

Teachers unions, police, and the real 'new civil rights movement'

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When Rudy Giuliani blamed the deaths of unarmed Black men on teachers unions in appearances on Geraldo Rivera's show and Fox News' "Hannity," Giuliani relied on the same logic that Rod Paige, Secretary of Education, employed in labeling the NEA a "terrorist organization." The argument may seem laughable to many on the Left, but Giuliani's comment emerges from ideological assumptions articulated quite openly by neoliberals, especially in World Bank documents, ideas that are driving brutal education policies.

Giuliani argues the real problem communities of color face is not militarization of police or brutality, but rather poverty and Black-on-Black crime, which requires a greater police presence, and results in the disproportionate arrests of Blacks. The solution to poverty (and therefore crime)? Education. "Maybe all these left-wing politicians who want to blame police, maybe there's some blame here that has to go to the teachers union, for refusing to have schools where teachers are paid for performance, for fighting charter schools, for fighting vouchers so that we can drastically and dramatically improve education," Giuliani observes.

That's not so far from the World Bank report "Great Teachers" explaining that while the current "deceleration" in the Latin American and Caribbean economies is due to external factors, like slower growth in China, we can't wait for capitalism to ameliorate poverty and its terrible social consequences. Instead we have to turn to education, "building human capital." To do that, the reasoning goes, we must improve teacher quality, paying teachers for "performance," and changing who goes into teaching. The obstacle? Teachers unions. "The deepest challenge in raising teacher quality is not fiscal or technical, but political, because teachers' unions in every country in Latin America are large and politically active stakeholders." Teachers unions are therefore the enemy of economic progress, and governments must persuade parents and civil society to turn against them.

Randi Weingarten, AFT President, responded to Giuliani's comment by asking in a tweet "Did **#rudygiuliani** really blame school teachers -not economics nor racism nor excessive force 4 **#garner**'s death. Has he lost it?" In ascribing Giuliani's argument to craziness, (Paige later dismissed his remark as a bad joke), Weingarten lost the opportunity to educate teachers and the public about the ideological battle being waged against teachers, their unions, and public education. We stand in the way of powerful elites controlling who teaches and what is taught, as well as their profiting in the process.

Giuliani was not the only pundit to link teachers unions and police brutality. One blogger demanded that teachers and teachers unions cause as much brutality to minority youth as do police.

So let's be clear about how police and teachers differ in what we do. Police are an arm of the state. Their job is to enforce the laws of the state although they may also help individuals in doing so. Teachers are paid by the state but our obligation is to our students. When the state directs us to do things that are unjust, our professional responsibility is to protect our students as best we can. Our job is to protect democracy.

Cheerleaders for what's called corporate education reform (I prefer to describe this as the neoliberal project) describe their agenda as the "new civil rights movement" and enlisted support from celebrity activist Rev. Al Sharpton. In contrast we see an authentic civil rights movement mushrooming before our eyes. Young people have been protesting deportations, school closings, budget cuts to schools but now tens of thousands of youth, most of them African American, are taking to the streets, often in acts of civil disobedience, to express their rage and hurt at the vicious slayings of unarmed Black males.

We should assume that the powerful elites trying to dismantle public education and destroy teaching as a profession, globally, will use all of their resources to turn this authentic civil rights movement against the unions. We see their strategy already in blogs claiming the unions and teachers are silent about racial justice. While I welcome Randi Weingarten's press release condemning the killing of Michael Brown and her arrest in a subsequent demonstration, there's a legacy of mistrust between communities of color and teachers unions that is not going to be erased by solitary acts of union officials or their public statements. To heal the breach we have to first admit there is one. Then we have to act like a social movement that is an ally. That means educating members about why the struggle for racial justice is in our best interest as teachers and union members, and then with their support providing material help to an ally we need - and which needs us. Help without control.

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