

Teachers unions have no rights if they have no leverage to exercise those rights

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Striking Andover teachers and their supporters gathered on the Town Common in Andover, Mass., Nov. 13, 2023. Suzanne Kreiter\Globe staff

We have never met an educator who wanted to go on strike. But we have met plenty of educators who want more mental health services for their students; living wages for the paraprofessionals working with their schools' most vulnerable students; access to paid family leave; and reasonable time in the school day to collaborate with colleagues to best meet student needs.

All of these issues can and should be addressed in the collective bargaining agreements that local educator unions in districts across the Commonwealth negotiate with their school committees. These issues are at the heart of recent strikes by educator unions in Massachusetts.

But when it comes time to bargain for these agreements, educators have no legal power to address school committees that do not engage in meaningful or serious negotiations. School committees can use their high-

priced, union-busting lawyers to stall and ignore proposals put across the bargaining table by the unions without consequence.

Yet if unionized educators decide to withhold their labor until a fair contract is settled, consequences in the form of hefty fines come swiftly — and they are designed to shatter the union, not achieve a contract.

This is fundamentally unfair and antithetical to the notion of workers' rights. Workers have no rights if they have no leverage to exercise those rights; and lacking such rights is just one more reason fueling a shortage in the teaching profession.

Given this troubling landscape, the [Massachusetts Teachers Association supports a bill](#) that lifts the prohibition on public employees to strike. The right to strike is fundamentally intertwined with our members' desire to have fully funded public schools.

Budgeting for public education at both the state and local levels has not kept pace with the needs of students. As education costs have gone up, real investment in education has gone down, and that was the impetus for the Legislature to pass the Student Opportunity Act and what compelled voters to pass the Fair Share Amendment, both of which have boosted spending on public education.

Collective bargaining shines a light on how much a community values public education. In Dedham, Brookline, Malden, Haverhill, Andover, Woburn, and now Newton, places where school committees tried to dodge the question for months, the respective educator unions there forced an answer by going on strike.

Those educators took a risk. They engaged in civil disobedience to instigate change for their students and themselves.

In most cases the state imposed punitive fines on those educators. Yet the school committees that dragged out negotiations in the first place and then used the legal system to try and break both the bank and the spirit of the union faced no consequences.

Whenever the legal system can be weaponized like this, the system must be changed. The bill, which exempts public safety employees, allows educators to call a strike vote only after six months of good-faith bargaining by both sides. If school committees know the clock is ticking, they will engage in meaningful bargaining.

This legislation will probably prevent more strikes than inspire them. The main reason strikes have been occurring is related to how long it has taken to settle contracts; the actual contracts agreed to in the districts where educators went out on strike were fair and reasonable and good for the schools — achieving what could have been accomplished months earlier without a strike.

Nobody wants schools to shut down. But we have seen over and over that a short-term disruption yields long-term benefits for students and educators.

Two days after the Andover Education Association settled its contract following a five-day strike in November, an instructional assistant gave birth to twins. Before the contract was settled, she had no paid parental leave, and was anxiously hoping she could rely on family members to help care for her newborns and toddler while she went back to work after draining her sick leave. But thanks to the contract the union fought for, she had access to eight weeks of paid leave in addition to her sick days.

That it took a strike for the Andover School Committee to realize that educators deserve humane, modern parental leave is shameful. It is just as shameful for the state to impose fines on the education workers who want to bring justice into their beloved schools.

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