



Thoughts on the First of May

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As I write this on May 1st, I think, of course, of May Day. Over a century ago it was chosen by workers around the world to commemorate the Haymarket riot and deaths in Chicago, where workers were rallying around the slogan "An 8-hour day, with no cut in pay." Many at the riot were union supporters and workers on railroads, in slaughterhouses, mines, and factories. Over a considerable period of time, these workers suffered death, jail, beatings, lockouts, and firings, until they got what was needed for each to have a modicum of dignity.

Just before May 1st, on a long drive home, I listened to Woody Guthrie singing songs of the Great Depression, many of which extolled unions. He explained in his verses why unions are needed, if this land were really ever to belong to you and me.

May 1st also brought back memories of my father, who took a job in 1929, at the start of the Depression. For years, the owners of that business exploited him and his fellow workers. But when he retired 35 years later, after having to participate in a strike every few years, my father had obtained a 40-hour work week, time and a half for overtime, double time for weekends, medical coverage, and a small pension to augment his social security. The union not only helped him earn enough to keep our family from penury, it also gave him a sense of self-worth, which was just as important. It was his union that let him live with a sense of personal dignity.

Dignity, crucial to well-being, often stems from some semblance of self-determination, and of being accorded some status. Professions confer both: they often have some control over their evaluation and are less likely to be subject to evaluation by others; they often control who comes into the profession, set up systems to police themselves, are less subject to the demands of non-professionals; and they have a say over their pay and hours. We tend to think of physicians and lawyers as professionals. But teachers, most of whom work for governmental entities, are not, despite our continued use of that term to describe them.

However, influential unions can fill the gap: they have the same kinds of commitments to their members as do professional associations. Union members also have a say in the evaluation of their members; they too can control who enters the profession; and they can affect the hours they work and the pay they receive. The best of them that I know (i.e., the Alberta's Teachers' Association) work closely with their provinces' principals to police themselves. At this point in American history, teachers' unions and

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associations, in my estimation, need to become more influential in asserting the needs of their members and protecting them from ludicrous legislation.

In the neoliberal environment in which we in the U.S. now live, unions—not just teachers' unions—have lost their influence. Furthermore, the increasing growth of a gig economy, as in high tech and Uber-style firms and charter and private schools, makes everyone an individual entrepreneur. This makes unionization all the more difficult. Please note that I am not so silly as to think all unions are honest or that they always protect their members. But they have made a huge contribution to the American way of life. Unions played a significant part in giving the U.S. a huge middle class, and that certainly has served this country well.

But now, when those in charge of the work of teachers abuse their workers, it seems to me that it is time to stand together to fight harder for what is right. Public schools are being denigrated through false news. And public school teachers throughout our country are being abused, while little is being done to moderate those trends. Neither the National Education Association nor the American Federation of Teachers is being anywhere near assertive enough to protect our teachers and the American public educational system. A few years ago, however, I did watch Chicago teachers in admiration. They felt their unfair treatment so keenly that they were among the first in my recent memory to call a strike, saying to the politicians who manage their schools: enough is enough!

We need to remember that teachers are among the most important of America's many workers. They are responsible for the nurturance of the social and intellectual growth of America's youth, including those with special needs and from linguistic minority groups. For our 50 million or so public school students, school teachers are the face of America. And when those teachers are suffering indignities, it will be communicated—as social status always is—and in response, our youth and the country I love will suffer. John Dewey commented on this: he wondered how teachers could communicate the essence of democracy if they live in systems that are not themselves democratically administered?

If teachers' salaries throughout their career are considerably lower than others with equal educational attainment, they know they are looked down upon by society – for how else could that happen?

If teachers cannot afford homes in the communities in which they teach, they receive a message that they are among the less valued in our society. The children they teach respond to that message accordingly.

If teachers' competencies are judged by standardized achievement tests that have little validity, then they are surely being abused and yet seem powerless to stop that abuse.

If teachers' classroom instruction is judged by observers who use observation instruments that show too low a level of reliability and who spend too little time in classrooms, teachers are also being wronged.

If teachers are not allowed continuing professional development activities to aid them in their professional growth, they receive a clear message that their profession is not complex or evolving; that there is little more worth learning!

If teachers work in schools without the appropriate number of counselors, school psychologists, librarians, music and art teachers, sports opportunities, and after school programs, they are being asked to do their job with students who are being handicapped in their personal growth.

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If teachers in the upper grades are expected to help students write better or grade homework thoroughly, but they have 200 students a week to instruct, they cannot do that job well or frequently enough.

And so forth. On top of all this, in my state of Arizona we do as little as we can to protect our most vulnerable families—our poor and our language minorities—thus decreasing the chances of so many teachers to be completely successful. As the percent of families in poverty or stress increases at a school site, it becomes much harder to teach. In Arizona we have few resources to help single parent families who often cannot afford childcare and/or a quality early childhood program. We have few social workers or treatment centers that can help families with food insecurity or drug and alcohol problems. We have a large population of undocumented family members living precarious lives whose children we try to educate while we also provide solace. We promote private school vouchers and charter schools, and by doing so we take money from the publics' schools, the schools with the hardest to teach children.

We just allocated to our state's teachers—already among the lowest paid in the nation—a 4/10ths of one percent raise, which is not even enough to cover the teachers' typical annual out-of-pocket investment in school supplies that they need in their classrooms. We have cut state support for our universities by huge percentages over the last dozen or more years and zeroed out funds for the two largest community colleges in our state. Budgets reflect priorities, which suggests that we do not want high quality higher education – so why should we worry about preK-12 education being high quality either?

It is past time to play hardball. Here is what I am thinking. This May-day has come and gone. But perhaps we all can take a year to think about the many issues needed to make the lives of teachers better, as well the many services needed to improve the lives of the families our teachers want to serve: health care, child care, drug treatment, mental health counseling, job training, nutritional help, and the like.

Our teachers are needed by our democracy. If they do not have the dignity that is their right, given their calling, the democracy we so value will suffer. The conditions under which they work, and their pay, must be negotiated from strength and that strength will arise from their solidarity. And for those of our citizens who are generally anti-union, I must remind you that states with stronger teacher unions do better in almost all ways than states that do not have such unions. And furthermore, that on the international tests, among the highest scoring nations in the world, teacher unionization is common.

Teachers really have nothing much professionally left to lose, and something quite akin to a profession to gain, by unionizing and becoming more demanding—a lot more demanding. Teachers need to be much tougher in negotiating than I think they are now—not just for their personal gain, but also so our public schools, and thus our nation, can prosper. As teachers and their unions fight for their dignity and the needs of our public schools, I am sure that the ghosts of my father and Tom Joad will visit them all. They will shake the hands of all our teachers and sing to them about solidarity, a social force that will make America a greater nation than it is now.

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About the Author

Dr. David C. Berliner, Regents' Professor of Education Emeritus at Arizona State University, is a member of the National Academy of Education, the International Academy of Education, and a past president of both the American Educational Research Association and the Division of Educational Psychology of the American Psychological Association. He has won numerous awards for his work on behalf of the education profession, and authored or co-authored over 400 articles, chapters and books. He has interest in the study of teaching, teacher education, and educational policy.