

*Defending the Status Quo or Protecting Community Interests?
Brenda Mitchell and the United Teachers of New Orleans*

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Abstract: On August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, Louisiana. The storm devastated the city, leaving the education system in total disrepair. As the city started to rebuild, different groups debated the best way to revive the previously failing public school system. The Louisiana state government, federal government, and Orleans Parish School Board advocated for a complete overhaul of the New Orleans public school system to an all-charter system. At the same time, Brenda Mitchell, president of the United Teachers of New Orleans, defended her union of educators and staff members in the wake of the storm. With education reforms imminent and few supporting her, Mitchell represented the union amidst calls for drastic changes to the school system that could largely eliminate UTNO's influence. Ultimately, Mitchell had to decide between fighting to preserve a system that historically benefitted her organization or adapting her organization's mission to comply with demands for change.

United Teachers of New Orleans: A History of Activism, Racial Justice, and Community

New Orleans teachers' unions have a long history of segregation, racism, and political struggle. In 1935, white teachers in New Orleans formed the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 353 in response to decreases in teachers' salaries during the Great Depression (Buras 2016). The Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) granted a raise in 1937 but specified that it did not apply to Black teachers (Ambrose 1996). Salaries for Black teachers were significantly lower than for white teachers to begin with, but OPSB had previously granted raises to Black and white teachers at an equal rate (Ambrose 1996). At the following school board meeting, some white teachers from the union showed their support for the city's Black teachers, presenting a combined set of demands that included a raise for Black teachers (Ambrose 1996). These teachers showed an unprecedented display of solidarity considering that the white union's activities had not previously included advocacy for Black teachers (Ambrose 1996). The board approved the raise, encouraging Black teachers to charter their own union: AFT Local 527 (Ambrose 1996). Cofounder and former president Veronica Hill explained: "All of the apathy and complacency was over. Everybody rose up" (Ambrose 1996, 45). For the next 20 years, AFT Local 527 expanded and fought for equal pay and other issues related to civil rights activism, but teachers' unions in New Orleans continued to endure racism and discrimination (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.a). Though OPSB had approved a raise that matched the pay rate increase formerly granted to white teachers, Black teachers still received 10-50% less income than their white counterparts (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.a). Black teachers also faced discrimination from the white teachers' union; in 1958, the AFT required all its local affiliates to integrate, but Local 353 refused

(Chanin 2021a). AFT expelled Local 353, leaving the all-Black Local 527 the only AFT affiliate in New Orleans (Chanin 2021a).

In the years following their formation, AFT Local 527 participated in the Civil Rights Movement while continuing to advocate for equal pay and treatment for Black teachers (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.a). Teaching was one of the few middle-class jobs available to Black women, so by advocating for teachers' rights, the union represented a broader movement for racial justice in New Orleans (Chanin 2021a). Notably, Black teachers with Local 527 went on strike for three days in 1966 for salary improvements (Buras 2016). While the strike was unsuccessful, it was the first teachers' strike in the South, and this collective action paved the way for future union activism (Buras 2016). The chapter went on strike again three years later for the right to collective bargaining, or to establish a contract between the union and the school board guaranteeing certain rights and working conditions for union members (Hoover 2006). Most collective bargaining agreements specify salary requirements, work hours (including breaks and time off), dismissal policies, and tenure (Harris 2020). This strike lasted 11 days and included 1,200 educators marching down Canal Street (Hoover 2006). Despite Local 527's repeated efforts, OPSB did not agree to collective bargaining (Hoover 2006).

Beyond fighting for teachers' rights, members of Local 527 used their organizational power to advocate for Black students and families. In 1968, a group of parents at Wilson Elementary accused the white principal of discriminating against Black students (Chanin 2021a). Local 527 supported the parents by sponsoring their meetings, speaking in front of the school board, and threatening to protest at future board meetings (Chanin 2021a). The union also worked to gain equal funding for Black and white schools, and they hosted voter registration and citizenship drives for parents (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.a). These efforts signify that Local 527's work towards civil rights and education equity went beyond protections for teachers and included community-focused activism.

In 1972, Local 527 merged with the Orleans Educators Association (OEA), a predominantly white teachers' union (Chanin 2021a). This merger established the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) and represented a powerful and progressive form of integration (Buras 2016). The National Education Association—OEA's national affiliate—facilitated the merger by threatening to expel local chapters that refused to integrate (Chanin 2021a). As a result, many white teachers opposed to integration left the OEA, leaving the members who were more sympathetic to the merger (Chanin 2021a). In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, UTNO's formation modeled the idea that desegregation should occur with respect and solidarity for established Black institutions.

