

NEW YORK

---

# Miss Grundy Was Fired Today

**Once deified, now demonized, teachers are under assault from union-busting Republicans on the right and wealthy liberals on the left. And leading the charge from all directions is a woman most famous for losing her job: the former Washington, D.C., schools chancellor Michelle Rhee.**

By [Andrew Rice](#) Published Mar 20, 2011



*Photo-illustration by Dienstelle 75*  
(Photo: George Marks/Retrofile/Getty Images)

The traditional, patronizing view of teachers, that they are to be treated like saints and paid as if they'd

taken a vow of poverty, has lately gone through a schizophrenic inversion. Open the newspaper most any day and you'll read about "bad teachers" who are holding children back and, through their unions, conspiring to remain well compensated. In a remarkably short time, this view has become popular across partisan lines. Each political party filters it through its own core beliefs: Republicans fixate on the stresses that greedy unions are placing on budgets through their pay, pensions, and benefits; Democrats argue that putting better teachers in troubled schools is a matter of social justice. But they are using much the same language—and rallying around a radical change in how this country thinks about public education.

On Thursday, March 10, Wisconsin's Republican governor, Scott Walker, published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* justifying the bill his party had rammed through the State Senate the night before. He wrote that he wanted to do away with a "union-controlled hiring and firing process," installing one of his own that his enemies say aims to remove veteran teachers from the classroom. The same morning, in New York, the *Daily News* published a column repeating many of Walker's arguments—this one under the byline of Newark mayor Cory Booker, a Democrat. Some teachers "aren't measuring up," Booker wrote, "and ought to find another line of work."

Such ruthlessness toward a profession that has been idealized for generations might seem an unlikely basis for a popular movement, but Education Secretary Arne Duncan is onboard, as is President Obama, who in this year's State of the Union address said, "We want to reward good teachers and stop making excuses for bad ones." So is Rupert Murdoch, who wrote a *Journal* op-ed of his own last fall suggesting that teachers are held to lesser standards than *American Idol* contestants. A few weeks ago in Providence, a Democratic mayor fired his city's entire workforce of teachers, saying they will have to reapply so he can choose the most skilled. Legislators in Tennessee and Indiana are considering bills modeled after Wisconsin's. Chris Christie has made himself into a New Jersey folk hero by attacking teachers as welfare queens. Florida governor Rick Scott is preparing to sign a bill abolishing tenure. Here in New York, Mayor Bloomberg is battling Governor Cuomo over the proposed repeal of a law mandating that layoffs be conducted by seniority, the "last in, first out" policy.

Though all modern presidents like to think of themselves as leading the national education debate, they rarely are; most important decisions are made at the state, mayoral, or school-board level. But if this decentralized uprising can be said to have a leader, it is the youthful, tough-talking, and telegenic Michelle Rhee. Four years ago, Rhee was chosen to run Washington, D.C.'s troubled school district by a young Democratic mayor, Adrian Fenty. She resigned just as abruptly this past fall, after Fenty was thrown out of office. But while Rhee's head-cracking, heresy-spouting attempt to revamp the school system was a major contributor to Fenty's electoral defeat, she left in a blaze of martyrdom, reveling in the extravagant admiration of national opinion-makers, as well as her commanding role in the polemical pro-charter-school documentary *Waiting for "Superman."*

Over the past few months, rather than taking another municipal gig, Rhee has been campaigning through flash-point states, like a sort of wonky Che Guevara, lending celebrity, credibility, and covering fire to

political leaders who endorse her vision of school reform. Last week, she was touring Ohio, as Governor John Kasich, a big fan of *Waiting for "Superman,"* promised “more choice, more accountability, more dollars in the classroom instead of bureaucracy.” The week prior, she was in Tennessee and Michigan; before that, she testified on Scott’s behalf before the Florida Legislature, where she was hailed as a “movie star.” At each stop, Rhee promotes her platform: expanding charter schools; connecting teacher pay to performance; revamping a pension-and-benefit system that “ends up excessively rewarding longevity”; ending tenure and seniority-based layoffs.

