

Are Teachers' Unions Still Relevant?

by Michael Ernest Sweet

When I began teaching, the union was a “thing” for the older teachers in my school. As a young whippersnapper I was encouraged—mostly by the administration—to be a free agent. In other words, I was encouraged to do a thousand things over and above my formal responsibilities, and I did. I was happy to do so too because I was an eager and energetic newbie. The administration benefited from my eagerness to accept a thousand preps and nine supervisions, and I felt like I was deeply involved in the school in return. Win-win, right? Well, not quite. There were colleagues—those older ones—who thought that I was making things difficult for them. Perhaps, given many years of hindsight, I was, in fact, doing just that. But, at the time, I saw the union as something for the bitter and confrontational, something that I could do without.

We often hear arguments about how unions have outlived their purpose—we don't need them anymore. It is indeed true that many of the issues that unions originally tackled have been addressed somewhat successfully—low pay, maternity leave, class sizes of 70 or more, discriminatory pay scales, and lack of pension and health benefits. Most of these issues are relatively under control in Canada. This does not mean, however, that we no longer need our unionized environment.

Today, more than ever, school boards and political agents are attempting to make schools run like corporations in a free market. Some voices claim that unions are standing in the way of leaders who want unchecked power to assign, reward, punish, and even remove or fire employees. If teachers are not performing it must be because of the unions and the contracts, not because of flawed hiring practices, lack of resources, mediocre leadership or a weak curriculum. Tenure is also invoked as a flawed system of protecting the incompetent. Here it's worth noting that tenure is not a union invention, it was a perk—one of few—made available to teachers in the 19th century for enduring such terrible working conditions.

Recently I went to a union retreat. It was my first ever, as this year is the first year in my twelve years of teaching that I've been appointed union steward for my school. The retreat was intriguing and interesting. I came away with a distinct feeling about the importance of the union, but I couldn't quite put my finger on why I felt this way. To help me better understand this hunch I called up retired union president, Ruth Rosenfield. Ruth was president of the Montreal Teachers Association for twenty-six consecutive years, making her, from what I can discern, the longest-serving union president in Canada.

“Teaching is a challenging profession and it's not getting easier. One purpose of a union is to help support our youngest and newest teachers not leave the profession because they need support. All the support that a teacher needs, especially younger teachers, is not always readily available within the school or the board. Overwhelming paperwork and school safety are two other areas where unions can help. For example, I don't think that any real progress has been made

in terms of making schools a safer place for teachers and students. Ultimately, not everything has been resolved. The problems we now face are new problems, yes, but many problems still exist and are perhaps even more complex today. The things which you mention that have been resolved, as you say, were also not the result of enlightenment on the part of management. This should be noted,” said Ruth Rosenfield.

Ruth's comments indeed helped me to understand the relevance of teachers' unions today. Although at first blush it would seem as though many labour issues have been resolved, there are just as many or perhaps more new issues facing teachers. Pay equity may not seem as critical as being inundated with paperwork, but then again, maybe it is. Meaningless busywork has very much interfered with my ability to properly educate my students on more than one occasion. If left unchecked, I can see how this issue may well blossom into a very severe obstacle to effective and engaged teaching.

Perhaps more importantly, Ruth's conversation helped me see that the union and the school board exist in a symbiotic relationship. They have more or less evolved together over the past century. The “machinery” of education has come to operate in a way which depends on the union as an important, or even crucial, cog in the wheel. School board and educational administration is a highly politicized environment. In fact, those often making the most sweeping changes

to our work environment are not educators or even people experienced in schooling, but rather politicians or bureaucrats. The union, in this kind of milieu, offers a stabilizing presence—it allows change to be more gradual and authentic, rather than abrupt and politically motivated.

So, what is the purpose of this whole discussion? Well, I guess it's twofold. One, I'd like to reassure the perhaps already converted that our unions are indeed necessary given the fact that education operates the way that it does. It's a mutualistic relationship. Issues in education are perhaps more complex and numerous than they've ever been. That is, unions are not at a loss for things to address. Secondly, I'd like to encourage young teachers to become more actively involved in their unions at the beginning of their careers. It's not a thing for “older” teachers. The union (professional organization) can be a valuable resource not only in protecting your working conditions and helping you navigate your rights and responsibilities as a teacher, but it can also be a source of tremendous support. You don't have to pick sides between the employer and the union—the two support one another and, perhaps, neither would function without the other.

Michael Ernest Sweet is an award-winning educator, writer, and photographer. He teaches for the Alternative Schools Network at the English Montreal School Board.



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