

“Tamed” Chicago Teachers Union Shows Its Claws

Written by Rich Miller

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Beginning in late 2010, for several months teachers' union lobbyists warned that teachers went out on strike a whole lot more back in the days when they were prohibited by law from striking than in the years since they had gained the statutory right to strike.

They warned that attacking teachers was a dangerous game.

They warned that the education reforms being pushed by groups such as Stand for Children risked creating a dangerous and possibly uncontrollable backlash.

In the case of Chicago, anyway, they were right on point. Despite a bold prediction last year by Stand for Children founder Jonah Edelman that “the unions cannot strike in Chicago,” the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) hit the picket lines last week.

Stand for Children tipped the political scales in 2010 by filling a void created when the Illinois Federation of Teachers decided to boycott Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan's campaigns. The new group pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into legislative races, gained Madigan's allegiance, and shook up the entire Illinois political dynamic – all while flying completely under the mainstream media's radar screen.

“The press never picked up on it,” Edelman said last year at the Aspen Institute's annual

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conference. Except for my own publication, he was right. The contributions were ignored by the major media until months later, when it was obvious to even an amateur what had already happened.

Edelman’s group added more fuel to the fire when its biggest donors, including Republican businessman Bruce Rauner (a possible 2014 gubernatorial candidate), dumped huge money into Rahm Emanuel’s mayoral race. Emanuel was lobbying for school reform in Springfield before he’d even been elected. Emanuel and plenty of others figured that the CTU was preparing to strike in 2012 and wanted to pass a law to make sure it didn’t happen.

Stand for Children’s Edelman claimed last year that he and the people at his organization had “done our homework.” The group, he said, “knew that the highest threshold of any [teachers’] bargaining unit that had voted one way or the other on a collective bargaining agreement, contract vote was 48.3 percent.”

So Stand for Children demanded that the threshold for striking in Chicago be increased to 75 percent of all eligible union voters. The Chicago Teachers Union, Edelman bragged last year, “will never be able to muster the 75-percent threshold necessary to strike.” He also claimed that the CTU took the deal without realizing the implications.

One can’t help but wonder what Edelman was thinking last week as thousands of Chicago school teachers walked the picket lines.

After three days of the strike, I commissioned a poll to find out what Chicagoans thought of the walkout. It turned out that the striking Chicago teachers enjoyed a strong majority of support. Also, an overwhelming majority of Chicago parents with public-school students supported the strike, the poll found. And a strong majority blamed management instead of the union.

The poll of 1,344 voting Chicago households was taken last week by We Ask America at my request. When asked "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the Chicago Teachers Union’s decision to go on strike?", 55.5 percent said they approved and 40 percent disapproved. Another 4 percent had no opinion. (The poll had a margin of error of 2.8 percent.)

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But support jumped to 66 percent among parents of public-school children. Less than a third of those parents, 31 percent, disapproved of the strike, according to the poll.

Asked who they thought was "most to blame" for the strike, just over 34 percent pointed their finger at Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, while 29 percent blamed the Chicago Teachers Union and 19 percent blamed the school board. In other words, a solid majority blamed management, one way or the other.

Edelman and a whole lot of other people thought they had outsmarted and outmaneuvered the teachers' unions. He and others continually poked the union in the eye. Instead of taming the beast, Edelman and his allies spent a king's ransom on Madigan's and Emanuel's political campaigns and ended up creating a monster.

There's a reason why Illinois is known as the "Sucker State." Edelman, Rauner, and others most certainly got played for one.

Congratulations.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.