Teacher unions, the state and politics in Ghana and South Africa: some preliminary observations

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Throughout history, teachers’ and their unions have often displayed an ambiguous relationship to the state. Sometimes, their professional roles ensure that they cooperate or even collaborate with the state. Even within cooperation may be found simmering tensions, which Govender calls ‘cooperation matched with resistance’. At other times, the pinch of economic hardship produces very radical responses. Studies on teacher union-state relationship have tended to demonstrate that it is the opposing ideology of unionism and professionalism that has often created the conflictual and ambiguous relations between the state and teachers’ unions as each tend to appropriate these ideologies to work its will particularly within the corridors of educational policy-making and sometimes the labour rights of teachers. This paper will attempt a broader discussion of teachers unions’ relationship with the state beyond the professionalism-unionism dichotomy. It does so by situating unions’ contestation with the state within the broader political and socio-economic dynamics of Ghana and South Africa. The paper will focus on GNAT and NAGRAT in Ghana and SADTU and NAPTOSA in South Africa. An attempt will be made to tease out the parallels as well as similarities in teacher union state relationship in the two countries.