

Welcome to the culture war against teachers, coming to a theater near you

by Laura Clawson (Daily Kos Labor)

The campaign against teachers is special, and worth paying attention to. It's not like workers in general get much respect in our culture, at least not beyond vague lip service that only ever applies to the individual, powerless worker not asking for anything. And janitors, hotel housekeepers, cashiers, and a host of others could fill books with the daily substance of working in low-status professions, I'm sure. But right now, teachers are the subject of a campaign heavily funded and driven from the top down to take a profession that has long been respected by the public at large and make the people in the profession villains and pariahs, en route to undercutting the prestige, the decision-making ability, the working conditions, and, of course, the wages and benefits of the profession as a whole. What we're watching right now is a specific front in the war on workers, and one with immense reach through our culture—and coming soon to a movie theater near you if it's not already there, in the form of the poorly reviewed parent trigger drama *Won't Back Down*. (That it's a war not just on teachers but on the workers of the future and on the government just sweetens the pot for many of the people waging the war.)

Teachers face a catch-22. Those in poor districts are expected to be superhuman, to by themselves counteract the effects of poverty—even though we know that while teachers are the most important factor in educational achievement inside the school, factors outside the school, like poverty, are far more important. But while teachers of poor students are supposed to be superhuman, teachers of well-to-do students are frequently treated by doctor and lawyer parents as idiot failures, teaching because they can't be doctors or lawyers. Policy and funding decisions are used against teachers in poor districts; the condescension of parents serves the same purpose in wealthier ones. But in both cases the professionalism of teachers is undermined.

I've written a lot about how corporate education policy targets teachers (and the concept of education as a public good that should be available to all kids). But this upper-middle-class condescension toward teachers is a potent weapon in that campaign against teachers and education. One of the foundations of the corporate drive to "reform" education to corporate preferences is the idea that billionaires know better, that hedge fund managers and Walmart heirs and Bill Gates, by virtue of having made a lot of money, must know more than education professionals about how education should function. And that translates downward—if Bill Gates is supposed to know how schools should work in general, an engineer or executive at least gets to boss his kid's teacher around.

For instance, Adam Kirk Edgerton explains that he quit teaching because:

[...] I was tired of feeling powerless. Tired of watching would-be professionals treated as children, infantilized into silence. Tired of the machine that turns art into artifice for the sake of test scores. Tired of being belittled, disrespected and looked down upon by lawyers, politicians, and decision-makers who see teaching as the province of provincials, the work of housewives that can be done by anyone. [...]

The prestige problem is, ironically, the worst in some of our "highest-performing" schools. In suburbia, teachers deal with the open disrespect of the upper-and-middle-class parent. I'm talking about those parents who fight for every letter grade, who teach their children to teach the teacher a lesson, and who regard teachers as merely obstacles on the way to an Ivy League admission. I was often amazed by the outrageous lies some parents would tell to get an extension on their child's assignment.

(Continued below the fold.)

Similarly, Corey Robin describes how, growing up in an affluent New York suburb with fantastic schools, teachers were nonetheless held in contempt by parents and students alike. "It's odd," he writes. "Even if you're the most toolish striver—i.e., many of the people I grew up with—teachers are your ticket to the Ivy League." Yet:

Every year there'd be a fight in the town over the school budget, and every year a vocal contingent would scream that the town was wasting money (and raising needless taxes) on its schools. Especially on the teachers (I never heard anyone criticize the sports teams). People hate paying taxes for any number of reasons—though financial hardship, in this case, was hardly one of them—but there was a special pique reserved for what the taxes were mostly going to: the teachers.

In my childhood world, grown ups basically saw teachers as failures and fuck-ups. "Those who can't do, teach" goes the old saw. But where that traditionally bespoke a suspicion of fancy ideas that didn't produce anything concrete, in my fancy suburb, it meant something else. Teachers had opted out of the capitalist game; they weren't in this world for money. There could be only one reason for that: they were losers. They were dimwitted,

unambitious, complacent, unimaginative, and risk-averse. They were middle class.