Nat LaCour, a teacher and longtime member of Local 527, became president of the integrated UTNO. LaCour, knowing that community support was necessary for UTNO's success, sent members into schools to talk to teachers about collective bargaining (Chanin 2021a). LaCour also reached out to other civic and political organizations. He later explained, "Every entity that was out there, we met to ask them to not oppose our efforts" (Chanin 2021a, 304). After an extensive community campaign, including 4,000 teacher petitions and city-wide advertisements, the school board approved UTNO's first collective bargaining agreement (CBA) in 1974. After years of strikes, petitioning, and community activism, UTNO became one of the first southern teachers' unions to establish a CBA (Chanin 2021a).

Following their successful collective bargaining campaign, UTNO expanded its membership and continued to advocate for improved conditions for New Orleans teachers,

administrators, and paraprofessionals. While the CBA was UTNO's most formal method for influencing the school district, the union also sponsored community-based programs that benefited students and teachers. For example, they hosted parent education workshops, provided professional development training to school staff members, and participated in social justice and anti-racist coalitions (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.a). UTNO largely credits Nat LaCour for the organization's transformation "from a relatively small group of mostly segregated teachers into the largest local [union] in the state" (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.b, n.p.). Under LaCour's leadership, UNTO grew to have significant political influence: in a 1992 school board election, five of seven union-endorsed candidates were elected (Hoover 2006). LaCour also led UTNO through two more strikes in 1978 and 1990, both of which were successful in securing improvements in pay and school conditions (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.b).

By early 2005, the United Teachers of New Orleans was a large and influential force in the New Orleans community. UTNO had over 4,700 members, accounting for 90% of teachers, paraprofessionals, and clerical staff employed by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) (Honawar 2006). UTNO members paid \$600 in annual dues, which meant that UTNO brought in about \$3 million a year in dues alone (Hoover 2006). Despite UTNO's large membership, their full-time staff consisted of only 10 paid members, so most of their dues went to community programming and member activities. (Chanin 2021b). The vast majority of union leaders were volunteers and full-time educators, including the vice president, executive council members, and building representatives (Chanin 2021b).

A New Sheriff in Town: Brenda Mitchell's Era of Leadership

In 1998, LaCour ended his 27-year presidency and left UTNO for a position at the American Federation of Teachers (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.b). In 1999, UTNO membership elected Brenda Mitchell to the presidency, thanks in part to support from LaCour (Chanin 2021b). Mitchell was an educator, and she initially joined the profession in 1968 (Chanin 2021a). From the start of her career, Mitchell contended with racism and harassment from district officials. For instance, when she applied for her first teaching job, district officials told her to lose weight before she was hired (Chanin 2021b). During her first year on the job, a principal tried to take credit for a grant she wrote (Chanin 2021b). Despite poor treatment from administrators, Mitchell was committed to her career and stood up for herself amidst unfair treatment. Fred Skelton, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, remembered, "She just said 'No, what's right is right.' And she took the heat.... you knew that she had the guts to stand up when it counted" (Chanin 2021b, 229).

Despite the challenges of discrimination, Mitchell demonstrated steadfast dedication to her career. By 1999, Mitchell had worked for New Orleans Public Schools for 30 years, serving as a teacher and a Title I staff developer (Perry 2006). Mitchell had also been a member of UTNO since she started her teaching career (Louisiana Federation of Teachers 2008). Less than a year after joining the union, Mitchell participated in the 1969 strike for collective bargaining (Chanin 2021b; Buras 2016). Within UTNO, Mitchell served as an area coordinator, the building representative for Howard #1 Elementary, and the Educational Issues Committee Chair before joining the executive board in 1973 (Louisiana Federation of Teachers 2008). Throughout her time on the executive board, Mitchell focused her attention on support for teachers. Mitchell coordinated UTNO's first annual conference in 1975, which provided professional development workshops and training for teachers, and she continued to run the conference for 20 years (Chanin

2021b). Mitchell also founded the New Orleans Teacher Center in 1980, which offered individual mentoring and training workshops by experienced local teachers (Louisiana Federation of Teachers 2008). As evidenced by her extensive involvement with both UTNO and the school system, Mitchell cared deeply about public education and improving school conditions for New Orleans teachers, students, and community members. Decades of leadership as a UTNO member, alongside her background in education and teacher support, led to overwhelming support for Mitchell's election to the presidency of UTNO (Chanin 2021b).

Although qualified by her own accord, LaCour's impressive legacy meant that Mitchell had to work to gain the respect of the organization. As a woman, Mitchell also struggled to earn respect on an interpersonal level. One union member shared, "[Brenda was] almost like having Hillary Clinton become president. There'll be some who will love her and some who are going to hate her" (Chanin 2021b, 24). Mitchell took criticism of her leadership in stride. "There's a new sheriff in town and her name is Brenda," she said. "I stepped up and I made them respect me" (Chanin 2021b, 229). Fighting to earn the respect of both union members and external critics, Mitchell developed a reputation for being tough and combative. While LaCour, who was very political and strategic, took a diplomatic approach to his presidency, Mitchell was more direct and authoritative in her leadership (Chanin 2021b).

