

TEACHERS UNIONS NOT TO BLAME

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One of the favorite whipping children for the right is the teachers union.

Blaming teachers unions for the ills that beset our educational system is like blaming the EPA for global pollution or the cop on patrol for an increase in shoplifting.

Nonetheless, repeatedly, we hear complaints that teachers unions stand in the way of meaningful change. Since these complaints are lodged typically by individuals who oppose all unions, one would think that they would be taken *cum grano salis*. However, they are not. If these persons had ever been union members themselves, they would not be so quick with their anti-union rants.

Those of us who grew up in working-class families, at least in the North, know the good that unions can do. If it were not for my father's union, my parents never would have risen from working-class to lower middle-class, never would have been able to afford to move us out of the apartment in which I grew up into our first home.

Of course, if the day ever arrives that management operates virtuously and in profit-sharing cooperation with labor, unions will not be needed. The model for such a possibility would be Sears, Roebuck before the 1970s.

Such a day of lion lying down with lamb seems to recede further into the distance every year.

Are unions flawless? They certainly are not. However, we should never make the mistake of condemning a whole because of the corruption of some of its parts. We do not conclude from the vast numbers of badly written sonnets that Shakespeare's sonnets are written badly.

Rotten apples do not turn good apples rotten.

In particular, teachers unions have moved teaching from a job with a subsistence income and no benefits to a job with at least a lower middle-class income and well-deserved health and pension benefits.

While one might argue that they need to do even more for teachers, one cannot deny that their failure to do so is less their fault than the fault of an intransigent education system and insensitive legislators.

To anyone who has been a member of a teachers union, the complaints against such unions must seem baffling.

They are blamed for the low quality of education. However, they do not set education policy, nor do they write curricula.

They are blamed for standing in the way of firing incompetent teachers. However, they did not hire those teachers. And they did not evaluate those teachers' performance as satisfactory. And they did not grant tenure (or its *de facto* inertial equivalent). If they intervene on behalf of a teacher who has been led to believe that he or she has performed satisfactorily, that is only right and proper, even if the teacher is actually incompetent.

Let us be frank. In a country with universal, compulsory education, not all teachers will be competent. That is a sad reality. The system's lack of a mandated, concrete, delineated curriculum leaves such teachers to their own devices and exacerbates the impact that they may have.

One might claim—with some justice—that since the rise of teachers unions, there has been an increase in the number of incompetent teachers. That may be true, but it cannot be laid at the feet of the unions.

The rise in influence of teachers unions coincided with the progress of the civil rights movement. Before that, the teaching profession benefited from societal segregation and sexism. Talented ethnic minority members of both genders and ethnic majority women were barred from the opportunity for meaningful employment, except in teaching. When Uncle Remus, Aunt Jemima, and Rosie the Riveter saw new employment horizons opening for them, the teaching profession lost a sizable portion of the pool of gifted educators.

Unions did not cause this and are not to be blamed for it.

It is an unfortunate phenomenon of recent history that long-delayed social justice emerged simultaneously with our schools' entering their most catastrophic period of decline. This had particularly devastating consequences for students in ethnic minorities.

This also happened to be the era when teachers unions came into their own. They were no less vulnerable to social pressure and educational decline than the system at large.

Finally, the teachers unions' leaders and members are more and more products of the current system. They too are prisoners of their flawed education. They are not alone, and they do not deserve to be singled out for blame.

Those who blame teachers unions—just as those who condemn standardized tests—are beating the wrong horse.

As Total Quality Management (TQM) guru W.E. Deming said, "Do not fix blame; fix the system."

In fixing the system, unions can be valuable allies.

Georgia is one of only 11 states (9 in the South and Southwest, Missouri, and Wyoming) that prohibit collective bargaining for schoolteachers. The government of Georgia needs to overcome its resistance to public service unions.

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