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edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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Weekend Edition
March 20-22, 2009

Bill Maher Reveals His Ignorance...Again

The Myth of the "Powerful" Teachers' Union

By DAVID MACARAY

There's a myth circulating out there that not only threatens to ruin the reputation of America's school teachers, but has the potential to side-track any realistic hopes of education reform. It's the assertion that "powerful" teachers' unions are responsible for the decline of public education in the United States in general, and California in particular.

Propagators of this myth claim that the reason test scores of American children have sunk so low in recent years is because our public school teachers are too incompetent and lazy to provide adequate instruction.

Moreover, because the teachers' unions are so domineering and evil—because their leaders will do anything to maintain union hegemony, including not allowing demonstrably inferior teachers to be fired—school administrators are powerless to act.

You hear these charges everywhere. Arianna Huffington, the late-to-the-party liberal and celebrity blogger, has been echoing such claims for years. For Huffington to be riffing on the state of public education is, in itself, remarkable, given that she lives in Brentwood, her daughters

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itself remarkable, given that she lives in Brentwood, her daughters attend prestigious private schools, and the closest she's ever come to an inner-city school was the day she accidentally drove by one, causing her to hastily lock the doors and windows of her Prius and speed away.

On Friday, March 13, comedian and uber-liberal Bill Maher joined the attack on his HBO show. In one of his signature tirades, Maher, a California resident, railed against the "powerful" California teachers' union, accusing it of contributing to the crisis in public education by not allowing the school district to remove incompetent teachers.

Maher came armed with statistics. He noted with dismay that the U.S. ranked 35th in the world in math, 29th in science, and that barely 50% of California's public school pupils manage to graduate from high school. He blamed the teachers for this.

Although every teacher in the LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District), has a college degree and a teaching credential and managed to survive the scrutiny of a lengthy probationary period, Maher piously maintained that these teachers were unqualified to run a classroom.

Granted, Maher is a professional comic trolling for laughs, and not a "social scientist" dispensing wisdom, so we shouldn't be looking to this man for enlightenment. Still, considering his liberal creds (from the environment to civil liberties to corporate mischief to drug law reform), it was demoralizing to hear someone this hip say something so stupid and simplistic.

Maher made a huge deal of the fact that, because of the union's protective shield, *less than 1%* of California's tenured/post-probationary teachers get fired. Although this ratio clearly outraged him (he appeared visibly upset by it), had he taken five minutes to research the subject, he'd have realized that this figure represents the national average—*with or without unions*.

In Georgia, where 92.5% of the teachers are non-union, only 0.5% of tenured/post-probationary teachers get fired. In South Carolina, where 100% of the teachers are non-union, it's 0.32%. And in North Carolina, where *97.7% are non-union*, a miniscule .03% of tenured/post-probationary teachers get fired—the *exact same percentage as California*.

An even more startling comparison: In California, with its "powerful" teachers' union, school administrators fire, on average, 6.91% of its probationary teachers. In non-union North Carolina, that figure is only 1.38%. California is actually *tougher* on prospective candidates.

So, despite Maher's display of civic pride and self-righteous indignation ("We need to *bust* this union," he declared), he was utterly mistaken. The statistics not only don't support his argument, they contradict it.

Fact: During the 1950s and 1960s, California's public school system was routinely ranked among the nation's finest. You can look it up. More significantly, the teachers in those classrooms were union members. The same teachers who were winning those awards for excellence belonged to the "powerful" teachers' union. Let that sink in a moment: Good schools, good teachers, big union.

