbury Park Press

NJEA member, workers advocate and anti-war activist Ellen Whitt is forcibly removed from Trenton meeting where the Christie - Sweeney plan was being steam rolled over NJ teachers and public workers.

### What We Want!

**NJ Youth United Against War and Imperialism calls on youth to partner with teachers and other public workers. Let's capture the spirit of the teacher, worker, student alliance in Wisconsin where similar policies were resisted through the occupation of a state building for weeks. Support the teachers and recognize that this attack will be followed by more drastic actions.**

**We call upon the teachers to continue to fight. Do not to accept the defeat of June 2011 – dust off and get back into the fray. Much of the grumbling is leading to backing Democrat candidates – many of whom backed Christie's anti-teacher law. We suggest another plan – the student option.**

**You can help us and we can help you. Help us to organize to support your efforts - and- to end the wars that are a root cause of the austerity, the reason why the federal government refuses to aid economically scrapped states and threatens to slaughter part of our generation. We are with you but our analysis and our goals while embracing your challenges, are about our generation's survival, so accept us on our own terms.**

**Teachers: distribute YO! - to other teachers - to students - use it to stir class discussion. Contact [NJYU@NJYouthUnited.org](mailto:NJYU@NJYouthUnited.org) / 908-635-3285**

### Yes, I want to be a member / supporter of NJ Youth United Against War and Imperialism

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

Membership: Youth: \_\_\_\_\_ Elder Supporter: \_\_\_\_\_ Mentor / Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Numbers: Cell: \_\_\_\_\_ Land: \_\_\_\_\_

Attending what schools (if any)? \_\_\_\_\_

Membership donation: \$5 \_\_\_ \$10 \_\_\_ \$20 \_\_\_ \$50 \_\_\_ \$100 \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Please include details as to your interest in youth organizing. You can also use the join button at <http://NJYouthUnited.org> or write to [NJYU@NJYouthUnited.org](mailto:NJYU@NJYouthUnited.org) to share your interests.**

**Please clip coupon and mail to NJ Youth United, PO Box 163, Belle Mead, NJ 08502**

**Make donation checks payable to NJ Youth United AWI**