



VIEWPOINT

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Teacher Unions Block Reforms

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The National Education Association (NEA) was established in 1857, and the American Federation of Teachers in the beginning of the 20th century but neither evolved as a significant traditional labor union until the 1960s. Unfortunately, as that transition took place, they adopted some of the less attractive features of industrial unions.

In the ongoing attempts to reform education, the NEA and AFT consistently block or cripple any meaningful change, such as school choice and charter schools. They, of course, deny this and cite rhetoric stressing the need for change and their wish to bring it about.

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Anyone who has spent anytime within the movement knows that the charge is true and the rhetoric false.

For example, in 1970 the U.S. government began looking for a school district to try a five-year school choice project, which required the approval of the local teachers. One was found in Alum Rock, California, where most of the teachers belonged to an NEA local and a smaller number belonged to an AFT chapter. Both groups agreed to participate, only to be attacked by their national unions.

At the 1997 conference of the Education Commission of the States, in Providence, R.I., I asked top officers of both unions why they did this. NEA's President Bob Chase excused himself from answering because he wasn't in office in the 1970s. This doesn't seem to be a good reason to not at least express a view as to why the NEA would attack members they are supposed to represent.

Ed McElroy, at the time the AFT Secretary-Treasurer (now its president), said the AFT did so because its members made "a stupid decision." He didn't explain who decided it was stupid or on what basis they opposed rather than supported their members.

Ironically, the AFT president at the time of the Alum Rock effort was David Selden, who testified before Congress in opposition to the program and to vouchers. After he later left office he wrote an article in which he said the teachers liked vouchers and so did he.

David Darland, when he was an NEA Assistant Executive Secretary, once said "If you are a good teacher, you are always undermining the status quo." Fortunately for teachers this is a standard not generally applied because it is one that few teachers meet, or care to. Whatever their teaching abilities, rarely do they seek to alter the status quo nor, if they did, would the NEA or AFT look kindly on their efforts.

Elaine Kendall was closer to the truth when she said that "of all professions, teaching is the most hostile to nonconformists or agitators."

Yet there was a time when this could at least be recognized and discussed within the ranks of teacher organizations. Consider this from the Student NEA News in January of 1967:

By and large the teaching profession is the least responsive, the least flexible, and the most afraid. We are plagued by teachers...without a social conscience, without recognition of the need for adventure and responsiveness in their own lives as well as the lives of their students...

Individual teachers have allowed themselves to accept neutrality as the only expedient to such an extent that they do not realize how successfully they have muzzled the profession.

Can it be called courage when one articulate school board member or one local chapter of some 'civic' organization can cause hundreds of teachers to swallow their pride and also their tongues. Is one supposed to be overcome with admiration when teachers limit their political and civic participation to membership in national organizations behind which they may conveniently hide?

The trouble with American education as it continues to exist is that the system forces teachers to prefer conformity for themselves and their students.

One wonders what happened to the student(s) who wrote that. Did they later become teachers only to conform themselves. Or did the system so discourage them that they pursued other careers.

Either way, what they wrote then is sadly still true today.