So it's not uncommon to read—or to hear in conversation—views like that of Bridget Williams, the ex-wife of the executive director of "Democrats for Education Reform," who describes parents' efforts to get their kids the teachers they wanted, writing that "Even in the best schools, we still knew we had clunkers to contend with. This is a direct result of the stranglehold unions have over hiring and firing and tenure." Except that it's not. Teachers in union and non-union states are fired at basically identical rates after they get tenure or pass a probationary period, and at least some union states are far more likely than non-union states to fire teachers before they ever get tenure. Yet the idea persists that if unions weren't standing in the way, every teacher would be outstanding. (Have you ever seen a workplace in which every single person was outstanding?) Add to this that states with binding teacher contracts (i.e. unions) have better educational outcomes than states without binding teacher contracts or unions, and the whole "teachers unions are what stands in the way of my kids getting a good education" thing starts looking like what it really is: anti-unionism and contempt for teachers as professionals, a desire as, in Williams's words, "a white, educated, savvy, aggressive (some might use another word), '4 percenters' in a good neighborhood" to show that you're the boss of teachers, most of whom aren't even 20 percenters.

That's the impulse the new movie *Won't Back Down*, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis, hopes to exploit by cloaking it in the story of a working-class mother working with a teacher against the teachers union. Funded by Republican billionaire (and owner of the *Weekly Standard*) Philip Anschutz, who also funded the anti-teachers union documentary *Waiting for Superman*, the movie is, happily, drawing terrible reviews, many of which comment directly on its political mission. A Minneapolis *Star-Tribune* reviewer, for instance, writes:

"*Won't Back Down*" is to school reform what "*Reefer Madness*" is to drug policy. The difference is that it features the best acting talent money can buy, with Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis as a fed-up parent and an idealistic educator who take control of their failing Pittsburgh grade school and transform it.

They play the heartstrings like Yo-Yo Ma in service of a story that is emotionally manipulative, dramatically crude, factually challenged hero/villain hokum. That describes about 81 percent of all movies, but when a film's goal is to move public policy, it's worth commenting on.

Won't Back Down promotes "parent trigger" laws. Parent trigger laws are supposedly a mechanism for greater parental control, in which parents can join together to drastically overhaul a school they see as failing. But Kathleen Oropeza, co-founder of the Florida parents' group *Fund Education Now*, warns that reality is very different: "The parent trigger uses a parent's love for their child to pull the trigger and pass a public entity, a school, into the hands of a for-profit charter." Trigger is among the model bills pushed by the now-notorious American Legislative Exchange Council. While individual laws vary, critics warn that they offer a back door for private (sometimes for-profit) companies to drum up signatures (sometimes dishonestly), bust unions and sideline school boards. "Sure," says Oropeza, "parents can pull the trigger, but they lose all control from that point."

Oropeza's group helped defeat a parent trigger law in Florida, where "Not a single major Florida parent organization supported the bill, including the PTA," with many opposing it, believing that it "would lead to the takeover of public schools by for-profit charter management companies and other corporate interests."

But parent trigger laws are just one piece of the broader message that teachers unions, and the teachers they're composed of, are the problem. The broader, deeper message is that teachers are simultaneously the most important thing in the school yet entirely interchangeable, that a good teacher or a bad teacher determines the course of a child's life yet teachers shouldn't be paid as much as other equivalently educated people, that teachers are solely responsible for educational outcomes yet what they do and how they do it should be determined by tech billionaires and any parent with an opinion. Every move in this war on teachers that appears to say they're important lays the groundwork to undermine teachers as autonomous professionals, and it all builds on the liminal class position of teachers, poised as intermediaries between poor people and middle-class people or middle-class people and rich people, as well as on the fact that teaching has traditionally been a profession dominated by women.

People still actually respect teachers, when you ask them. They think their own kids' teachers are pretty good. That's a big part of the reason the war on teachers pretends to value teachers and to just be going after their unions—as if unions are not made up of teachers but are some foreign entity. But make no mistake, the goal here is to undermine teachers themselves as less than professional, as labor that can be gotten for cheaper and given less power. Taking away teachers' ability to bargain collectively is a crucial step in that process.

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