



Week of Feb. 22-25, 2011

Unions and Quality Schooling

by UCLA IDEA

We are witnessing a broad-based assault on public employees' right to engage in collective bargaining. This matters for public education in California and we'll explain that connection below.

Union members are mobilizing across the country for their own futures, for their right to participate in workplace and professional decisions, and in solidarity with Wisconsin's workers. Many states are considering legislation to restrict union rights. Anti-union forces in several other states are waiting for the moment they can assert themselves. In California, Assemblyman Allan Mansoor (R-Costa Mesa) introduced a bill to ban collective bargaining for pensions.

There's nothing new about pitched battles between corporations and political conservatives on the one hand, and unions on the other. But it is extraordinary in America when one side proclaims that it will settle for nothing less than the annihilation of the other.

Unions' strength lies in the historical record that workers are better off when they organize. Employees who negotiate as individuals tend to have less job security, poorer working conditions, lower salaries, and uncertain retirements. But the same features that make unions strong also make them targets for resentment and scapegoating.

In the midst of financial crises, well-financed anti-union campaigns have created a popular image of public sector employees as lazy, underperforming, and overpaid. The media love long-running features on "bad examples" of public sector employees. Consider the sensational stories about obscenely large salaries, pensions, or disability benefits paid to a few public employees. Sometimes these lush payments result from a union contract, but more often the recipients are high-level bureaucrats with opaque individual contracts.

Unrelenting publicity, often politically motivated, helps transfer that anger to entire categories of Americans. As a result, "union members" are smeared with accusations of sensational benefits and unwarranted political power. In fact, most public sector employees and retirees worry about their livelihoods, retirement, supporting their families, and they are astonished that their fellow Americans think otherwise.

Importantly (and annoyingly to anti-union forces,) unions offer protections for activist members who speak out against waste, favoritism, recrimination, parent disenfranchisement, administrative incompetence, and so forth. Of course, some people just don't like unions of any sort, public or private. It doesn't matter how "perfectly" run the union is or how exemplary its members. Public employees can't convince them, and that's why we are watching these pitched union/anti-union battles.

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THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Feb. 22-25, 2011

Page 2

What then would the end of public sector unions mean for public education in California? With no effective counterweight to the interests of the few who are committed to lowering corporate tax rates, we would expect:

- Substantially less investment in public schools and larger classrooms with less attention for students (teachers unions have been the only well-funded source of advocacy for more investment in education and reasonable class sizes);
- More vulnerable students and parents who lack teacher advocates that can speak up on their behalf without fear of retaliation;
- Experienced and effective teachers leaving the profession (and prospective teachers going elsewhere) as the pressure on wages and benefits drives both down and as teachers lose the ability to use their professional discretion to shape student learning.

Such a future is untenable. And yet so is a status quo that ensures that California's highest-need schools are most likely to experience severe shortages of highly qualified teachers. Teachers unions are not the primary cause of this problem, but they need to play a leadership role in its solution. More generally, public support for teachers unions will sag so long as these unions can accurately be portrayed as looking out only for the interests of their members.

There is a different way forward, what some term "the new unionism." This approach, charted, in part, by a new generation of teacher union leadership, recognizes that the future of unions depends on their alliance with the parents and students they serve. It calls for teacher unions to speak with and on behalf of communities as well as members. And it focuses teacher union attention on strategies for making schools better and more equitable. Of course, this "new unionism" echoes an earlier vision. In 1904, Chicago teacher Margaret Haley argued that the primary reason for teachers to organize was to "secure conditions under which [high quality learning] may become possible."¹

¹ Haley, Margaret (1904). "Why Teachers Should Organize." *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Forty-third Annual Meeting of the National Educational Association*, St. Louis, Missouri, June 27-July 1.

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