UTNO's political influence waned during Mitchell's presidency. In a 2004 school board election, UTNO only successfully elected one candidate despite endorsing most incumbent candidates (Hoover 2006). Some members attributed UTNO's declining influence to Mitchell's personal leadership style (Chanin 2021b). Former member Wilson Boveland explained, "She would always fuss with the people in administration... So we could never accomplish anything" (Chanin 2021b, 231). Other UTNO members respected Mitchell's bold leadership, particularly other educators. Mitchell recruited talented teachers, most of whom were Black women, and mentored them to take leadership positions in UTNO (Chanin 2021b). One such teacher, Juanita Bailey, claims "[S]he basically made me a woman... She broke me out of that timid, not standing up for yourself, you know... She didn't have a lot of time for bull, and she would let you know" (Chanin 2021b, 231).

Despite internal disagreements about her leadership style, Mitchell successfully managed UTNO's 4,700 members and fostered close personal relationships with many of them. Notably, she cultivated a reputation for herself as a leader distinct from LaCour. Beyond disagreements from within UTNO, Mitchell contended with a shift in political attitudes on education reforms and unions that made her role more difficult.

School Accountability, Charter Schools, and Unions

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, a national school accountability movement advocated for increased state and federal control over public schools (Loeb and Figlio 2011). Proponents of school accountability believed that establishing state or federal standards for school performance measures, like test scores and report cards, would encourage teachers, students, and administrators to improve school performance (Moe 2002). In 1994, Congress passed the Improving America's Schools Act, which recommended assessments, uniform standards, and school privatization (Lay 2022). In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act, which required schools to test students annually in reading and math using tests and proficiency standards determined by the state (Klein 2015). No Child Left Behind stated that state governments could intervene in "failing" schools by changing the leadership

team, allowing parents to move their kids elsewhere, or even closing the school (Klein 2015). In theory, these penalties would motivate students and teachers to improve performance (Lay 2022).

As state and federal policies encouraged school accountability, charter schools gained popularity as a mechanism for raising school performance. Charter schools are publicly funded, but they are operated autonomously by a private entity, meaning that they evade most rules and regulations that apply to traditional public schools (Vergari 2007). If charter schools fail to perform, their authorizers can revoke their charter and turn control of the school over to a different charter operator (Lay 2022). Another important aspect of charter school systems is school choice. Parents can choose to send their children to any charter school, while traditional public schools determine school placement based on geographic zoning. Charter schools are public and therefore cannot charge tuition; however, students must apply before they can attend, and charter schools can cap enrollment (Vergari 2007). Parents can choose the best school for their children, but charter schools also have the ability to select the students they enroll.

Hypothetically, giving families the agency to choose a school drives competition between schools and leads to an overall improvement in education quality (Harris 2020). Advocates of charter schools also argue that schools with greater autonomy produce more innovative and effective education strategies outside of traditional constraints (Harris 2020). Furthermore, charter school proponents criticize traditional school districts for inequitably distributing resources, lacking accountability, and failing to swiftly enact change (Harris 2020). Meanwhile, defenders of traditional public schools argue that their bureaucratic structure, with central leadership and uniform organization throughout districts, is the most efficient way to provide reliable results (Harris 2020). Traditional public school districts also have publicly elected school boards, which are more democratic and community-focused due to geographic zoning (Harris 2020). In an ideal traditional public school model, elected school board members have strong ties to their community and can make decisions on behalf of the area they represent. (Harris 2020). Parents and educators continue to debate the merits of both charter schools and public schools and which model creates superior outcomes.

The school accountability movement and charter schools are largely critical of teachers' unions. Unions seek to protect the rights of teachers and other school employees by negotiating collective bargaining agreements (CBA) or other protections. As school accountability measures encouraged higher standards for school performance, advocates criticized teachers' unions for safeguarding "bad" teachers at the expense of students and schools (Moe 2002). Because union contracts protect most teachers in traditional public schools, school district leaders must give teachers "due process" before firing them, including evidence of poor performance and proof of multiple opportunities to improve (Harris 2020). Charter schools, which operate autonomously, are not required to establish CBAs with teachers' unions. Jeanne Allen, president of a charter school advocacy group, claims that unions and charter schools "don't tend to mix well" due to charters' emphasis on "freedom and performance-based accountability, and those things are anathema to union contracts" (Hoover 2006, n.p.). John Ayers, the former head of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, felt similarly, sharing: "In the urban setting, the unions add so little value, it's shocking" (Buras 2016, 156). National attitudes surrounding charter schools, school accountability, and unions provided the background for debates about the New Orleans school system both before and after a historic storm devastated the city.

