

## Rebecca Friedrichs: Public unions the real freeloaders

By [REBECCA FRIEDRICHS](#)

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In his piece, "Right to Work sets workers free to freeload," Kevin O'Leary [Jan. 10] made some strong points for standing against the National Right to Work movement. Persuasive? Yes. Completely accurate? No.

As a public school teacher working in California, I have 25 years of experience dealing with two powerful teachers unions – the California Teachers Association (CTA), and the National Education Association (NEA). California is one of 26 "non-right-to-work," states, which mandates dues or "fees" to labor unions. I've spent 11 years as an "agency fee payer," and 14 years as an active member, so I'd like to address O'Leary's assertions about RTW laws from a dues paying worker's perspective.

O'Leary blames the desire for "open shop" (freedom not to join a union) on conservatives and refers to "the free-rider problem – when people enjoy benefits without paying for them," as "A sweet deal" for employees. Trouble is, the real "free-riders" are the unions.

Unions portray themselves as entities that exist exclusively for the benefit of middle-class workers. In reality, unions have been freeloading off the backs of their members for years by collecting excessive, forced dues in order to fund their non-representational powerful political machine.

For example, CTA is a 501c(6), not for profit organization that pays no taxes, yet it uses members' monies (without their permission) to promote a one-sided political agenda. True, some of the donations would not be considered objectionable, regardless of one's political orientation, like \$150,000 to the Sierra Club, and funding to the Hip Hop Caucus, but they often have little to do with education.

According to a 2010 report by the California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC), "The largest contributions to a political party among the identified special interest groups were made by the California Teachers Association to the California Democratic Party – totaling \$6,503,499."

The FPPC report asserted that CTA "Spent \$12,102,416 opposing Proposition 75, which sought to prohibit the use of public employee union dues for political contributions without individual employees' prior consent. The measure was defeated 46.5 percent to 53.5 percent."

The Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan election-finance watchdog organization, reports that NEA was the top combined state and federal contributor to the 2008 races, donating some \$45 million, more than 90 percent of which went to Democratic campaigns. Yet data reported in Education Next, from an NEA periodic survey conducted in 2005, reveals that NEA members "are slightly more conservative (50 percent) than liberal (43 percent) in political philosophy."

Welcome to my world in which I'm forced to pay "contributions" to a union whose political and social choices are often in contrast to my own. This is why many Americans are fighting for RTW laws.

O'Leary states that unions provide, "collective leverage, the power of numbers versus the power of capital." They certainly started out that way, but unfortunately the will of the majority no longer prevails, as a disproportionate number of union administrators are making decisions for millions of voiceless members.

Union backers always defer to "opting out" for those who don't support their political agenda; however, they fail to mention the negative consequences associated with being an "agency fee payer."

In order to "opt out," I had to send a written request to become an agency fee payer. Even though I still pay full union dues (\$950 annually for full time teachers in my district) minus non-chargeable fees, I receive several "punishments" for standing on principle and insisting on my right to free speech.

First, I lose union membership and the rights to vote and serve within my local union. Second, I lose my professional liability insurance. Third, I am treated with disdain, open hostility and disrespect simply for disagreeing with the political agenda of my union. It's no surprise that many teachers who want to opt out do not; they are too afraid, so they hope lawmakers will free them from forced dues.

CTA and NEA admit that their non-chargeable fees – used exclusively for a political agenda unrelated to representing members – are estimated to be 31.6 percent and 54.11 percent respectively for the 2012-13 school year.

Right to work supporters are not attempting to abolish the right to have a union, nor are they vicious. They are working to restore the rights of individual, hard working Americans who disagree with being forced to fund a political agenda that is not their own.

If unions want members to value their services, they must exist for the will and needs of their members, quit collecting additional "dues" for their political agendas, and focus on representing the interests of their members instead of their ideological pursuits.

*Rebecca Friedrichs has been an educator in Orange County public schools for 25 years and is on the board of the California Teachers Empowerment Network*