

DEMONIZING TEACHERS AND THEIR ELECTED LEADERS

By Nick Gier, President, Idaho Federation of Teachers, AFT/AFL-CIO

This isn't pay-for-performance; it's a salary distribution system. Through Tom Luna's system, even an ineffective teacher could get a bonus and the teacher of the year could get no bonus if he or she isn't at a so-called qualified school.

—Janet Orndorff, Boise School Board member

We have gone from a system where almost no one was terminated, no matter how bad, to the other extreme, where good teachers as well as bad are terminated. The latter is probably more damaging due to the stress and demoralization it causes.

—Mary Levy, D. C. attorney and education analyst

Measuring outcomes through standardized testing and referring to those results as the evidence of learning is, in my opinion, misguided.

—David Magill, Director, University of Chicago's Lab School

It is not fair to expect teachers to correct all the imbalances and remedy all the pathologies that result from growing inequality in our society.

—Eugene Robinson, "When did Teachers become Villains?"

Hillsborough, Florida district officials recognize the union as a full partner in school reform. They understand that frontline educators need to be deeply involved in decisions that affect their classrooms and their schools.

—Randi Weingarten, President, American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

A full page ad entitled "Unions Declare War on Idaho Kids!" has appeared in many Idaho newspapers. It was paid for by right-wing agitator Frank L. Vandersloot, Dutch for "from the ditch," which describes the nature of ad quite accurately. Vandersloot charges that teacher unions "fought Governor Scott Walker's educational reforms in Wisconsin. The kids won. The unions lost." This conclusion is a tad premature.

Wisconsin Ed Reform Bills Found Unconstitutional

On March 30 U.S. District Judge William Conley ruled against a provision of Walker's bill that required, just as Idaho now does for teachers, that public employee unions hold bargaining elections every year. Walker's bill exempted public safety unions from this onerous burden, and Conley ruled that this favored one group of workers over others. Significantly enough, the police and firefighter unions had endorsed Walker in the 2010 election.

Then on September 14 Dean County Judge Juan Colas ruled that Walker's bill deprives public employees of their "rights of free speech, association, and equal protection." Colas also found that the change in pension law violated the "prohibition of constitutional impairment of contracts." The Walker administration has appealed both decisions and Conley's ruling is now being decided by a Chicago federal appeals court.

Teacher Unions Represent 75 percent of America's Teachers

Vandersloot is of course delighted that the National Education Association (NEA), the largest union in America at 2.2 million, has lost 2 percent of its members over the past two years. My organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has actually has grown slightly over the same period and is now at 1.52 million. The two unions represent 75 percent of the nation's teachers, and that would be higher of all states allowed collective bargaining.

The NEA's chapters tend to be in more rural areas and conservative states where organized labor has never been strong. Here conservative governors have passed restrictive labor laws that have banned "fair share" agreements. In the past judges and labor boards have ruled that all school district faculty must pay for the costs of collective bargaining, which in most cases amounts to about 90 percent of union dues. The NEA may have lost most of its members by free riders choosing not to pay their fair share.

Vandersloot wants us to believe that teachers have finally realized they have been duped by union "bosses" in Washington, D.C. But a survey K-12 teachers done by the think-tank Education Sector found that 81% believed that they "would be vulnerable to school politics. Vandersloot should also be reminded that union leaders are elected by teachers at the local, state, and national level.

Chicago and New York City Support the Union not the Mayor

In a recent appearance in New York City Mitt Romney brushed off a comment by a parent and school board member, who reported that parents supported the AFT union by 3-1 over Mayor Michael Bloomberg. With over 200,000 members the United Federation of Teachers has represented New York City teachers for 52 years.

In Chicago thousands of parents marched with 50,000 union members, many from surrounding states, in support of the Chicago Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1,

one hundred years old this year. A McKeon & Associates poll of registered Chicago voters showed that 47 percent supported the strike while 39 percent opposed. Only 19 percent said Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former Chief of Staff, said that he was doing an above average job addressing the teachers' issues.

One of the parents on the Chicago picket line was the Rev. Richard Grant, who said that "my son says he's proud that I'm supporting his teacher." So much for Vandersloot's war on kids waged by evil union bosses. How could he possibly insult the intelligence of both students and their teachers more?

Teachers Vote for Union Representation and for their Leaders

Vandersloot and his ilk spit out "union bosses" as if they were dictators with devious control over millions of teachers and school boards. Even with union contracts district managers still have the right to hire and fire teachers for cause. Idaho Senate Bill 1108 has eliminated the requirement that a statement of reasons must be given for termination. This of course is a denial of due process.

For Idaho teachers there are no "union shops," which means that members of the Idaho Education Association and the Idaho Federation of Teachers sign up voluntarily. Non-members are free from the responsibility of paying the costs of collective bargaining and other union benefits. As explained above, more progressive states require non-union public employees to pay "agency fees," usually 90 percent of union dues.

Labor unions are some of the most democratic organizations in the nation. All unions gain their right to represent workers by a majority vote of the bargaining unit. Instead of dictates from D.C., they also decide for themselves whether to withhold their services. Over the years they have held fewer and fewer strikes. For example, the number of work stoppages in the nation's 16,000 school districts fell from 271 in 1975 to 15 in 2004. Public employee strikes in Ohio were much higher before union representation, but now workers are able to negotiate their grievances rather than vent them in the streets.

By a show of only 30 percent a "decertification" election must be held. The union is out if it cannot maintain its majority. Adding the unnecessary burden of automatic unit elections every year is something that no democratic system has ever done. This is political sabotage and union busting not educational reform.