Considered alone, each of these proposals would be controversial, and anathema to the teachers unions; taken together, they amount to a staggering assault. For too long, Rhee says, the system—and her party, the Democrats—has languished in the grip of do-nothing bureaucrats and cynical labor leaders, a protean inertial force that she sometimes calls “the blob.” To fund her cause, Rhee announced in December that she would create a counterbalancing interest group called StudentsFirst, modeled on the NRA, for which she is hoping to raise \$1 billion. Rhee frequently says she launched StudentsFirst because “there is no big organized interest group that defends and promotes the interests of children,” a line that, like a lot of things she says, is both highly debatable and maddening to her many critics, since it suggests that any disagreement is tantamount to child neglect. But Rhee sees no room to play nicely with others. “We’ve been doing a disservice to kids for many years,” she said in a recent speech at the Manhattan Institute. “So let’s get comfortable with a little fighting.”



Rhee is equally comfortable campaigning with Democrats and Republicans, whether that be Mayor Bloomberg, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, Florida Governor Rick Scott, or Education Secretary Arne Duncan. (Photo: From left, Susan Walsh/AP Photo; Tim Larsen/Courtesy of Governor's Office; Joe Raedle/Getty Images; Jacquelyn Martin/AP Photo)

Rhee doesn’t like to be managed or muzzled by platitudes, and she prefers to travel alone with her BlackBerry, free of handlers. On a frigid winter morning in New York, after a predawn burst of e-mails, she departs her hotel for a whirlwind series of television interviews, evidence of a sudden stardom that is sometimes baffling even to Rhee. “But in the grand scheme of boring bureaucrats,” she says, “I’m really good at this.”

Whisking from Fox News to Bloomberg before heading to the *Today* show, Rhee picks up a copy of the *Journal* and scans it for a column under her own byline arguing that fiscal crises around the country could usher in “the best of times” for education reformers. By lunchtime, she’s in the back of a Town Car on her way to the Capitol Building in Trenton, to be Christie’s guest of honor at his State of the State

address. “No one in America has been more clear that we must change our public-education system from one that caters to the feelings of adults to one that prepares our children for the 21st century,” the governor says as he introduces her to the crammed chamber. “Michelle ... I want you to count New Jersey among those who, like you, are finally putting students first.” When he finishes, Christie strides over and wraps Rhee in a bearish hug, and they recede to a closed-door meeting in the governor’s chambers. Then Rhee is speeding back to Cipriani’s on 42nd Street, where Davis Guggenheim, the director of *Waiting for “Superman,”* is to receive the award for Best Documentary at the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures’ annual gala.

Milling around awkwardly during the cocktail hour, as Christian Bale makes his entrance through a gully of flashbulbs, Rhee is greeted by director M. Night Shyamalan. They met a few years ago, over a dinner in Washington, where the director asked her to explain what five factors are most essential to a child’s education. Rhee told him there was really just one thing: “Have a good teacher three years in a row.”

Her answer to Shyamalan may sound simplistic, but it’s the reform movement’s creed. Rhee cites recent studies that suggest a string of effective teachers can make a huge difference in a student’s test scores, and that a few lousy ones can sentence a child to a life of underachievement. She argues that there are far too many of those bad teachers clinging to jobs, especially in poor urban districts, and shutting out bright newcomers. “My thing is to differentiate,” Rhee says, “figure out who your highly effective teachers are, and then terminate the ineffective ones.” This sort of pruning is easier when funding is scarce, and Rhee argues that these lean times offer a rare opportunity: a chance to purge the public-education system. “Nobody wants to be in a fiscal crisis—this sucks,” Rhee told me earlier that day, on the ride back from Trenton. “But it is providing this opportunity for us to bring these things to life. Look, teachers are going to lose their jobs. That’s not a good thing. But as long as that is a reality that we’re facing, let’s do it in a smart way.”

Rhee’s talk of progress through pain can come across as callous, or worse, but her many admirers say she’s merely speaking hard truths. “She’s someone bringing a clear and honest voice,” Guggenheim tells me later, “where everyone else talks in this sort of edu-speak.” Her ability to make clear choices out of complex trade-offs—between the interests of adults and children, fairness and the bottom line—lends her message an appeal that reaches far beyond the realm of politics. Rhee launched StudentsFirst in an appearance on *Oprah*; last week she sat for another gauzy *Today* show interview with Jenna Bush Hager. Most important, perhaps, for Rhee’s ambitions, her cause has struck a chord with a cadre of wealthy philanthropists, billionaires like Bill Gates and Eli Broad, whose foundations help drive the national education agenda.

