

Why Teachers Unions Matter

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Nowadays a newspaper cannot be opened — or a TV turned on — without one being subjected to anti-teacher misinformation. The anti-teacher hysteria looks diverse on the surface, but underneath, this public controversy seeks to dislodge teachers unions: the right-wing trashes teachers' unions outright, while the "liberal" media takes a more subtle, sophisticated approach, blaming the state of public education on "bad teachers" who must be fired and replaced. Both styles are the same in essence.

The bi-partisan goal is to undermine and dismember public education, so that public funds may be instead channeled into paying debts racked up by multiple wars and corporate bailouts. Also, as public education is gutted, rich investors parasitically benefit from it by opening for-profit "charter schools," curriculum corporations, or the bevy of new companies that "certify" teachers for a fraction of the cost or time of universities, ready to serve at the new corporate McEducation institutes.

Obama's Race to the Top campaign enshrines these odious goals into governmental policy, picking up where Bush's anti-teacher union policies left off, and racing frantically in the same direction, to the bottom.

The schools that Bush's No Child Left Behind labeled as "failures" are to be shut down under Obama's Race to the Top. These schools are almost entirely in poor neighborhoods, where the social disease of poverty is an easy predictor of a child's poor test scores.

But Obama ignores this obvious fact and blames poor grades and test scores on the teachers, exclusively.

Thus, Obama cheered when every teacher at a Rhode Island "failing" high school was fired. He praised the past closures of dozens of public schools in both Chicago and New Orleans as examples for others to follow. Indeed, Detroit and Kansas City each have plans to close dozens of schools, while California is set to fire thousands of teachers. Under Obama's plan, federal money is awarded to states that fire the most "bad" teachers and close the most "failing" public schools.

Charter schools are to fill the void, where the rich will have access to all the amenities offered at public schools, while the poor will be warehoused in a drab environment lacking resources — without sports and other extracurricular activities, no art or music, no counseling or psychological services, etc. The two-party system envisions education "reform" to mirror free market ideology, where services once deemed "essential" are now to be sold as commodities to those who can afford them.

The right-wing has made it clear — for years — that teachers' unions are the biggest

“obstacle” to this education “reform,” and they are right. Consequently, the very existence of teachers’ unions are in jeopardy with Obama’s Race to the Top.

If teachers’ unions cannot keep schools open, or teachers from being fired, their power is undermined. If any teacher can be fired when they are labeled “bad,” then one of the fundamental concepts of unionism, seniority, is crushed. If teachers cannot be protected by seniority, then pro-union teachers will be targeted and fired, and the union will evolve into a paper tiger. And if union-protected teachers can suddenly be fired arbitrarily, then union-protected workers in other fields will soon find their seniority destroyed, and with it their unions. The struggle of the teachers is thus the struggle of all union workers. But unions benefit more than just union workers.

Anyone involved in politics — from the rank and file “activist” to those working for liberal-minded causes — understands that unions are the ONLY source of consistent resources for progressive campaigns, from money donations, TV advertisement, to door knockers and phone bankers, etc.

For example, the two recent progressive tax measures passed in Oregon — that increase taxes on the rich and corporations — would have been impossible were it not for the support of the teachers’ unions. Unions are the only social force capable of combating the constant anti-worker measures pushed by business groups all over the country, state by state. They are the only real check to the power of the wealthy and corporations.

Additionally, U.S. unions are strongest in the public sector, making them a special target of the organized corporate elite. Amongst public sector workers, teachers are the best organized and most cohesive. The corporate cross-hairs are thus steadily aimed at the head of the teachers’ unions, with Obama’s Race to the Top acting as a high-caliber rifle.

The economic crisis acted as the trigger to Obama’s assault on education: the financial woes of every state were seized by Obama as a tremendous opportunity to “reform” education; thus, Race to the Top forces money-hungry states to compete for a measly \$4 billion of federal money. The winners are those states that inflict the most self-harm by firing “bad” teachers and closing “failing” schools. Obama is accomplishing more in one campaign than the anti-public education right-wing has accomplished in decades.

This anti-education carpet-bombing was going unchallenged until recently. On March 4th, demonstrations across the country were organized to defend public education. It’s no coincidence that the biggest demonstrations were organized in San Francisco. There, unions took the lead in organizing a downtown rally, using their resources to turn out 15,000 people. The non-union led protests elsewhere paled in comparison, showcasing again the extreme political relevance of unions.

A central demand in the San Francisco protest was “tax the rich and corporations.” This demand is crucially important, for it not only insures that public education will be adequately funded, but applies to the sufficient funding of the entire public sector — social services, transportation, etc.

Taxing the rich and corporations must be the rallying call for the entire public sector workforce, which remains the bedrock of American labor. If this demand were to be

promoted by the biggest public employee unions, the vast majority of the community would support it, as happened in Oregon. The progressive tax victory in Oregon proved that the corporate media lies about “cuts” being the only solution to the economic crisis. The corporations and wealthy must pay for the crisis they sparked.

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