New Orleans Public Schools: A Failing System, and Who's to Blame?

Before Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) consisted of 117 public schools serving 66,000 students (Garda 2011). As a traditional public school district, New Orleans citizens voted NOPS school board members into office, and students attended schools based on their residential location (Harris 2020). The district, as well as the school board, had a difficult history of financial mismanagement, poor student performance, and racial inequality. In his book *The Inevitable City*, former Tulane University president Scott Cowen cites a report declaring New Orleans education “a poster child for dysfunction and corruption” (Cowen and Seifter 2014, 73).

Critics of NOPS cited OPSB's poor performance on both financial and performance measures; for example, a 2003 investigation of the school system found that the school district allocated \$11 million worth of false checks (Harris 2020). Additionally, in 2004, 96% of students failed to meet basic proficiency in English, and 94% failed to meet proficiency in math (Cowen and Seifter 2014). New Orleans was a clear example of the type of “failing” school district used as justification for No Child Left Behind and other school accountability policies.

Schools in pre-Katrina New Orleans were also largely de facto segregated. After the integration of New Orleans schools following *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, many white families moved away from New Orleans to surrounding parishes or transferred their children to private schools (Rasheed 2006). In 2005, Black people made up 66% of the city's population and 94% of students in New Orleans public schools (Lay 2022). Wealthy members of the New Orleans community had the opportunity to seek improved education for their children elsewhere, while poor families faced unfavorable outcomes in the public school system.

In the 2003-04 school year, 72% of New Orleans teachers were Black, compared to 15.1% of teachers in other large US cities (Barrett and Harris 2015). The New Orleans teaching force was an essential component of the city's Black middle class, and UTNO was the primary institution advocating for their best interests (Buras 2016). Most teachers were women, and UTNO contributed to many Black women in New Orleans having job security and benefits. Many of the teachers also had strong connections to the local community, as 60% graduated from New Orleans colleges, and most had been teaching for over five years (Barrett and Harris 2015).

Since they first established collective bargaining in 1974, UTNO maintained a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with OPSB that guaranteed certain rights and protections for the teachers. This contract—nearly 200 pages long—included policies on tenure protections, compensation, workloads, and working conditions (Harris 2020). In 2005, the CBA also required OPSB to pay into the Health and Welfare Fund, which provided health care benefits to employees covered by union contracts (New Orleans CityBusiness 2006). The CBA present before Katrina was set to expire in June 2006, meaning that OPSB was contractually bound to the terms listed in the agreement until then (New Orleans CityBusiness 2006).

Before Hurricane Katrina, policymakers blamed the teachers for the poor performance of New Orleans public schools. Despite many of them having 20 or more years of experience and strong community connections, many viewed New Orleans teachers as lazy and incompetent (Buras 2016). One member of the Louisiana BESE stated, “Charter schools are now a threat to a jobs program called public education,” perpetuating harmful stereotypes that characterize Black people as lazy and dependent on government welfare (Buras 2016, 156). Generally, education reformers blamed “bad” employees for the state of public schools instead of investigating the issues underlying the school system, such as poverty, systemic racism, and neglect (Chanin

2021b). Brenda Mitchell supported teacher evaluations and improvement, but she argued that the school board should also take accountability for the state of the school system. She explained, “Now, hold our feet to the fire, but you hold your own feet to the fire too” (Chanin 2021b, 124). Mitchell’s comments reflect broader dissent in the New Orleans public school system prior to the storm, with policymakers blaming NOPS’s poor performance on teachers, and teachers voicing frustration with the lack of government support.

Hurricane Katrina and the Education Reform Debate

So just imagine for a moment, not only what I am going through—and I am going to be all right, because I am tough and the union has toughened me even more, and I am resilient—but for the thousands of people in the city, the thousands of members of United Teachers of New Orleans who will never be the same again. And, oh my God, the children.

- Brenda Mitchell (Mitchell 2006, n.p.)

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August of 2005, it interrupted every aspect of life in the city, with education as no exception. Hurricane Katrina displaced over 64,000 students and caused \$800 million of damage to school buildings (Garda 2011). Of the 117 public school buildings in the city, only eight survived the storm with minor damage (Lay 2022). The storm’s effects devastated and displaced teachers, spreading them across the country. Brenda Mitchell, whose home was destroyed by the storm, stayed in Baton Rouge to be UTNO’s representative in post-Katrina conversations. In the wake of the storm, the Louisiana state government, the school board, and charter organizations aimed to completely reform the New Orleans public school system. On the other hand, New Orleans citizens, teachers, and the union advocated to preserve the old system and retain local control of public schools. As UTNO’s sole representative in reform conversations, Mitchell had to contend with the competing interests of powerful actors and decide on a strategy to protect UTNO’s strength and values.

