



Mark Patinkin

[Comments](#) 31 | [Recommend](#) 1

Mark Patinkin: Union's stand only serves to hurt the teachers

01:00 AM EST on Saturday, February 27, 2010



I heard a moving ad on the radio the other morning paid for by the Central Falls Teachers' Union.

It show-cased teach-ers talking about their commitment to progress in a challenging community. I've seen similar quotes from other Central Falls teachers in news stories. I'm convinced they care deeply about the kids in that high school.

It seems a shame many now face an uncertain future because as a union, they voted down a plan to transform the school. They refused to agree to professional development and more time with students because they wouldn't get enough extra pay. As a result, the superintendent, Frances Gallo, has fired all the teachers — 93 faculty and staff — to allow her to remake the school next year.

Many are calling Gallo unfair and even brutal.

How could she do such a thing?

Others say the school was failing and she needed to act.

The debate is mostly about which side is right.

[Governor Carcieri](#) and even the U.S. secretary of education, Arne Duncan, back Gallo, pointing out the students' low test scores and 48 percent graduation rate. The teachers say they have been doing heroic work in a difficult community.

It's legitimate debate.

But in terms of how things got to a point of having the entire faculty fired, the question of who's right, to me, is beside the point.

I would ask a different question.

Who was smart?

Supt. Gallo did not act on a whim. She gave the teachers the option of accepting the school transformation plan. If they had voted yes, she could not have fired them.

They voted "no" because, among other things, they felt they wouldn't be paid enough for the extra time

with students.

Maybe they are correct to feel that way. Maybe the plan hurt them financially.

But giving Gallo the power to fire them was immeasurably worse financially. Why would they have done it?

I have a theory.

I have been in a union for 30 years, and have come to feel that in standoffs with management, members often get into a collective self-righteousness that makes them vote against their individual good.

Let's talk about a case in my own field that still stands to me as a symbol of that.

In the mid-'90s, I was reading a union publication that proudly featured a service being offered to striking journalists in Detroit. The service was a mobile food pantry in the back of a truck. It was visiting a picket line. There was a picture of newspaper people "shopping" for handout food in the pantry. They needed the service because they'd been out of work for a long time.

My reaction: Why is the union proud of this?

To me, that mobile pantry was a symbol of how the union had steered its members toward a disastrous decision to strike when they shouldn't have.

The strike was about many things — one being that the unions didn't want guaranteed raises replaced by merit raises. Another was staffing reductions. Well, after years of broken lives and huge sacrifice, the unions agreed to go back to work and accept the very conditions they struck over. Many didn't get rehired — so the reductions were far worse than what they tried to prevent with a strike. Hundreds of lives were derailed.

During the strike, the union tried to get advertisers and subscribers to boycott the papers, and succeeded, to some extent. But that only further hurt themselves, because now there was less money for staff.

I still remember the strike being a national cause célèbre in the union world. The Detroit journalists were taking a noble stand. Publications kept celebrating their righteousness.

But they achieved nothing. Less than nothing, really. It was a suicidal strike, all because union members chose solidarity over strategy.

Which brings us back to Central Falls.

The teachers there may well be able to claim they were right to ask for more pay. But they knew — they knew — that voting down the superintendent's plan would put a target on their backs.

Union solidarity is fine in some circumstances. But it can be blinding, too.

I assume I'm not the only one who followed the early negotiations in Central Falls, clearly saw that if the teachers rejected Gallo's deal they'd be fired — and then, in disbelief — watched as they rejected it anyway.

I'm a fan of teachers. Some of the most influential people in my life were teachers. Watching the Central Falls case is a tragedy. I'm sure the teachers there are committed folks on the front lines of urban education.

And yet, I wonder: Was it really Gallo who fired the teachers, or did they do it to themselves?

We can continue to debate whether that union vote was right.

But it wasn't smart.

mpatinkin@projo.com