“She’s attracting lots of people who haven’t been involved in education philanthropically,” says Broad, who says he plans to be a “major donor” to StudentsFirst. As he explains it, his rationale for underwriting Rhee mirrors her view of the nature of teaching: It’s all about her individual talent. “We don’t have that charisma, frankly.”



Four years ago, few people outside the pedantic confines of education policy had ever heard of Rhee. When I asked the professor and historian Diane Ravitch to explain her brash emergence, she replied, “She’s in sync with the narrative of our time.” Ravitch does not mean that as a compliment. A former Education Department official under the first George Bush who has come to consider the reform movement misguided, she recently wrote a book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, that offers an astringent critique of the proposition—voiced most zealously by Rhee—that teachers are the root cause of, and solution to, all of the system’s problems. Until fairly recently, everyone took it for granted that parents, educators, and communities shared the responsibility for schooling children, and presumed that outcomes were the product of a complex web of circumstances. Now the calculus has been narrowed to a single variable, the instructors, who are offered all the credit and shoulder all the blame.



Photo-illustration by Dienstelle 75  
(Photo: Classicstock/Alamy)

Rhee, naturally, says that she loves good teachers—it’s just their unions she wants to curtail. Skeptics like Ravitch say you can’t separate the individual from the collective, and question the motives behind the movement. “What I don’t understand is why Obama and Duncan have signed on to what I think is a very right-wing strategy,” Ravitch says. “Because I know where these ideas come from. I was there when they were hatched.”

It’s not correct, though, to say that the reform movement’s intellectual lineage is exclusively conservative; there’s plenty of liberalism running through its DNA. At 41, Rhee belongs to a cohort of policy-makers who came of age in the Clinton era, the heyday of Democratic centrism, and who arrived at their position

via a progressive ideal: that every child, no matter how underprivileged, should have a fair chance to achieve his or her intrinsic potential. These activists have spent their careers testing this proposition in think-tank research and charter-school classrooms. In some cases, they have expended their fortunes—the cause has been embraced by the financial community, and especially by a relatively youthful breed of New York hedge-fund manager. This, despite all her recent chumminess with Republican governors, is Rhee’s natural political base.

At the center of reformist theory is a consoling apostasy: that as much as it might appear that economics, class, and social dysfunction are aligned against inner-city children—implicating us all—the real problem is possible to isolate. It’s just a management issue. And perhaps not surprisingly, this idea gets a lot of traction on Wall Street. “From a distance, it’s very easy to accept the notion that the reason the less privileged kids are not learning is endemic to poverty itself,” says Brian Zied, a hedge-fund manager and donor to reform causes whose first exposure to the education debate came via tutoring at a Harlem charter school. “You interact with the kids for a few minutes, and it immediately hits you that, wait a minute, these kids can learn like any other kids. They just need to be put in an environment with high-quality teachers who care about outcomes. Frankly, it’s the same incentive system that works in 99 percent of all businesses. You reward the people that do well, and part ways with the ones that don’t.”

This is not a new idea—Republicans have been banging on about “merit pay” for years—but it gathered momentum in liberal circles gradually over the past decade, through a slow accretion of empirical data and personal experience. “Everyone involved in education reform now gets it,” says Whitney Tilson, a Manhattan financier and a board member of the organization Democrats for Education Reform. Tilson says that it took him and other reform-oriented Democrats “much too long” to come to the conclusion that the teachers unions, a crucial component of their party’s coalition, were implacable enemies. Only within the last year has the tension between the two sides exploded into all-out war. “When children’s lives are at stake, it’s almost incomprehensible to conceive of people willing to throw those children under the bus and screw them for life,” Tilson says, referring to unions and their supporters. He adds of Rhee, “She went in a little naïve, but she’s not naïve anymore.”

The intellectual history of the liberal obsession with “teacher quality”—a contentious euphemism—stretches back even further, to the early nineties, and the formative experiences of Michelle Rhee’s career. As a fresh Cornell graduate, Rhee signed up for the organization Teach for America, then in its infancy, which served as a training ground for the reform movement. “The idea started in TFA,” says Richard Nyankori, a close friend and top lieutenant to Rhee in Washington, “that there were these really exceptional teachers and then there were these really horrid teachers.”

