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Shortchanging teachers: Union dues are simply taxation without representation for many.

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Just a few weeks into the new school year, and in the midst of an important political season at the state and national level, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the relationship that the teachers unions have with their members. Much has been written about these unions, and the case has been frequently and justly made that they are anti-student because of their adamant positions on school choice, charter schools and teacher tenure. And although these unions of course claim to champion teachers, this support is conditional and often comes at the expense of teachers.

In 28 states, a teacher is essentially forced to join a costly union. A typical teacher in Southern California, where I teach, pays \$922 every year to his or her local, which then sends \$611 of that amount to the state affiliate, the California Teachers Assn., or CTA, and \$140 to the national affiliate, the National Education Assn., or NEA. (One has to wonder, if the unions are so beneficial, why do teachers need to be forced to join and to fork over such hefty dues in most states?)

And just what are all of these forced dues spent on? Untold millions go to political causes, whether a teacher agrees with the cause or not. According to Reg Weaver, the recently retired NEA president, his union's rank-and-file teachers are about one-third Democrat, one-third Republican and one-third independent. Yet more than 90% of NEA political spending goes to Democratic causes, according to OpenSecrets.org. Thus, if you are a Republican and have conservative values, your dues are being used to support causes and candidates you oppose.

In August, just before relinquishing his position, Weaver spoke at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. Although it was not surprising that he expressed support for Barack Obama, he made an egregious statement at the end of his speech. After extolling the virtues of his candidate, Weaver said, "That, my friends, is why the 3.2 million members of the National Education Assn. are organized, energized and mobilized to help elect Barack Obama as the next president of the United States of America."

What? All 3.2 million? This coming from the man who has said that the NEA is only one-third Democrat. Who then speaks for the 1-million-plus Republican teachers and for the 1 million or more who are independents and may not have decided whom to vote for?

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Another example is Proposition 8, a controversial measure on the November ballot in California that would seek to preserve the traditional definition of marriage. The CTA, which represents more than 300,000 teachers, just this week contributed \$1 million -- on top of a previous \$250,000 donation -- to help defeat Proposition 8.

As usual, the CTA did not seek input from its rank-and-file members on this issue. Although certainly some teachers are in favor of same-sex marriage, others are not. And just what, exactly, does Proposition 8 have to do with education? Why is the CTA pushing a "values" agenda that many parents, and many of its own members, may find offensive?

Aside from political choice, there are other areas in which teachers don't fare well under the auspices of their unions. Carol Katter, a veteran teacher and lifelong Catholic, objected to the fact that her union supports abortion on demand. When she sought a religious exemption from paying her dues, a union official suggested that she change her religion! In her state, Ohio, the law allowed only Seventh-day Adventists and Mennonites to claim such an exemption. Only after much legal wrangling was Katter able to do so.

One of the great betes noires of teachers unions is merit pay. They insist that all teachers at a similar point in their careers make the same amount of money, regardless of workload, classroom size, job performance or other measure. Good teachers earning more than bad teachers? Not on their agenda.

Clearly, this old-style industrial model of paying people based on seniority can kill incentive. Good teachers are less likely to have the incentive to excel when peers who have lower aspirations, are less talented or less effective make the same amount of money.

All of us who object to what amounts to taxation without representation must speak up. Teachers who are happy with their union should have the right to continue that affiliation. However, the rest of us -- especially those who live in states where we are forced to join a union -- would be well served to take a hard look at the organization that claims to represent our best interests and start demanding change.

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