

Race, racism and teachers unions: Making the connections

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This past week I participated in a “Don’t tread on educators” workshop for NYC teachers who are fighting against having been given unsatisfactory ratings by supervisors. They shared personal stories of being singled out for punishment after years of satisfactory service and of their union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) that will not support them and worse, often collaborates at the highest levels with the administration in pushing them out of their careers.

Earlier in the week I had been a discussant at the annual conference American Educational Research Association in an excellent session about race and teachers unions. Though I didn’t make the connection until after the NYC meeting, I should have realized that most of the people in the room were African American women with considerable teaching experience. As was explained in the AERA session, African American teachers are being replaced because of both their race and their career status. (I prefer this term to “veteran” but that’s another conversation...)

One paper in the session described how Chicago’s reform caucus, CORE, now the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union focuses on race and racism. Too often as the CTU becomes the template for reform elsewhere, activists ignore how important anti-racism work and race consciousness were for CORE’s development. Another paper described the mass firings of career black teachers in New Orleans, destruction of the public school system (and its union), replacement of “indigenous black teachers” by “inexperienced, transient white teachers,” with no connections to the students or communities the new schools ostensibly served. The third paper described development of a community-based charter school that empowered students, teachers, and parents in Austin Texas, in a project supported by the local union.

What all three papers pointed to, explicitly or implicitly, was the need to name and rectify the historic and continuing complicity of teachers unions in social inequality, their failure to support challenges by oppressed groups to alter status quo. In the past (and today in locals like Philadelphia) teacher union officials, even those who are themselves minority and have many minority members, have not put forward a “race conscious” form of teacher unionism. This pattern has been challenged by the CTU and by Karen Lewis, CTU President, who boldly and eloquently talks racial truths to power.

The drive to de-professionalize teaching is global and in the US it is probably being felt most acutely by experienced teachers of color, mostly women – teaching is still women’s work. In schools that have little or no union presence, administrators have an easy time picking off the teachers they don’t like, and in a society poisoned by racism, administrators often see older African American teachers as deficient. While all older teachers are vulnerable because they are more expensive to pay than “newbies,” minority teachers are especially vulnerable because administrators often harbor subtle and not so subtle racist attitudes. Even administrators who see themselves as in favor of social justice may not value the cultural knowledge and personal ties to parents and community minority teachers bring to their classrooms and schools.

The loss of seniority and job protections are experienced disproportionately by career teachers of color especially, whose numbers are diminishing rapidly. Naming this situation as a product of systemic racism in the schools and society is a union issue, one that is key to building a social movement that has support of minority communities.

Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics. Or write me at drweinerlo@gmail.com.