

[**Chieppo: Pols, unions cook up ‘Chef’ mess**](http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/op_ed/2017/08/chieppo_pols_unions_cook_up_chef_mess)

[**Charles Chieppo**](http://www.bostonherald.com/users/charles_chieppo) Friday, August 18, 2017

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In the classic novel “Animal Farm,” George Orwell wrote, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” That is a perfect description of the environment that led four members of the Teamsters, who were just acquitted of extortion and conspiracy charges, to openly abuse a “Top Chef” television crew for not using union labor when they filmed locally in 2014.

Anyone who’s ever seen my law school transcript knows I’m not qualified to opine about the jury’s verdict, but the bigger issue is how Massachusetts got to a place where union members felt comfortable threatening to smash the “pretty little face” of “Top Chef” host Padma Lakshmi, hurl misogynistic and homophobic insults, slash tires and threaten to beat up crew members. Defense lawyers didn’t even try to refute these charges.

Robert Cafarelli, John Fidler, Daniel Redmond and Michael Ross were not born monsters. Their devolution into animal-like behavior was enabled by a state political environment in which unions “are more equal than others.”

If you want to understand political power, follow the money. In Massachusetts, 17 of the 20 political action committees that gave the most to candidates for state and county offices were labor organizations during the last election cycle for which the state Office of Campaign and Political Finance has published data. That means public employee union negotiations amount to elected officials using taxpayer money to bargain with their own benefactors.

You don’t have to look far to see the return organized labor has reaped from its investment. Witnesses in the “Top Chef” case testified that Boston tourism director Kenneth Brissette — who himself faces extortion charges in another case for allegedly threatening to revoke permits unless organizers of the Boston Calling music festival agreed to hire union members — said the television show should not receive permits to film in Boston until it resolved its dispute with the Teamsters.

Much of the recent progress made by the MBTA has been due to a three-year exemption from the commonwealth’s anti-privatization law, one that could never have been enacted in any other state. As part of its reform efforts, the T plans to outsource bus maintenance, which currently costs 70 percent more than at comparable transit agencies.

The proposal has triggered howls of protest. This spring, every member of the Massachusetts congressional delegation signed a letter condemning the plan even though the work, as it is at the commonwealth’s regional transit authorities, will be contracted out to companies that use union mechanics.

Many have tied the decline of organized labor to growing income inequality and a worsening in the condition of working- and middle-class Americans. On the national level, where unions don’t wield nearly the power they do here, there is some truth to the claim.

But if those who make that argument value intellectual honesty, they must recognize that here in Massachusetts, unions are indeed the first among equals. And the “Top Chef” fiasco proves once again that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

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