



**California Federation of Teachers**  
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

A Rotten Apple for Jobs

By Mary Bergan, President

California Federation of Teachers

So it turns out that “think different” really means “don’t think.” Last week the Associated Press reported that Apple CEO Steven Jobs told an educational reform conference, “I believe that what is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they have become unionized in the worst possible way. This unionization and lifetime employment of K-12 teachers is off-the-charts crazy.”

In the years before the iPod saved Apple from extinction, its computer advertising exhumed dead geniuses for its “think different” campaign. Black and white photos, each featuring an instantly recognizable off-center hero, carried the message that if you bought a Mac, you’d be a brilliant hipster too.

Luckily for Apple, no one could ask the deceased what they thought about that. One of this ad campaign’s most enduring images was of Chicano civil rights icon Cesar Chavez, arm draped over a hoe. Farm worker union organizers had so often failed to crack the power of the state’s agribusiness elite it was common wisdom that it couldn’t be done. Chavez’s historic achievement was to build the first farm worker union that lasted.

The ad, of course, doesn’t endorse unions. It simply appropriates the image of a Chicano hero in a state with a growing Chicano population and, presumably, potential market for Apple products. Indeed, in the 1990s Steve Jobs and Apple notoriously resisted granting union recognition to its largely Latino, low paid, contracted out Silicon Valley janitorial

workforce until the Justice for Janitors union campaign embarrassed the corporation sufficiently to bring Jobs and his company around.

Another hero in “think different” was Albert Einstein. The brilliant physicist, like Jobs, had an opinion about teacher unions: “I consider it important, indeed urgently necessary, for intellectual workers to get together, both to protect their own economic status and also, generally speaking, to secure their influence in the political field.”

Einstein practiced what he preached. He joined the American Federation of Teachers in 1938 as a charter member of the Princeton University local.

In 2005, Arnold Schwarzenegger put the anti-teacher union Proposition 74 on the ballot. It would have undercut teacher job security by lengthening probation from two to five years, during which time a principal could fire a teacher for any reason at all, or for no reason at all. Union protections would have been rendered moot.

During that campaign Schwarzenegger repeated like a mantra “Once the teacher has tenure, you can’t get rid of him, no matter how bad he is. He has a job for life.” The governor was undeterred by the truth, which is that “tenure” means simply the right to a hearing before termination.

Teacher unions do not defend “bad teachers.” Teacher unions, which are made up of teachers themselves, defend the due process rights of all teachers, foremost among them the right answer one’s accuser before an impartial third party. In other words, teacher unions are about fairness in the workplace, about advocating for the women and men that belong to them, and about providing a collective voice for individuals who democratically decide they need one. Like what Chavez was after for farm workers, and what Einstein believed teachers needed.

The public understood this in 2005, and Schwarzenegger’s nasty ballot initiative went down to a well-deserved defeat.

I guess it's harder for a billionaire CEO of a non-union company to understand. It's easier, "think different" aside, to simply mouth something that's been repeated a lot over the years: teacher unions are the problem in public education.

That's a red herring, a myth perpetuated by well-funded enemies of public education and unions. By any reasonable measure, the big problem with public education is underfunding. Mr. Jobs, according to the AP article, likened public education to a business. Let me do the same. How well could a business—say, a computer company—operate if you paid its professional employees so poorly and put them in work environments so unsupportive that nearly half of them left the company within five years? How long could that business survive if it had to hold bake sales to get enough chips to build its machines?

Mr. Jobs should know that public education is not a business. It's not there to make profits, but to help students learn to be productive citizens in a democracy. Teacher unions are not "off the charts crazy," but the means for a measure of dignity for their members, so that they might concentrate on their classrooms instead of worrying about the arbitrary actions of bosses with no checks and balances on their power.

I offer Mr. Jobs an opportunity. Next month the CFT holds its annual convention in Los Angeles. Come by and talk with the people who educate our children and hear from them what their situation is like. If you can't make it, perhaps you might consider an apology for your insulting comments to California's teachers. If you don't wish to do either of these things, we'll create a special award for you, and bestow it on you in your absence. We'll call it the Rotten Apple, for the individual who best personifies the need to think *differently* about public education and teacher unions.