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Are Teachers' Unions Anti-teacher? (Larry Sand)

As the yearly convention of the National Education Association (NEA) approaches, it is time to reflect on the relationships that this organization and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have with their members. Much has been written about the nation's two teachers' unions, and the case has been frequently (and justly) made that the unions are anti-student because of their adamant positions on school choice, charter schools and teacher tenure. However, I contend that the unions are not only anti-student, they are all too often anti-teacher.

In 28 of our 50 states, a teacher is essentially forced to join a very costly union. A typical teacher in Orange County pays \$922 on a yearly basis to his/her local, which then sends \$611 of that amount to the state affiliate, the California Teachers Association (CTA), and \$140 to the national affiliate (NEA.) One has to wonder - if the unions are so beneficial, why are teachers forced to join and to pay such hefty dues in most states?

And just where do all those forced dues go? Untold millions go to political causes, whether the teacher wants them to or not. According to Reg Weaver, NEA president, the unions' rank and file teachers are about one-third Democrat, one-third Republican and one-third independent. Yet, well over 90 percent of NEA political spending goes to liberal and left wing causes. Thus, if you are a conservative teacher, your own dues are used to support causes and candidates that you oppose.

If you are religious it can be even worse. 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, a union official suggested that she change her religion! In her state, Ohio, only Seventh Day Adventists and Mennonites have the opportunity to exercise that exemption. Only after much legal wrangling was Ms. Katter granted an accommodation.

One of the great *bete noires* of the unions is merit pay. They insist that all teachers at a similar point in their career make the exact same amount of money as other teachers at that same point. Good teachers earning more than bad teachers? Not on their agenda. Clearly, this old-style industrial model of paying people can kill incentive. Good teachers are less likely to have the impetus to excel when their neighbors who have lower aspirations, are less talented and less effective still make the same amount of money. Hence, good teachers suffer at the expense of their lower performing peers.

Good teachers can also be discriminated against in another way. If a school district needs to cut back its workforce, who gets cut? The lower performing teachers? No. Thanks to the unions, the system is based strictly on seniority. Quality is not a factor. When cutbacks were necessary in a Minnesota school district, a gifted and innovative Teacher of the Year who had won many awards and was loved by her students was among those who lost their jobs. It didn't matter that she was eminently more qualified than most of the teachers who retained their jobs. It was simply their version of last hired, first fired.

In a 2006 article in the LA Times, Kathy Kristof exposed the NEA who frequently steered its members into savings plans with high expenses and poor returns, prompting two union members to initiate legal action. Why would an entity that purports to be pro-teacher do something so transparently anti-teacher? Because, according to Ms. Kristof, "the companies reciprocate with financial support" to the NEA. In other words, the union was getting a kickback for touting an inferior product.

It is time for teachers to speak up. Those who are happy with their union should have the right to continue that affiliation. However, teachers, especially those who live in states where they are forced to join a union, would be well served to take a hard look the organization which claims to represent their best interests.

Larry Sand is a veteran teacher in Los Angeles. He is also the president of the [California Teachers Empowerment Network](#), an organization dedicated to getting information to teachers that they typically don't get from their school districts or their unions. The views herein are strictly his own.