Nyankori first got to know Rhee when TFA assigned them both to Baltimore. Rhee taught at Harlem Park Elementary, a red-brick school in a desperately poor West Side neighborhood. A few weeks before she arrived for the fall 1992 semester, the city had turned the school’s management over to a publicly traded company called Education Alternatives Inc., and the network news shows sent cameras to Harlem Park to

record the first day of classes. Within the local community, the arrival of the for-profit company, run by a white entrepreneur from Minnesota, was viewed with profound suspicion. Some parents picketed, and many teachers were openly rebellious. Rhee entered this tumultuous experiment with nothing more than her Ivy League degree and five weeks of teacher training.

She soon discovered she had no idea how to reach her second-graders. “I sucked,” Rhee says in Richard Whitmire’s recently published biography, *The Bee Eater*. The kids ran roughshod over her attempts at a Montessori-style approach. In a speech last year to new teachers, Rhee made light of her flailing attempts to maintain control. On one occasion, she said, she used masking tape to shut their mouths as she marched them to the cafeteria.

Stories like that one—later reported in the *Washington Post*—have made captivating material for Rhee’s critics, who wonder if Michelle Rhee would have fired Michelle Rhee. But while Rhee’s claims of meteoric test-score gains have since been disputed, it’s clear that she improved dramatically as a teacher. By her third year, her classroom had become a showpiece for Education Alternatives, which then encouraged the rest of the faculty to follow Rhee’s lead. Not surprisingly, some older members bristled at her favored status. “*Good Morning America* came in to watch,” recalls Andrea Derrien, who worked alongside Rhee. “After that point, it really was like we were isolated from the rest of the school.” The tension culminated in Rhee’s being nominated for Teacher of the Year, competing in a vote against a popular veteran whom Rhee thought incompetent. According to Whitmire’s book and the recollections of several former Harlem Park teachers, the anti-Rhee faction was so determined to defeat her that there were rumors they stuffed the ballot box.

No one who knew Rhee thought she would make a career of teaching. Indeed, by the time Education Alternatives was ousted from its management contract amid conflict with the union, Rhee had moved on to a graduate program at Harvard. From there, she launched an organization called the New Teacher Project. Drawing on the lessons of Harlem Park and the work of economists like Stanford’s Eric Hanushek, she came to the conclusion that teacher effectiveness had nothing to do with years of experience, specialized training, or distinctions like master’s degrees (all qualifications that she herself had lacked). Rhee now describes teaching ability as something akin to an inborn talent, joking that no matter how much she practiced basketball, she could never play in the NBA like her fiancé Kevin Johnson, the former All-Star and current mayor of Sacramento. She created the New Teacher Project to identify other naturals.

Rhee’s organization contracted recruitment services to school districts, targeting career-changing professionals. (“You remember your first-grade teacher’s name,” read a memorable subway ad for the project’s NYC Teaching Fellows program. “Who will remember yours?”) But when Rhee came to the conclusion that union rules were preventing her organization from placing applicants, the New Teacher Project began to branch into politics, issuing a series of critical reports. Her activities met with hostility



from the unions but caught the eye of Joel Klein, then New York City's schools chancellor. When Adrian Fenty, the new reform-minded mayor of Washington, was looking for a schools chief, Klein offered a daring recommendation: Rhee.

Whereas at the New Teacher Project Rhee had focused on bringing talented teachers into urban districts, her work in D.C. was mostly concerned with the negative side of the ledger—prefiguring the debates that are roiling state capitals this year. She moved quickly to assert her authority, deposing many principals and closing 23 schools, and then zeroed in on the teachers union and its expiring contract.

Rhee was particularly influenced by economic studies predicting that the nation could reap outside gains in educational performance simply by dislodging the worst 5 to 10 percent of teachers. Her team in Washington came up with a system called IMPACT, which incorporates a “value added” statistical model to assess teacher quality. IMPACT was designed to control for variables like the class's income level and English-language proficiency, and scores teachers on two major factors: classroom skill, as determined by multiple evaluations, and results, based on students' improvement on standardized tests. Then IMPACT sorts teachers into categories ranging from “highly effective” to “ineffective.” Value-added models have been around since the nineties, but Rhee's controversial proposal was to apply them to firing decisions.

During the contract renegotiation, Rhee offered to pay top scorers six-figure salaries, provided the union give up its tenure protection. That meant ineffective instructors could also be canned. Rhee said her plan would reward the best teachers, offer middling ones an incentive to improve, and root out incompetents. But workers suspected her real agenda was to break the union, and they turned the offer down flat.