The Louisiana State Government

While Katrina provided a catalyst for major changes to the education system, the Louisiana state government sought control of New Orleans schools beginning long before Katrina (Lay 2022). As a result of NOPS’s poor performance and reputation, the state of Louisiana implemented several policies in the 1990s and early 2000s in an attempt to improve the district. In 2003, the Louisiana legislature established the Recovery School District, a state-run district that had the ability to take over low-performing schools after the school was deemed “academically unacceptable” for four years (Garda 2011, 59). In 2004, the state legislature expanded the criteria under which OPSB would lose control of underperforming schools, demonstrating that Louisiana’s efforts to remove New Orleans schools from local control preceded Hurricane Katrina (Garda 2011).

With the foundations for state action already in place, the state government wasted no time in reshaping the school system after Katrina. Within a week of the storm’s arrival, education reformers at the state level discussed the opportunity to transform education in New Orleans. Members of the state government, including Governor Kathleen Blanco and the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), showed no interest in reviving the old system

(Buras 2016). Due to corruption and poor performance in OPSB schools, state leaders did not believe OPSB was capable of reopening schools effectively (Garda 2011). Leslie Jacobs, a former OPSB member and at-large member of the BESE, stated, “It’s hard to find a silver lining from Katrina, but one silver lining is that the school board can start anew. And if any school district needs to start anew, it’s Orleans” (Beabout 2007, 45). The BESE largely supported Jacobs’ position, and in early September, announced that New Orleans schools would not open for the rest of the year, despite other parishes like Jefferson and St. Tammany managing to reopen schools by November (Chanin 2021b). The state’s hesitance to reopen schools revealed its intention to make major changes before students returned.

Less than two weeks after the storm, education industry lobbyists gathered in Baton Rouge and met with the US Secretary of Education about potential reforms (Dingerson 2006). The state government decided that charter schools would be the most viable and effective way to reinvent the school system. Brenda Mitchell remained in Baton Rouge after the storm, both because she had lost her home in the storm and because she could speak on behalf of the union before the state legislature (Chanin 2021b). As the state government started to make decisions about rebuilding the New Orleans education system, Mitchell had the attention of state government officials (Chanin 2021b). Mitchell reported that she spoke to the state superintendent and “a whole bunch of other bigwigs” as early as the day after the storm hit (Chanin 2021b, 306). While UTNO and the state government historically disagreed on state-driven education reforms, Mitchell maintained a seat at the table with state officials as they deliberated.

In early October, Blanco signed executive orders allowing non-charter schools to be converted into charters without parental or faculty consent and with no timeline constraints (Garda 2011). In doing so, Blanco effectively disempowered resistance from the people who opposed charter schools the most: unionized teachers and community members. UTNO member Leoance Williams stated “The state did not want Orleans Parish to open the schools because they didn’t want us back as teachers...They didn’t want the political clout that we had back in the system.” (Chanin 2021b, 303). Hurricane Katrina provoked state-driven efforts to start over with a completely new, charter-filled (and union-free) school system.

The Orleans Parish School Board

While the state’s envisioned reforms meant that OPSB would lose control of the school system as they knew it, Katrina put an end to reservations against a new system (Garda 2011). OPSB lacked the resources to rebuild the school system without aid from the state and federal governments, neither of which trusted OPSB to rebuild the system on their own (Beabout 2011). With the district’s history of low academic performance, financial mismanagement, and poor school conditions, OPSB acknowledged its poor reputation and did not resist the state’s overhaul of the district (Beabout 2011). In September, the federal government offered OPSB a \$20.9 million grant from the US Department of Education to Louisiana to support the rebuilding of the school system (Dingerson 2006). However, this money could only be used for new and previously existing charter schools, leaving charter schools the only financially viable option for reconstructing New Orleans education (Garda 2011).

On October 7th, OPSB voted to convert 13 schools in the district to charter schools (Perry 2006). Because of Governor Blanco’s executive order, OPSB did not have to seek approval from school faculty or parents before chartering the schools. Despite public resistance to the changes, OPSB ignored their disapproval and fulfilled their original proposal (Perry 2006). Attempting to

overhaul veteran teachers, the charter association put in charge of the new schools refused to allow returning teachers to transfer into charter school positions. The association also required a “basic skills test” for all teaching applicants, which former New Orleans teachers described as “demeaning and insulting” (Chanin 2021b, 320).

