

Gloria Steinem and Diane Ravitch: Who's making the feminist case?

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Here's how Gloria Steinem announced her support of Bloomberg's designation of Cathleen Black as NYC Schools Chancellor: "I've known Cathie Black for more than three decades, and I know she turns the impossible into success. In the beginning of New York Magazine and Ms. Magazine, she earned advertising support in a world still run by Mad Men, and at USA Today, she achieved a popular national newspaper that experts said couldn't exist. As the first woman to be president of the Hearst Corporation, she initiated its most successful publication, "O" Magazine. Now, her abilities as a publisher are being held to a different standard than Joel Klein as a prosecutor, even though she is on the board of a Harlem magnet school. In short, she has a hard path to an impossible job — which is exactly why she'll succeed. I support her because I know New Yorkers — especially students — will be very glad she's there."

One irony in Steinem's actions is that Diane Ravitch, now a relentless critic of the Bloomberg/Klein reforms, made her name in education as a neoconservative by blasting attempts of women and minorities to be included in curriculum. Much to her credit, Ravitch exposes the harm done by the reforms every place she can get a podium. Though Ravitch doesn't cast her argument against the neoliberal reforms in feminist terms, her defense of teaching as a profession and the rights of teachers to have strong unions is what feminists should be saying and doing.

Steinem's clearly hasn't learned what was wrong with a definition of "sisterhood" that excludes the economic concerns of poor and working women. Her defense of Black displays the same arrogant insularity and class hubris of middle class professional women displayed in the early days of the women's movement. I saw these attitudes up close when I became involved in a struggle about California's protective legislation. When the movement to adopt Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) went to the states, ERA supporters were often pitted against advocates (mainly trade unions) of laws that required employers to protect women against physical exploitation in the workplace. The ERA would have wiped out protective legislation. Laws varied from state to state, but in California they required employers to give women regular breaks, drinking water and toilet facilities on the job site, and weight-lifting limits. Sometimes the laws were used as a rationale for discrimination in hiring ("We have no toilet for women to use, so we can't hire you.") Sometimes the protections were extended to men because it was more practical for employers to do so. Labor union activists in California, under leadership of Anne Draper, tried, unsuccessfully, to have the laws extended to all workers. The affluent professional women who led the struggle for the ERA's adoption sneered, literally and figuratively, at the need for laws that safeguarded workplace hygiene and safety.

Gloria Steinem's very public support for Bloomberg's appointment of Cathleen Black (and can we please call her by her full name and not "Cathy"? Was Joel Klein "Joey"?) is a sneer, intended or not, at lots of women who work for a living. It was feminist only in one sense: Black is a woman. This is feminism? Not to me. Steinem supported not only an ill-suited candidate but also the Mayor's right to make this decision without consultation with the people most involved in children's education — women, teachers and mothers. They've been denied voice about their children's fate — as have been New York's citizens. Probably about 50% of those citizens are women too.