This past June, Rhee finally got the union to agree to a contract that looked a lot like her original proposal, but the victory came at an enormous political cost. The union sponsored protests decrying mass firings, and backed Vincent Gray, a city councilman who entered the primary against Fenty. Rhee didn't help her boss by reveling in her strident national image, wielding a broom on the cover of *Time*. “I don't mind firing people, because I know it is going to help kids,” she told the *Washington Post*.

All told, more than half of the district's 4,200 teaching positions turned over as a result of layoffs, firings, and attrition during Rhee's tenure. The payoff, she claims, came in test-score increases that showed Washington to be perhaps the nation's most-improved district. When Fenty lost to Gray, to Rhee's shock and no one else's, she went through some soul-searching and concluded that while she could have explained herself better, she made all the right decisions. It was the public she had misjudged. “The idea that when people saw the results they would want more of it was absolutely wrong,” she said in a recent speech.

Yet Rhee's failings were not simply matters of communication. Her dedication to assessing quality was undermined by a difficult fact: No one has adequately defined good teaching. Value-added formulas, like the one behind IMPACT, are only as accurate as their inputs. Critics argue that standardized tests are

flawed and inconsistent and don't measure what kids should really be learning anyway. And Rhee carried out hundreds of firings before IMPACT was even in place. Rhee acknowledges that for all her talk of stringent standards, there was "no perfect option" when it came to making many of her firing decisions. "In anything that we chose, there was a possibility of someone getting screwed," she said at an appearance in December. "But we thought, 'Better the adults getting screwed than the kids.'"

In the end, it was this perhaps unavoidable unfairness that angered many Washington voters. Suppose the new formula was weighted incorrectly? "Should we then not act upon any of those ineffective teachers because there might be some mistakes?" Rhee asks in reply. "Well, that's a matter of priority. Who bears the burden of the risk?" A teacher who was unjustly fired could always find another job, but the harm done to a wronged child would be impossible to correct, she says. "You only have one shot at first grade."

In hard times, how do you pick winners and losers? That's the subject up for discussion in an elementary-school classroom on Astor Place, as Rhee sits facing a room full of worried public-school teachers. It's a welcoming audience: They're members of a New York group called Educators 4 Excellence, founded by two recent Teach for America alums. The median age of the crowd looks to be about 28, and with Mayor Bloomberg predicting thousands of layoffs, these young teachers are particularly vulnerable under existing regulations that protect seniority.

Lobbying to abolish such rules is Rhee's initial focus, because she sees it as both a vital priority and an easy win. It's hard to defend a system that arbitrarily inflicts pain on the newest teachers, who are often concentrated in the most troubled schools, and that maximizes the number of layoffs, because their jobs are usually the lowest-paid. For an hour, Rhee listens as the teachers debate metrics, such as New York's own value-added assessment system. But when it's her turn to speak, she tries to cut through the philosophical clutter. "Let me tell you that what you all are talking about today, it is not the fight," Rhee says. "You can argue up and down about the other stuff forever, but the real fight is the political fight." The union presents itself as "a monolithic teacher voice," she continues. "There is no organized group that says, 'We have to stop this.' So, the only way that you are going to feel empowered is if you mobilize."

If the pitch sounds like a union organizer's, the resemblance is intentional. After the American Federation of Teachers spent heavily to defeat Fenty—about \$1 million, according to Politico—Rhee decided that to win the next round she would take on labor in the areas in which it excels: fund-raising and political mobilization. Rhee unveiled her plans in December, declaring on *Oprah* that she was "going to start a revolution," and StudentsFirst has since signed up 180,000 members. By the end of the year, Rhee hopes to have a million followers and chapters all over the country. StudentsFirst is being launched by seasoned political operatives like Anita Dunn and Bradley Tusk, as well as the Obama campaign's web guru, Joe Rospars. They are modeling the organization on two grassroots movements: Obama 2008 and the tea party.

