Matt Damon, Diane Ravitch, and scapegoating teachers

written by newpolitics | August 6, 2011

Several thousand teachers and their supporters rallied in Washington July 30, for the SOS (Save Our Schools) march, a grassroots effort organized by an Oakland CA science teacher. I was out of the country and couldn't attend but most reports have agreed that the the rally was spirited, and disappointingly small, given how hard the organizers worked at building it, and the amount of "celebrity" power behind it, including Diane Ravitch in a starring political role and Matt Damon in a starring role. Both the AFT and NEA endorsed the march and gave a token contribution, $25,000- probably not even as much as they spent on rubber bands and paper clips at national headquarters last year. Even if you don't look closely at the AFT's Facebook page coverage of its involvement in the march, it's clear from the pathetic photos that it had a very small presence. If the AFT and NEA had put even one-quarter of the effort organizing for this march as they did the get-out-the-vote for Obama, the march would have had tens of thousands of teachers. Post-march critiques that I've read have been split. On one side are the folks who essentially say " Matt Damon was great! It was a fine start and it's a beginning on which we have to build." On the other side are postings analyzing the political shortcomings of the march demands and speeches, like Susan Ohanian's blog and Alan Singer's piece on Huffington.
From the start the march organizers had great energy, high hopes, and lots of naivete. The underlying political message was that Obama's heart is in the right place – and we just have to let him know that he has his facts wrong. Diane Ravitch was an articulate spokesperson for the march, a fact that's been taken up by the supporters of multicultural education who (rightly) remember her long-time opposition to scholarship or curricula even faintly suggestive of systemic racism or sexism in US society. I won't repeat my analysis of what's right and wrong with Ravitch's current political work and writing, but I think it's important to acknowledge that she has, essentially, substituted herself for what labor/liberals and the AFT and NEA national leadership should be doing and saying. I suggest we view Ravitch as our frenemy in the struggle to save public education. The problem is not Ravitch, but progressives, and especially the teachers unions, which have bowed to Obama and the Billionaire Boys Club in a way Ravitch has not.

What the SOS march didn't get at was why the neoliberal reforms have been accepted so readily. Granted, the Billionaire Boys Club has control of the popular media and lots of money to throw at the "problem" of teachers standing up for the dignity of their profession. (Do see the real "indy" film about education,"The inconvenient truth behind waiting for superman.") We have to understand that the ideological success of the neoliberal project in education also comes from its exploitation of US education's historic inequalities in education. Minority parents and communities can't be won away from charter schools and privatization unless we acknowledge the sad complicity of teachers, their unions, and the education establishment in supporting a status quo of educational inequality. We need credibility when we ask for parent support and explain how Walmart's funding of charter schools and "fast track" teacher certification programs relates to its anti-union, sexist, and racist employment policies.

Still, we can't be too hard on the march organizers because their unwillingness to identify the politics behind the assault on teachers unions (and public education) has characterized most of the liberals in the education establishment, like the Opportunity to Learn Campaign. Even more disappointing has been The Nation's analysis, or rather, lack of it. A recent story about "teacher

quality" is typical of The Nation's refusal to take note of Obama's buy-in of policies advanced by Democrats for Education Reform, who are indistinguishable from the neoliberal American Enterprise Institute. Jane McAlevey's fine piece about labor's capitulation to Obama's policies was an exception to The Nation's failure to get at the deep problem we face in the bipartisan drive to refashion public education and destroy teachers unions. Another solid piece, by Pedro Noguera and Michelle Fine, explaining the politics of scapegoating teachers, is worth reading in The Progressive.

The SOS march proved how much a movement to turn back these terrible changes to public education needs transformed teachers unions. The unions are being attacked so viciously because the Right understands the unions' potential power, alas, better than do most teachers and progressives. Transforming the unions requires much more than replacing the faces at the top, though the head honchos in Washington certainly have to go. We need union democracy. And we need to shout out that schools can't improve the economy and can't create jobs. What schools, teachers, and their unions can do is stand up for the right of all children to have their full human potential respected.