

THE BENEFIT OF TEACHERS UNIONS

[YouTube]IMUbo0IQT48[/YouTube]

Matt Yglesias has solved the riddle of why so many purportedly liberal wonks hate teachers unions, even while they claim to support unions generally.

The most salient difference, completely absent from his armchair psychologizing, is surely that *public school teachers work for the government*. If AT&T workers get a better deal for themselves, that may well mean a worse deal for people who bought AT&T stock in past years but I'm not going to cry on their behalf. By contrast, if Chicago public school teachers get a better deal for themselves that may well mean a worse deal for Chicago taxpayers.

Indeed, what baffles me about these discussions is the tendency of labor's alleged friends to simply refuse to look this reality in the face and instead insist that any hostility to *specific union asks* must secretly reflect the skeptic's hostility to the existence of the union or its members. [my emphasis]

Look what Yglesias has done here. He has defended purportedly liberal pundits who are opposed to teachers unions based on a concern for taxpayers.

This is funny for several reasons. First, because a plurality of actual Chicago taxpayers—47%—support the strike, with 39% opposed. So Yglesias is arguing that his pundit friends don't like this strike because they're concerned for taxpayers who actually do like the strike.

That's so ... paternalistic.

But also look at how Yglesias has constructed this: if teachers get what they want, it may be a bad deal for the taxpayers.

Somehow, in a post about schools, Yglesias thinks this is about citizens as taxpayers and not citizens as parents or even just community members.

He doesn't consider the possibility that if teachers get what they want, it may be a great deal for taxpayer-parents. But as Chicago Public School parent Matt Farmer explained back in May (in the YouTube above), the teachers are fighting for a bunch of things that benefit kids: things like arts education and libraries, the kind of things that the Rahm Emanuels of the world make sure their own kids get.

They're also fighting for smaller class size and climate control and rehabilitating crumbling schools. Rather than fixing schools in the poorest neighborhoods that impede learning, Rahm wants to close those schools—often gutting the community center of a neighborhood—and dump the money into Charter schools. Rahm is basically stripping public schools of funding and boosting the funding of Charter schools, all while claiming a budget deficit is driving these changes.

And teachers are fighting against letting tests drive teacher evaluations.

Studies show that Charter schools don't out-perform other public schools (and that doesn't even control for many factors that allow Charter schools to avoid the most challenging students). And test-based evaluations have a number of problems, starting with the cheating it encourages and including measuring teachers on factors they can't control. Thus, CTU is fighting policy changes that the benefit of which is at least contested if not entirely illusory.

Yet Yglesias can only imagine that teachers' asks would hurt taxpayers, not that they might help kids.

Does Yglesias really think libraries in schools are a bad thing?

Finally, though, there's Yglesias' tell. The last line of his post restates his calculation. It's no longer just teachers versus taxpayers who aren't parents.

If CTU members get what they want, that's not coming out of the pocket of "the bosses" it's coming out of the pocket of the people who work at charter schools or the people who pay taxes in Chicago. [my emphasis]

Aha! Not only are taxpayers not parents, but somehow the people who work at charter schools are presumed to represent a public good that traditional school teachers are not.

If Yglesias had just said, "some purported liberals are opposed to teacher's unions because unions value libraries in schools over our unproven policy gimmick," then it would all be so much more clear.

And apparently Yglesias and his pundit friends know better than both the thousands of teachers who know these kids and the plurality that prefers the neighborhood public model to Rahm's outsourcing experiments.

Update: See DDay on this, too.