

The Rift Between Teachers and Democrats Widens

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The corporate media is brutally honest on rare occasions. Take for example a recent article in The New York Times Magazine, titled The Teachers' Union's Last Stand (05-23-10).

The title itself is surprisingly sincere, since it admits that the nation's teachers are being targeted for attack by the Obama Administration, through his "Race to the Top" education reform. And although the article has an inherently corporate bias, it contains many revelations that have been otherwise ignored in the mainstream media.

The article outlines the two contending forces behind the national education "debate": the corporate "reformers" and the "anti-change" teacher unions. Who are the reformers? The New York Times answers:

"...high-powered foundations, like the [Bill] Gates Foundation... and wealthy entrepreneurs, who have poured seed money into charter schools."

Other reformers include: "... a new crop of Democratic politicians across the country — including President Obama — who seem willing to challenge the teachers' unions."

Top on the list of objectives for the reformers — Democrats and corporate groups — is the creation of charter schools, which stand in total opposition to public education. The New York Times article speaks at length about the biggest obstacle to the charter school "movement" — the teachers' unions.

Examples are given on a state-by-state level where teachers' unions have stalled or defeated attempts of the corporate-backed "reformers" to shift public funding towards private charter schools.

But the article also mentions instances where teachers' unions have made shameful concessions to the reformers, such as in Washington, D.C., Tennessee, and Rhode Island. The main concession is the job security of teachers. How is the job security of teachers and the creation of charter schools related?

Because teachers' unions are the biggest obstacle to the creation of private charter schools, unions must be undermined. Unions are powerful because union members cannot be fired for engaging in political activity. Union workers are thus able to help organize their workforce and communities to pursue political objectives — such as saving public education — without fear of being fired.

Destroying teacher seniority is thus the primary goal of the corporate education reformers.

This is the hidden motive behind all the media attention towards “firing bad teachers.” The reformers want the ability to fire any teacher at any time, consequently undermining teachers’ unions.

Thus, teachers are supposed to be rewarded — by keeping their jobs or with raises — based on their students’ abilities to achieve high test scores, regardless of the number of children in the classroom, or the poverty level of the students, or whether or not enough classroom materials exist to do the job.

Sadly, the President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Randy Weingarten, has agreed to abandon teacher job security in recent bargaining negotiations. The New York Times reports:

“ [The Washington, D.C.] contract...now makes it possible... to fire any teacher with tenure...if the teacher is evaluated as “ineffective” for one year or “minimally effective” for two years. The criteria used to define “ineffective” or “minimally effective” are, according to another clause, “a nonnegotiable item” determined solely by [school administrators].”

Language like this will be used to destroy teachers’ unions. School administrators will determine that union activist teachers are “ineffective,” those teachers that criticize work conditions will be labeled “minimally effective,” etc.

If Weingarten thinks that making this kind of concession will quiet the demands of the “reformers,” she will need to think again. Giving sharks tidbits merely sends them into a feeding frenzy.

Indeed, the frenzied demands of the corporate groups to privatize public education are more than Weingarten can keep up with. The other, larger national teacher union, the National Education Association, has yet to make the large concessions Weingarten’s AFT has.

The Democrats demanding these concessions are creating conflicts between the unions to an unheard of degree. If a complete break happens between the unions and Democrats — as it should — the repercussions would be enormous. The New York Times explains:

“If unions are the Democratic Party’s base, then teachers’ unions are the base of the base. The two national teachers’ unions — the American Federation of Teachers and the larger National Education Association — together have more than 4.6 million members. That is roughly a quarter of all the union members in the country. Teachers are the best field troops in local elections.... In the last 30 years, the teachers’ unions have contributed nearly \$57.4 million to federal campaigns... and they have typically contributed many times more to state and local candidates. About 95 percent of it has gone to Democrats.”

Teachers’ unions cannot continue to support a political party that aims to destroy them.

Even Weingarten was forced to admit “deliberately or not, President Obama, whom I supported, has shifted the focus from resources and innovation and collaboration to blaming it all on dedicated teachers.”

The Democratic Party is dismantling public education on a state and municipal level, picking each target at different times to hide the enormity of the attack, while confusing teachers,

parents, students, and community members about the overall agenda.

Only an organized and aggressive response can stop the privatization of public education.

Both national teachers unions — along with regional teacher's unions — must adopt common positions on the total defense of fully funded public education, while also demanding that teachers' job security be protected. A campaign that involves rank and file teachers, students, parents, other public workers, the labor movement as a whole and the larger community can be united around the slogan: fully fund public education by taxing the rich and corporations!

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