Before Katrina, UTNO’s collective bargaining agreement with the school board was teachers’ most formal demonstration of power in the district. Mitchell also maintained a positive relationship with OPSB’s superintendents throughout her presidency, and she reported that they were able to resolve the CBA with few disputes (Chanin 2021b). As OPSB started to cede control of schools to charter organizations, the future of the CBA was in jeopardy. Under the old system, UTNO members were protected and powerful, but OPSB was a key supporter of UTNO. As OPSB cooperated with the state push for charter schools, Mitchell saw that in this new proposed system, teachers would likely lose the protections that UTNO had been fighting for since the 1960s. Like OPSB, Mitchell and UTNO faced a choice between defending the old system and adapting UTNO to support reforms.

Teachers, Students, and Community Members

While the state government and the school board debated the best way to save the New Orleans school system, students, teachers, and parents were suffering. New Orleanians were displaced across the country, and many had lost their homes, including Mitchell. Due to the delay in reopening schools, many students enrolled elsewhere, but the poor quality of their former schooling made the transition difficult. Many families would not return to the city until their children had somewhere to go to school, and an extreme makeover of the school system would slow down that process. Maria Hernandez, a New Orleans high schooler, shared her frustration with the school reform process. She explained that only two schools were open where she lived, which was also where the hurricane hit the hardest, and that both schools had selective admission criteria. She expressed, “How can these decision-makers open two high schools on the East Bank, but none for common folk like me, who either can't get into or don't want to get into selective admission high schools?” (Frazier et al. 2006, 31).

OPSB decided to prioritize opening charter schools despite pushback from many New Orleans citizens. After OPSB accepted the state’s \$21 million federal grant and started to approve charters, citizens filed a lawsuit to prevent the charter schools from opening (Garda 2011). The lawsuit argued that OPSB’s approval of charter schools violated an open-meeting law, which required school board meetings to be publicized and open to the public (Capochino 2005; Frazier et al. 2006). In response to the lawsuit, a civil court required the school board to halt its plans and provide an opportunity for public comment (Perry 2006). Mitchell supported the citizen lawsuit, and UTNO filed its own lawsuit aimed at preventing newly chartered schools from opening (Garda 2011). Because of escalating citizen dissent, national guardsmen attended the first meeting of the new charter association in anticipation of protests (Garda 2011). Ultimately, while reformers claimed to be making decisions in the best interest of the students and families, they carried out their agendas without significant citizen input. Determining how most New Orleans citizens felt about potential reforms proves challenging, but at the very least, a passionate group of citizens vehemently opposed the reforms (Frazier et al. 2006).

UTNO Members

While the state government, OPSB, and charter organizations jumped at the chance to reinvent the New Orleans public school system after Katrina, UTNO members prioritized their own safety and security. In the aftermath of the storm, UTNO members were scattered across 38 different states (Perry 2006). Black working and middle-class areas of New Orleans were disproportionately affected by the flooding, meaning that UTNO members were particularly vulnerable to displacement after the storm (Chanin 2021b). Dr. Linda Stelly, an AFT representative assisting UTNO after the storm, met displaced union members across the country and reported that they felt isolated from their former support systems (Perry 2006). UTNO members felt that the school board had abandoned them after placing all employees on “disaster leave without pay” two weeks after Katrina (Buras 2016, 160). Under this designation, former teachers could qualify for unemployment, but they would not be paid until they returned to the city and resumed working. With no schools open and no promising timeline, teachers wondered if they would be able to return to their city and former jobs.

Because so many displaced UTNO members felt disconnected from the school system, most were unable to help Mitchell with union affairs immediately after the storm. However, the AFT assisted Mitchell in her efforts after Katrina, and the organization spent \$350,000 in 2005-06 to keep UTNO stabilized (Honawar 2006b). Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT), voiced his support for UTNO’s membership. He argued that the treatment of teachers post-Katrina “was the greatest wound that could have been inflicted on those individuals who spent their lives in those buildings while nine superintendents in twelve years paraded through at princely salaries” (Honawar 2006b, n.p.). Though most UTNO members could not assist her, financial and ideological support from the state and national unions gave Mitchell hope that UTNO could recover from Katrina and its aftermath.

Meanwhile, in Baton Rouge, Mitchell advocated on behalf of a scattered and fragile union. Due to UTNO’s relatively weak internal bureaucracy, the added burden of the storm made mobilizing the organization a nearly impossible task (Chanin 2021b). Mitchell also represented an organization that, in the eyes of many reformers, had little credibility or value. Negative perceptions of UTNO before Katrina, combined with their displaced and discouraged membership, made the union appear weak in the eyes of reformers.