This kind of populism, however, is not how Rhee intends to raise a billion dollars. Eli Broad says Rhee is

planning to secure \$50 million commitments from twenty individuals or foundations to get started, and going forward, she plans to spend about \$200 million annually. These are stunning figures—the Democratic National Committee spent about \$200 million during the 2010 election cycle—but Rhee’s admirers believe they are reachable. “She’s talking big,” says Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform. “She’s talking about running the tables and changing public education forever, and I think that’s going to appeal to a lot of movers and shakers nationwide. She’s not asking for money to build a gym.” In addition to Broad, financiers like Ted Forstmann and Julian Robertson are expected to be major backers, though Rhee isn’t revealing any names. And she may never have to. Under Citizens United, the Supreme Court’s recent campaign-finance decision, a nonprofit like StudentsFirst can spend unlimited sums on lobbying and campaign ads without having to disclose its donors.

Rhee often says she is still naïve when it comes to politics—she claims never to have heard of Citizens United when I bring it up—but her critics scoff at that notion. “She’s raising money for Goliath,” Diane Ravitch says of Rhee, arguing that if there really is some monstrous force of special interests—“the blob”—working against children, it isn’t the beleaguered unions. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, calls the obsession with blaming her membership “cheap” and insidious. “If you say everything is about the individual teacher, in an individual classroom, then you actually don’t have to create any systems, you don’t have to spend any money,” she argues. “You don’t have to do anything but have a rhetorical war.” Weingarten, who negotiated with Rhee during the acrimonious contract talks in Washington, points out that other superintendents have come to similar agreements without demonizing teachers in the process.

Many teachers say Rhee’s fixation on “quality” ignores contrary research and defies common sense. If Rhee’s theories were correct, says Dennis Van Roekel, a former math teacher who heads the National Education Association, the best-performing schools should be in the South, where there are few unions. “The opposite is true, so that makes her assumptions false,” he says. “It’s called an indirect proof in geometry.” The unions tout a recent federal study that suggests test scores in Washington improved more modestly than Rhee claims. “For every complex problem, there is a simple solution,” Van Roekel says, “and it’s usually wrong.”

Rhee’s most vehement opponents believe that her movement is a stalking horse for extreme conservative objectives—maybe even the end of public schools as we know them. She has served on an advisory committee to Florida’s Rick Scott, who floated the idea of rechanneling public-education funding into a statewide system of vouchers. Rhee didn’t agree with that particular idea, which Scott later backed away from, but she says she’s open-minded. “Quite frankly, it doesn’t matter to me whether a school is a private school or a charter school or a traditional public school,” she says. “I’m agnostic as to the delivery mechanism. I happen to believe, personally, that public schools can work, and I’m going to work for the rest of my career to make public schools better. But if it turns out that I’m wrong, and that kids can get a better education through some other means, I have no problem with that.”

When, in the midst of Wisconsin's standoff, I ask Rhee whether she was supportive of the draconian anti-union bill, she says no. She believes that teachers should be able to collectively bargain salaries and benefits, though not issues surrounding in-class performance. But she adds that she sympathizes with the impulse behind the legislation. "There's frustration, and rightly so, with the way collective bargaining has played out over the last couple of decades."

"Rhee is trying to hold together a coalition of Democrats who are somewhat skeptical of teachers unions and right-wing ideologues who want to destroy unions entirely," says Richard Kahlenberg of the left-leaning Century Foundation. He argues that the popular position of the moment—love the teacher, hate the union—is internally inconsistent and unsustainable, and wrote in a recent *Washington Post* column that "Democrats like Michelle Rhee paved the way for Scott Walker." Ultimately, reformers may be forced to decide which side of the equation matters more to them, and even some of Rhee's supporters have begun to express concern that she may be tying their movement too closely to Republicans. "The workforce is teachers, and demonizing their organizational representatives is not a way to move forward," says Cynthia Brown, an education specialist at the Center for American Progress. "Going to war? I think there's got to be some nuance here."

Liberals like Brown would like to see reform proceed in collaboration with the unions and credit them for some tentative concessions. Rhee, however, thinks cooperation is overrated. "I don't see teachers being demonized; I see politicians saying we have to change these structures we can no longer afford," she says late one evening on her cell phone after a long day of campaigning through Tennessee. "I think that what's problematic is that when you start to question or challenge the union, you are labeled a union-basher." Someday soon, though, Rhee, and the rest of her movement, will have to decide how far they are willing to take the fight. After the Wisconsin vote, polls registered public support swinging to the union position, raising the question of overreach. Rhee would like to distance herself from conservatives when it's convenient. But instigators can't control who takes up their cause. Unschooled as she may be, Rhee could soon learn an important lesson of politics: Your allies can damage you as much as your enemies.