Critics complain that unions coddle incompetent teachers, but since 2009 400 teachers (98 in August alone) in the District of Columbia have been fired for poor performance. Critics, such as education policy analyst Mary Levy, believe that district

administrators have gone too far and now “good teachers as well as bad are terminated.” Highly rated teachers are refusing to take their bonuses out of solidarity with their colleagues.

“No Student Left Behind” becomes “No Student Left Untested”

The AFT, NEA, and a great many parents are not happy with Obama’s revision of Bush Era policies, which place far too much emphasis on test scores and pit states and schools districts against one another. Before the strike Mayor Emanuel received a letter from 16 universities in the Chicago area. It concluded that “the new evaluation system for teachers and principals centers on misconceptions about student growth, with potentially negative impact on the education of Chicago's children.” Finnish students are some of the best in the world and they don’t take a standardized test until they enter university; furthermore, their teachers are 90 percent unionized.

The Washington (D.C.) Teachers’ Union (AFT) has now succeeded in reducing the percentage that test scores count in teacher evaluation from 50 to 35 percent. In other districts unions have successfully reduced that number to 25 percent. Governor Jerry Brown has just signed legislation that reduces the role of tests and includes demographic factors such as drop-out and “college going” rates. The Los Angeles School district agreed with the teacher union (a long time coalition of NEA and AFT) that test scores would no longer be used in teacher evaluation. In stark contrast Idaho law now requires that lump sum merit pay appropriations to districts be based on test score improvement.

Student Performance Correlates Strongly with Poverty

Studies have shown that student performance correlates most strongly with income inequality. (Race is no longer the major determining factor.) Teachers are being punished for conditions over which they have no control. Because of broken homes millions of America’s school children are lost before they start first grade.

Once in school Chicago’s poor kids find that many of their schools—in contrast to those in the suburbs—have no libraries, no nurses, no counselors, and no air conditioning. Nearly 80 percent of Chicago’s students qualify for free or reduced price lunches. The new contract called for only 100 more nurses and social workers, but did require enough counselors for all the city’s elementary schools.

The best union contract, however, cannot alleviate the poverty in our inner cities. As Eugene Robinson wrote in a recent column: “Students from families making more than \$200,000 score more than 300 points higher on the SAT, on average, than students from families less than \$20,000 a year,” and all that the “brie-and-chablis

reform movement” want to do is “beat up on teachers.” In terms of world comparisons, student performance is generally better in those countries with less income inequality

The Three Luna Laws Must be Repealed

Voting “No” on Idaho Proposition 1 would repeal Senate Bill 1108, which undermines due process, reduces teacher job security, and severely limits the scope of collective bargaining. As with the Wisconsin laws, these restrictions may well raise basic constitutional issues. Limiting the contract period to one year would increase the cost of negotiations and waste the precious time of teachers and administrators who participate in them. Forcing the union to prove majority support every year is an unnecessary burden that no other democratic procedure requires.

Voting “No” on Proposition 2 would repeal Senate Bill 1110, which deals with “pay for performance,” and this merit pay would go to districts solely on the basis of standardized test improvement. The AFT has long supported merit pay, but only where the union has been involved in producing the plan and where there is a comprehensive set of criteria—not just test scores—to judge teacher performance. SB 1110 fails on both these points. In fact, Superintendent Tom Luna did not consult school districts, parents, or teachers before introducing his bills.

For FY 13 nearly \$39 million was taken from teacher salaries to fund Idaho’s merit pay. A Pocatello parent demonstrates the absurdity of such a process: “It’s like reducing your hourly wage by two bucks and then giving you an opportunity to earn it back as bonus. A worker should not have to take a reduction in salary in order to pay for his/her bonus!” Teachers who previously earned a \$2,000 bonus for five years by obtaining National Board Certification will now compete for limited funds with teachers who have not done this arduous work.

As Boise School Board member Janet Orndorff states: “This isn’t pay-for-performance; it’s a salary distribution system. Through this system, even an ineffective teacher could get a bonus and the teacher of the year could get no bonus if he or she isn’t at a so-called qualified school,” that is, a district whose test scores improves.

I will let the Idaho Education Association give the reason to vote “No” on Proposition 3, which “forces your local schools to spend your tax dollars on expensive, unproven technology before they spend money on essentials like reducing class sizes, purchasing basic classroom supplies, or protecting student safety. Because this state mandate was left largely unfunded by the legislature, it could lead to higher property taxes for all of us.” Some of the funds for laptops comes out of teacher compensation, and rural districts will be especially hard pressed to come up with money for merit pay and computers.

AFT Leads in Education Reform

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a report entitled “A Nation at Risk.” As the new president of the Idaho Federation of Teachers, I went on a state-wide speaking tour and committed my union to education reform. The IFT offered a Master Teachers Plan as the answer to the report’s call for merit pay. Master Teachers would be responsible for curriculum development and mentoring new teachers and would receive substantial salary increments for that work. The Idaho State Board of Education failed to respond to our plan, even though we introduced the concept of Master Teacher 30 years before Tom Luna did.

In Tampa, Florida AFT union-district collaboration has helped make it a national model for teacher development and evaluation, pay for performance, and teacher mentoring. The collaboration also has attracted the attention of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which announced last year that the Hillsborough district would receive an Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching grant. The grant provides \$100 million over seven years to develop a new-teacher induction program, improve teacher and principal evaluation systems, provide better professional development, support incentives for teachers who work with high-needs students, and overhaul the district’s compensation system.

As national AFT President Randi Weingarten said: “District officials recognize the union as a full partner in school reform. They understand that frontline educators need to be deeply involved in decisions that affect their classrooms and their schools.” As a federation of local and state chapters all over the nation, we enjoy substantial local autonomy, but I wholeheartedly endorse not only Weingarten’s statement but all of her good work for American teachers and students. Weingarten is a teacher and colleague not one of Vandersloot’s fictional dictators.