Why a former teacher union president goes over to the dark side

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The LA Times reports that AJ Duffy, who just this spring stepped down as President of the second largest teachers union in the US, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), is opening his own charter school, which will use all of the union-busting techniques UTLA has long opposed. LA's political establishment, most notably the former UTLA staffer who is now Mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, is, no doubt, chortling in glee at this act of treachery.

I just returned from UTLA's annual Leader Conference, where I spoke about the nature of the life-and-death struggle in which teachers unions are engaged. One of the points I made was that time is running out for union members to take ownership of their unions and to convert the out-dated "service model" or business unionism to a form of union that is more like social movements. Another point I made is that the unions face tremendously conservatizing forces and that union democracy – member pushback – is the most powerful countervailing tendency.

AJ Duffy's flip to the forces of evil should be no surprise to anyone who understands the tremendous power of the propaganda machine that has been put in place by the "Billionaire Boys Club." Yet, it's a disappointment to see that someone who was trusted with safeguarding public education from privatization, keeping it a "public good" that is overseen and funded by the public, would, so easily, desert his former comrades. Shame on you AJ Duffy!

I hope UTLA members take this as a reminder that union leaders are only as strong and as courageous as the members who force them to be so. Don't mourn about AJ Duffy. Go back to your chapters and organize!