

**IBD Editorials**

## **Americans Should Know They Have Choices In The Workplace**

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In the summer of 2012, the Nevada Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan think tank based in Las Vegas, initiated a campaign to let local teachers know that they could opt out of their union, the 12,000 member Clark County Education Association, by submitting written notice between July 1 and July 15.

The reaction was dazzling. Hundreds of teachers had wanted to leave the union but didn't know that it was possible. Armed with their new-found information, over 400 chose to leave their unions.

Building on that momentum, NPRI, in conjunction with the Association of American Educators, is promoting June 23-29 this year as National Employee Freedom Week — a week dedicated to educating employees about exactly what rights they have regarding union membership. The campaign has over 50 member organizations across the nation.

When it comes to employee freedom, every state's experience is different. California, for instance, is different than Nevada because it's not a right-to-work state, in which employees may leave their unions at any point. In California, however, union members must still pay the portion of union dues that goes toward collective bargaining and other non-political union-related activities.

### **Know The Options**

But if they don't like their union's politics, they don't have to help fund them. The dissenters who select this "agency fee" option typically do so because they don't like that about one-third of their dues goes for political spending. Even though over 40% of union households voted Republican in 2012, over 90% of union largesse went to Democrats and liberal causes.

This is important for employees in every state, including California. The Golden State has many dominant unions — perhaps none more powerful than the mighty California Teachers Association with its 300,000 members and its more than \$211 million in political spending between 2000 and 2009 alone, with additional millions since.

This past year, an agency fee payer in the CTA could expect to get a \$224 rebate. (The complete rebate would actually be more because when a teacher joins a union in California, they are actually joining three — local, state and national — and would get rebates from each of them.)

It is important to note that different unions in different states have specific opt-out periods during which a worker can exercise their right to leave. In many states, like California, one not only has to resign, but also must ask for a rebate of the political portion of their dues every year within a specified, and frequently very narrow, window of time.

To be clear, National Employee Freedom Week is not about denying anyone the right to belong to a union, but rather about letting employees know their options and providing them with the facts they need to make an informed decision that's right for them.

### **Time For A Discussion**

Unions are threatened when workers opt out, and typically accuse dissidents of being "free riders" or freeloaders. But if workers don't want the services that the union has to offer, they have no choice; they have to accept them because the union demands exclusivity.

So instead of "free rider," a better term would be "forced rider." Teacher union watchdog Mike Antonucci explains, "The very first thing any new union wants is exclusivity. No other unions are allowed to negotiate on behalf of people in the bargaining unit. Unit members cannot hire their own agent, nor can they represent themselves."

In other words, opting out of a union isn't threatening to the union at all; employees still pay for the union's collective bargaining activity, allowing unions to continue pursuing their central tasks, while simultaneously giving employees additional freedom with their paychecks and time.

It's an appealing option for many union members: National Employee Freedom Week conducted scientific surveys of union households across the nation, and a full 33% of national respondents indicated they would opt out of union membership if given the chance.

Regardless of which path employees take, this will start a larger discussion about what employees need most to be effective in their jobs, whether they work in a classroom or a factory. Perhaps National Employee Freedom Week would be a good time for everyone — from California to Connecticut — to have that discussion.

- Sand, a retired teacher and longtime union member, is currently president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network.

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