

Teachers Unions as Champions of Social Justice

By Ben Spielberg (Bay Area '10)

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During my second year in the corps, I became involved in the San Jose Teachers Association (SJTA). My two years on SJTA's Executive Board have helped me understand why teachers unions are generally the most credible, important advocates driving change for low-income communities.

Many reformers perceive unions differently. They argue that SJTA's forward-thinking approach to education reform is an anomaly and that unions who oppose reform ideas put "adult interests" ahead of student learning. These claims, however, are divisive and inaccurate; unionized teachers often spend the entirety of their professional lives putting student needs ahead of their own. To understand why unions sometimes appear intransigent, it's important to understand what makes the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) context unique.

SJUSD leadership clearly demonstrates their belief in the importance of organized labor, fair compensation, and collaborative policy development. Our district doesn't point fingers or blame the opportunity gap on teachers; SJUSD management asks what they can do to help staff support students and invests in systems that empower staff to successfully execute their jobs.

Unfortunately, teachers and their unions are frequently attacked elsewhere—their basic job protections misconstrued, their character denigrated, and their voices ignored. As a result, unions who would otherwise pursue a

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social justice agenda must frequently handle immediate crises. *Vergara v. California*, for instance, has forced the California Teachers Association to spend its time correcting misconceptions about teacher employment law instead of concentrating on its preferred priorities: improving teacher evaluation and support, raising California's minimum wage, protecting immigrants' rights, and other in-school and out-of-school causes that benefit students.

Reformers and districts thus shoulder the majority of the responsibility to show good faith and create the conditions—transparency, openness to union ideas, respect for union membership, and a willingness to work together—that



help unions execute a social justice approach. At the same time, unions must make the effort to move beyond reflexively defensive postures and actively try to understand people with whom we disagree. Even when we see reform ideas implemented counterproductively, unions must keep an open mind and engage in solutions-oriented conversations about topics ranging from merit pay to standardized testing.

Teachers unions can also consider following SJTA's example by proactively defining themselves as social justice organizations in two main ways. First, unions should clearly define a positive mission statement and orient their work towards their mission. SJTA's mission is to "empower teachers to educate, inspire, and change lives through public education." SJTA advocates for sustainable working conditions and fair labor practices, for example, not just because our hard-working educators deserve them, but also because students with happy, well-rested teachers and adequate classroom resources learn more.

We also co-designed an innovative new teacher evaluation system with SJUSD that uses several indicators of effectiveness and requires extensive training for multiple evaluators who conduct both formal and informal

observations. We believe more meaningful feedback about strengths and areas for growth will help teachers deliver excellent instruction to students. In addition, SJTA led efforts in 2012 to help fund public schools, pass San Jose's minimum wage increase, and elect two excellent school board members. These successful campaigns translated directly into benefits for our students—an uninterrupted school year and financial support for students' families. Our student-oriented mission guides all of SJTA's work.

Second, unions should consider contract structures that reduce the time spent negotiating salary and benefits. SJTA and SJUSD's "salary formula" directs a guaranteed percentage of the district's revenue to teacher compensation. Though not a panacea, this system keeps wages fair and transparent and has helped enable SJTA and SJUSD to jointly pursue new approaches to evaluation, funding, permanent status, school redesign, teacher leadership pathways, and charter schools in ways that simultaneously help students and treat teachers and organized labor with respect.

My experience with SJTA demonstrates how much open-minded, proactive, and properly-supported social justice unions can accomplish. To address educational inequity on a larger scale, we therefore need more reformers and districts to stop bashing organized labor and start working with us. Together, we can develop the intelligent, ethical policies that benefit students most.

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The Great Corporate Reform Conspiracy

By Derrell Bradford

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During my career working in school reform I've been called a lot of things, but in recent years, two new buzzwords have risen to prominence in the anti-reform lexicon. Thanks to a disciplined media campaign by their opponents, reformers are now co-conspirators in a "corporate reform" and "privatization" revolution. It's like one night I went to bed as a fighter for educational justice, and the next morning I woke up a tool of the Man turning our kids and schools into profit centers for the country's oligarchs. Boy, did that happen quickly.

I keep looking for this "corporate" influence and "privatization" scheme, because I want to know how the money will actually get made. If there's a school system in America that's awash in cash—sitting on heaps of bullion à la Scrooge McDuck—I'd love to know where it is. More importantly, to believe that you'd have to ignore all the corporations and people who currently make money in our school systems: the vendors and lawyers, construction and insurance firms, and, well, the teachers. If you're concerned about people making money in schools, I have news: You're too late.

But I'm not going to the mat for profit or corporations here. Corporations have brought good into the world, but they've



also done some terrible things that lots of folks, perhaps rightly, hate them for. And "privatizer" has always had an insidious ring particularly in communities of color, where it means, broadly, "someone who has a job in a school or a post office today won't have it tomorrow." But the truth is that setting up straw men and name-calling like this only happen when you don't have anything else to say and have lost the argument. Don't think you can win on the merits? Just distract everyone and hope you can wait out the change-assault on the status quo.

In the end, I don't care about the conspiracy theories. Some people consider me a frontline fighter among frontliners, because I have worked for over a decade on reform in tough places with tough political challenges: places like Camden and Trenton, New Jersey, that spend a lot on public education but produce very little for the folks who need it the most—the kids whose very existence hangs in the balance and for whom school is the only lever they have.

I grew up black and male in Baltimore City, so I see myself in each and every one of these kids. And I remember, like it was yesterday, the moment "corporate" reform (back then it was called a scholarship because we had no charters) touched my life and opened it up in