

Long-time member and principal Stephen Pelizzo writes about combining his principal work with his union activism.



Most of my life I have combined being a school leader and a union activist/official.

Originally, I was a small school principal in Queensland in the 1970s and early 1980s, where all my principal colleagues were active members of the QTU. When

I first came to the NT, my principal, Alden McCue, was on what was then the NTF Executive, and ex-principal Col Young was the union secretary. Of all the various segments of our union, principals had the greatest density of membership.

When I first became a principal here, many of my mentors had strong union backgrounds. Additionally, this level of density and activism remains true in all other Australian jurisdictions, with principals playing a distinct, high profile role in other branches of the AEU. However, over time, union membership and activity by school leaders has become rarer in the NT, which is odd.

So what happened to make the NT become different? I don't have a definitive answer, however I think that a combination of the following has contributed to this trend:

- Persistent negative views expressed by all stripes of NT governments towards teachers in general, and education unionists in particular.
- The success of a 'divide and conquer' strategy behind Principal Executive contracts.
- Interstate and out of system recruitment, both of principals themselves and senior management, who don't have a sense of our collective history.
- Growth of a mythology unique to the NT (principals are senior managers not educators, and employment is only ever short term).

On top of this, people join unions, or become union leaders, for a wide variety of reasons. For me, here are a couple of critical factors which I consider should apply to leaders in both education and unionism:

- Professional collegiality (us educators are all in this together)
- Service to others (especially the more vulnerable)
- Belief in the basic precepts of democracy; and, most importantly,
- I'm not scared

It seems to me that for some school leaders points 1, 2 and 3 are problematic because they have a "me first" mentality, making it difficult for them to interact from a union perspective. Most often though, I discern the fourth point as a reason for not engaging with the union. Comments I've heard include, "it will be bad for my career", "my contract could be under threat", or "the Department doesn't like it." There are sadly many examples of previous leaders in our Department who have claimed that principals shouldn't be members of the union. Less sadly, few of them have ever remained.

I wish I could assuage those fears. But I know of enough examples of covert bullying to not be able to. Personally, my career has flourished, with some setbacks, despite that. And I am not afraid. It is always sad when leaders (in any field) make decisions based on fear.

Being a union activist while being a principal is demanding. It does mean wearing different hats and looking and responding to the world from different perspectives, at different times. However, there is also much cross over, most especially in the basic values espoused. Being a good unionist means treating people decently, which is also always what being a good leader is about.

So to my principal colleagues who are union members, I salute you. To those who are not yet, I encourage you to embrace the collaborative values of our profession and join.

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