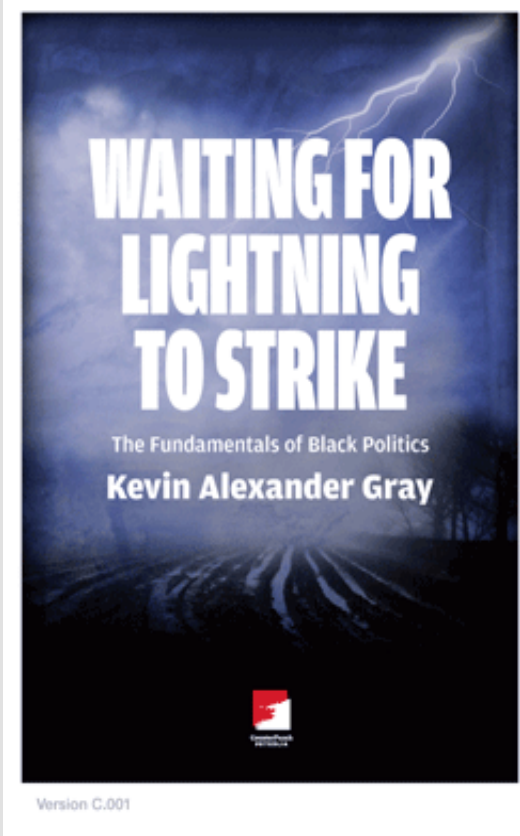
Which raises the question: Has anything else changed in California (and the rest of the country, for that matter) in the last 40 years to lead one to believe there might be causes *other* than labor unions to explain the drop in graduation rates? Have there been any significant changes in, say, cultural attitudes or demographics?

For openers, how about the disintegration of the American family and the decline in parental supervision/involvement? Being a good student requires discipline, application and, perhaps, a certain level of respect for authority. Have we witnessed any "breakdowns" in these areas over the last 40 years?

Or how about the rise in urban poverty? Or the hollowing-out of the middle-class (the average worker hasn't received a pay increase, in *real*

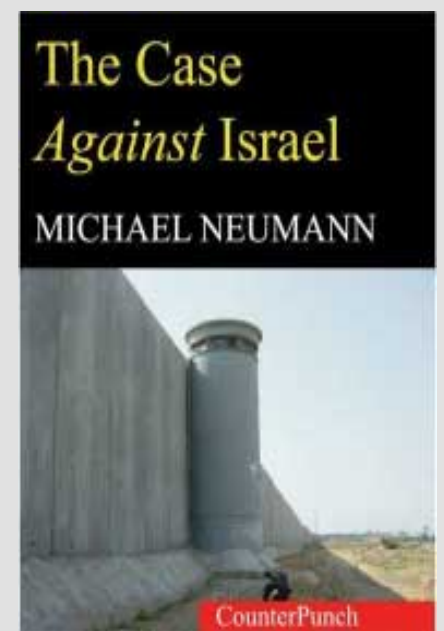


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dollars, since 1973)? Or the assimilation of non-English-speaking immigrants? Or the decrease in per capita funding on California public education? Or the chaos created by school boards arbitrarily mandating wholesale changes in "educational ideology" every two years (LAUSD has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on consultants)?

Ask any teacher, child psychologist, sociologist, or real estate agent, and they'll tell you the same thing: As a general rule, good schools are found in good neighborhoods, and bad schools are found in bad neighborhoods. Simple as that.

Moreover, people know this "formula" to be true. Not only is the promise of good schools one reason why people with kids buy homes in good neighborhoods, it's not uncommon for parents in California to lie about their home addresses in order to get their children assigned to better schools.

An experiment: Try moving those "good" teachers from decent school districts—where the kids show up each day, on time, prepared, bright-eyed and attentive, having completed their homework, having eaten a nutritious breakfast, etc.—to one of those South Central LA shit-holes, where crime is rampant, neighborhoods are ravaged, families are in crisis, and 40% of the students live in foster care.

See if these "good" teachers, by virtue of their innate "classroom abilities," are able to improve the test scores of these stunted, overmatched and underprivileged kids. See if these "good" teachers can do what a generation of parents themselves, and society itself, can't seem to do; see if the graduation rates in these depressed communities rise significantly.

And, as part of that same experiment, move the "incompetent" teachers to these healthy, self-sustaining districts and see if the students in these schools don't continue to score significantly higher, even with the "bad" teachers now running the show.