For many UTNO members, the only way to restore the organization to its former power would be to reopen the public schools, maintain their previous CBA, and return members back to their jobs in New Orleans. UTNO’s CBA was critical to the union’s power prior to Katrina, and its extensive protections largely motivated 90% of eligible employees to be members. Preserving the CBA, and the system that upheld it, seemed critical to the union’s future success. If all parties consented, a charter school system could incorporate the CBA to give each school its own contract, as opposed to a single contract for all teachers in the district (Honawar 2006a). Nevertheless, UTNO’s reputation before the storm as well as the general incompatibility of charter schools and teachers’ unions complicated the idea that UTNO could adapt to a new system.

“Renaissance, Not Replacement”: Mitchell’s Response

...[H]undreds, even thousands, of families [are] holding off on returning to their beloved city until the essential elements of daily life are in place, including viable housing and a neighborhood school for their children...We strongly

believe that the pulse of the city will return to a sense of normalcy when schools reopen and neighborhoods are re-populated with families.
- Brenda Mitchell (American Teacher 2006, 9.)

Living in Baton Rouge with little support behind her, Mitchell had a decision to make. The state government and OPSB pushed for reform, but UTNO members, students, and community members wanted to go back to their jobs, homes, and schools. As other stakeholders started to plan for the future, Mitchell had to respond with an organizational strategy for UTNO. Despite the seemingly inevitable reforms, Mitchell chose to stand by her community and advocate for a return to schools as they were. Mitchell called for a “renaissance, not replacement” of the current system, choosing a strategy that she felt best suited her organization and her community—effectively, defending the “status quo” system in the eyes of reform-minded actors (Beabout 2007, 45).

Mitchell recognized that getting educators and families back to New Orleans required securing jobs and schools for their children. On November 8th, UTNO filed a lawsuit against the district to force them to reopen schools, blaming the formation of charter schools for the delay in reopening public schools (Beabout 2007). Mitchell stated that OPSB’s resistance to reopening schools revealed their true intentions: “Their mentality was...don’t educate the children. Even the people in St. Bernard, who had as bad or worse time than us, opened their schools back up. We had to sue them...I don’t think they wanted poor Black people to return to New Orleans” (Chanin 2021b, 302). However, the lawsuit moved too slowly to have any significant results, and reformers proceeded without reopening schools (Chanin 2021b).

Shortly after the lawsuit, Mitchell and UTNO released their proposal for the new school system (Beabout 2007). According to the plan, opening schools as quickly as possible should be the city’s priority, and to do so, the school district would retain the same basic organizational structure as before the storm. UTNO’s plan specified some changes, mostly focused on working conditions and demands for more ethical behavior from district employees (Beabout 2007). By identifying teachers’ work conditions as a major problem with the current system, Mitchell opposed the narrative that “bad teachers” were responsible for school failure in New Orleans, instead highlighting environmental changes that could improve schools. Mitchell defended her plan by stating, “...We are not asking for more of the same. We need tested, successful programs, not an agenda that turns New Orleans schools into a laboratory for educational experiments on students” (American Teacher 2006, 9). According to Mitchell, New Orleans needed to open schools so displaced New Orleans families could return and have a voice in the upcoming education reforms.

While advocating for the reopening of schools, Mitchell also connected with displaced union members. During such precarious times, she sought to aid and assist union members rather than mobilize a protest or campaign (Chanin 2021b). UTNO set up call centers in Baton Rouge and Houston to contact members, and Mitchell traveled throughout the country to visit former UTNO members (Honawar 2006a). UTNO had additional volunteers in 25 different cities working to connect with former teachers (Honawar 2006a). By prioritizing member support efforts rather than political resistance, UTNO practiced “soft opposition” to the reforms, as Doug Harris describes (Harris 2020, 61). However, direct opposition to the reforms proved logistically difficult, considering that UTNO’s previous methods of political activism, including strikes, protests, petitions, and community campaigns, required active participation from a large body of

members (Chanin 2021b). Jo Anna Russo, a UTNO staff member, explained “We couldn’t even get a group of people to go on a bus to do anything, to go and work politically...you had all these missing components” (Chanin 2021b, 306).

UTNO members did not agree on the best organizational strategy in the face of the reforms, and many criticized Mitchell’s approach. Some union members felt that Mitchell should have done more to protect UTNO from the coming reforms. Samantha Turner, a former union member, shared “I thought, if there was a time that they should have fought the hardest, that would have been the time... But I didn’t feel, personally, that I was a priority at all” (Chanin 2021b, 311). Other union members disagreed with Mitchell’s decision to remain in Baton Rouge and advocate for the old system in front of the state legislature. They believed that Mitchell should have compromised some of their former protections to make a place for UTNO in the new system (Chanin 2021b). To some, the only way to sustain UTNO was to accept reforms as imminent and negotiate with the changing system. To others, like Mitchell, the only way to preserve their strength was to advocate for the old system, under which they held significant power. Mitchell’s position was nonetheless an unthinkable one; with state, local, and federal authorities insistent on reform, how could one union leader protect an unpopular system?

