

Bust the Police Unions to Rank and Yank Bad Cops

By Saqib Qureshi

The police officer who killed George Floyd had been the subject of more than a dozen complaints about his conduct. In two previous incidents, Derek Chauvin had been disciplined with letters of reprimand. Tou Thao, who stood by as Floyd died, previously had a lawsuit brought against him over excessive use of force. The lawsuit was settled for \$25,000. How can such men be allowed to “serve and protect”? Unions.

Public-sector unions, including police unions, will do almost anything to protect their members. These unions create a culture of impunity. Even police officers who are terminated can be reinstated, “often via secretive appeals geared to protect labor rights rather than public safety” as a 2014 piece in the Atlantic put it.

The Minneapolis police union has signaled it will fight to ensure the officers fired over George Floyd’s

killing get their jobs back. The union’s Lt. Bob Kroll said he’d “worked with the four defense attorneys that are representing each of our four terminated individuals under criminal investigation, in addition with our labor attorneys to fight for their jobs.” This should be a warning of the difficulties inherent in reforming police departments and ending police violence.

But it is clearly time to rethink public-sector unions, and one good place to start would be more and better information. There will be no improvement until officers are no longer protected at all costs by unions.

Take an example from Canada. In 2017, the Fraser Institute found that employees in Canada’s private economy were five times as likely to be removed from their jobs as public-sector employees were. Public-sector workers were almost five times as likely to be unionized.

Increasing turnover of public-sector jobs could help root out toxic

employees. A first step would be to let go of the lowest-performing 2% of public-sector workers—in this case, police officers—each year. That would help ensure that the most violent, disrespectful and incompetent officers are dismissed each year.

Officials need the ability to fire low-performing officers and reward ones who go above and beyond.

Yet we should also acknowledge officers who exceed standards of behavior and policing. In recent days videos have emerged of cops and National Guardsmen interacting with peaceful demonstrators. Some have shown solidarity or engaged in polite conversations to hear real grievances. It would make sense to reward the top-performing 5% of public employees, including police officers.

Sheriff Chris Swanson of Flint, Mich., has attracted praise for laying down his gear and joining protesters in a peaceful march that defused a potential confrontation. “We’ll walk all night,” he says in a video. Mr. Swanson has received praise from the Trump White House and former President Barack Obama for his handling of the incident. Flint has seen multiple peaceful protests since that night. Sheriff Swanson, who holds an elected position, faces a level of accountability that many other law-enforcement officials don’t. Accountability matters.

These reforms are hardly sufficient to change longstanding cultures of violence or uproot racism, but they can go a long way toward accomplishing our shared goals.

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