Fact: Oregon has a good public school system. So do South Dakota, Vermont, Connecticut, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Maine and Washington, among others. Is that because the folks living in these states are exceptionally bright? Is it because their teachers are extraordinarily talented? Or is it because these school districts are stable, relatively homogeneous, and don't face a fraction of the challenges facing California?

For the record, the teachers in these aforementioned good schools are overwhelmingly unionized. Oregon and Washington teachers are 100% unionized; Wisconsin is 98%; Connecticut is 98%; etc.

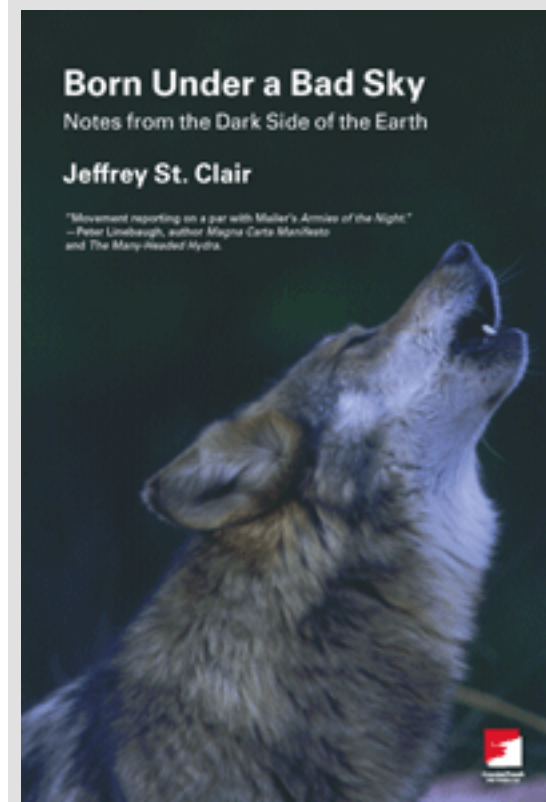
Also, comparing the scores of American students in foreign countries is a bit misleading. The United States was not only the first nation in the world to offer free public education, it was the first to make it compulsory.

In the U.S., by law, you must attend school until at least age 16 (some states have even higher age requirements). That means our national average is going to incorporate test scores of every kid from every background in every neighborhood in the country.

In India (where I once lived and worked), great emphasis is placed on education; accordingly, India has a decent school system, one that scores well. But school attendance is *not mandatory*. Indeed, India has 400 million people who are *illiterate*. One wonders what their national test scores would be if those many millions who can't read or write were factored in.

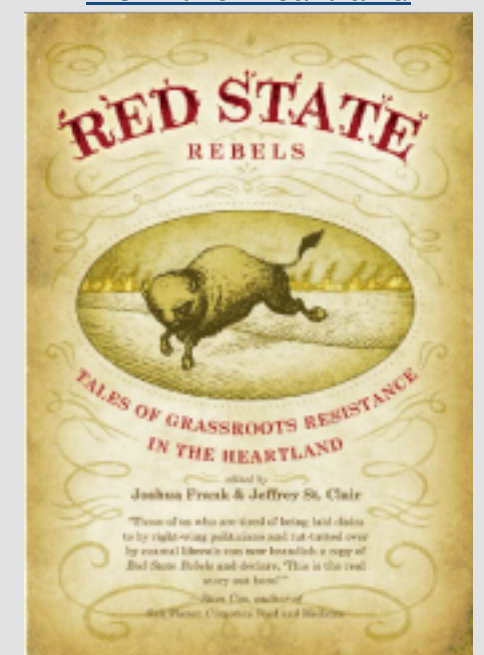
Fact: Teachers *can* be fired. Who honestly believes a teachers' union—whether in California, Oregon or Connecticut—has the authority to insist that management keep unqualified teachers? Since when does a labor union *dictate* to management? Since when does the hired help tell the bosses what to do? The accusation is absurd on its face.