Despite pressure from the state government and school board, Mitchell chose to advocate for the school system as it was before the storm. Mitchell’s decision put UTNO against more powerful, reform-minded actors, but she honored UTNO’s historical commitment to community-minded activism and justice for Black teachers. Mitchell’s proposed plan defended the traditional school system, but due to her focus on supporting UTNO’s scattered membership, Mitchell did not mount significant resistance to the reforms (Chanin 2021b). Mitchell defended her plan to the state legislature, but aside from the personal testimonies of herself and a few other union members, little could drive the state government to integrate UTNO’s plan into their decisions (Beabout 2007). To reformers, Mitchell fought to protect the “status quo” system that hindered educational progress in New Orleans. In Mitchell’s view, she defended her organization against anti-union reformers and chose a strategy that she believed would quickly bring her community back together.

Epilogue: Act 35 and Mass Termination

After [the storm] we were wondering where was the voice for the union. But again, now in retrospect... I could[n’t] imagine... one union rep or one union president trying to speak on behalf of all the teachers, against the state. Who do you go to?

- Shelly McAlister, former UTNO member (Chanin 2021b, 312)

On November 30th, Governor Blanco passed Act 35, a law that changed the criteria for state takeover of local schools. Under the new Act, the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) could take over any New Orleans school performing under the state (Lay 2022). While previous policies allowed RSD to take over schools deemed unacceptable by the state, this Act expanded those parameters significantly and allowed for state control of almost every school in the city. Act 35 passed in the Louisiana legislature, but notably, over 75% of New Orleans representatives voted against it, demonstrating that the state of Louisiana acted against the interests of New Orleans community members (United Teachers of New Orleans n.d.a). RSD took over 102

schools, and only the 13 highest-performing schools before Katrina remained under the control of OPSB (Lay 2022). RSD would eventually convert all of these schools into charter schools. Because OPSB no longer employed the educators working at these schools, conditions guaranteed by the collective bargaining agreement were void. Reformers viewed union contracts as an impediment to progress and effective schooling, so the state takeover and subsequent chartering provided the perfect opportunity to decimate UTNO's influence (Harris 2020).

OPSB had previously established a call center meant to locate former teachers and determine when they would return to work, and by 2006, most New Orleans teachers had reported their location and intention to return to work (Buras 2016). After months of keeping teachers on "disaster leave without pay," OPSB voted to fire all teachers and New Orleans Public School employees, which went into effect in early 2006 (Dingerson 2006, 9). OPSB claimed that they could no longer afford to employ the same number of teachers after the state acquired over 80% of their former schools (Lay 2022). To add insult to injury, OPSB sent termination letters to teachers' vacated addresses, despite having access to their updated contact information. The letters included a narrow appeal period of ten days and an incorrect address to send appeals (Buras 2016). In June 2006, UTNO's contract with OPSB expired, and OPSB refused to renew it; consequently, even the teachers rehired in New Orleans Public Schools could not obtain union protection (Dingerson 2006).

Though many veteran teachers showed a willingness to return to New Orleans and work, many new charter schools refused to rehire them or treated returnees like novice teachers in terms of salary and benefits (Buras 2016). More than 2,000 veteran teachers were forced into early retirement so they could retain their health insurance benefits (Democracy Now 2006). Instead of directing resources toward rehiring and supporting veteran teachers, the Louisiana BESE signed a contract with Teach For America to provide teachers for RSD (Buras 2016). Teach for America recruits largely come from out of state with little to no teaching experience (Buras 2016). Bringing in an outside teaching force through Teach for America irrevocably changed the demographic makeup of the New Orleans teaching force, as inexperienced recruits from outside of the city replaced Black, local, veteran teachers.

Following Act 35 and the mass termination of UTNO members, Mitchell refused to accept defeat and held onto hope for the union's future. "The union is still strong and viable," she said. "We're just going to be working with a different kind of system" (Hoover 2006, n.p.). Mitchell worked to rebuild UNTN for three years before retiring in 2008. When she left, Mitchell had rebuilt UTNO's membership to about 1,100 people, and most eligible teachers became members. UTNO never re-established a collective bargaining agreement after the storm; in fact, they would not win their first charter school CBA until 2015 (Jewson 2015). Though UTNO's work looked significantly different than before Katrina, Mitchell preserved the organization through reforms that could have eliminated it entirely.

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