Fact: During the *first two years* of employment, any teacher in the



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LAUSD can be fired for any reason, with no recourse to union representation and no access to the grievance procedure. Two full years. If the district doesn't like you for any reason, they fire you. No union. No grievance. Nothing. Could any arrangement be more favorable to management?

Yet, the myth persists, the myth of the Unqualified Teacher. Instead of identifying the *real* problems facing California's schools (daunting as they may be), and trying to solve them, people stubbornly insist that *thousands* of our teachers—every one of them college-educated, credentialed, and having survived two years of scrutiny—need to be fired.

Let's be clear; no one is suggesting that all teachers are "excellent." Obviously, you're going to find marginal workers in any profession. But, realistically, how many "bad" teachers could there be?

Surely, America's colleges, universities, and credentialing system can't be so hideously flawed that we no longer trust their output—that our teachers aren't worth a damn. Moreover, if it's the unions who are protecting them, why does South Carolina—where 100% of the teachers are non-union—fire only *one-third of one-percent* of them?

Fact: The fault for unqualified teachers remaining on the payroll lies entirely with the school administrators. These overpaid, \$120,000 a year, gutless bureaucrats want us to believe that we live in a world turned upside down. A world where, fantastically, the bosses answer to the employees.

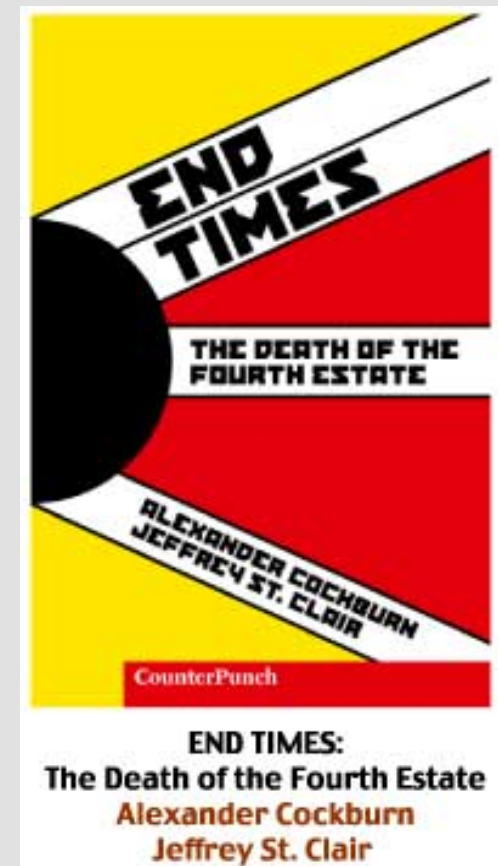
Arguably, the problems facing America's public schools are staggering. But because politicians are essentially spineless—fearful of doing or saying anything that would risk antagonizing their "base"—they refuse to address the *real* issues. Instead, they play little mind-games with the voters. It's not a pretty picture, but it's where we stand.

And if television personalities like Arianna Huffington and Bill Maher honestly believe all this anti-union propaganda being circulated, they're more gullible than we thought.

David Macaray, a Los Angeles playwright ("Borneo Bob," "Larva Boy") and writer, was a former labor union rep. He can be reached at dmacaray@earthlink.net

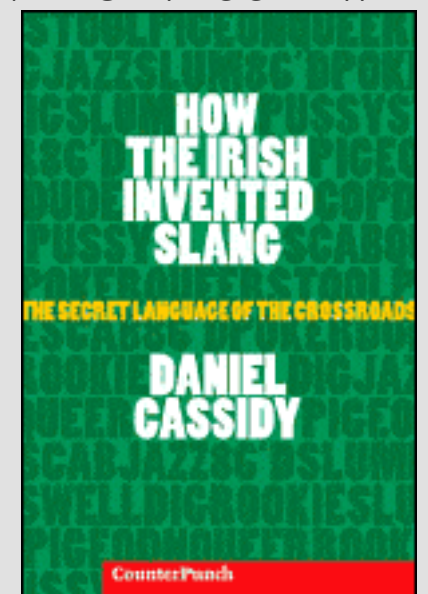
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