

Opinion: Teachers' unions political funding inappropriate

By Larry Sand

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With the school year complete, and the political season in full swing, it's a good time to examine teachers' relationship with their union and its political spending. In California, some 325,000 teachers and other education professionals are represented by the California Teachers Association. While teachers across the state have voted to take pay cuts to save colleagues' jobs, one would figure the CTA might lower its dues. Well, it hasn't. In fact, CTA has raised dues \$18 per teacher for 2010-2011.

CTA determines teachers' dues by a formula tied to average teacher salary. Due to a pay-by-seniority system, when teachers get laid off, the newest and lowest-paid are the first to go. The most senior and higher-paid stay, raising the average teacher pay. CTA President David Sanchez, whose salary is also determined by annual teacher salary, will be getting a raise this year.

More important than the dues increase is where much of the dues money goes. Teachers' dues in California average about \$1,000 per teacher per year, with about 30 percent of it going for political spending. In fact, CTA spent more than \$211 million from 2000 to 2009 on lobbying, and it is hardly a secret that this money goes in one direction only — left — despite the fact that teachers' politics run in all directions.

Recently, the California Teachers Empowerment Network, the organization of independent-minded teachers that I lead, conducted an informal poll asking its members' thoughts about a recent decision in Texas to disallow school districts from collecting political money for the teachers' union. The ruling said that teachers were free to give money to union political action committees, but that the individual teacher would have to write the check. Similar rulings have been made in Utah and Michigan.

The responses to our poll were overwhelmingly favorable to the Texas ruling. Some said they were conservative and were infuriated that their dues were going to liberal candidates and causes. Others said the union shouldn't be spending their dues money on politics of any kind, especially since the teachers had little, if any, voice in these funding decisions, and the issues being funded often had nothing to do with education.

While teachers can request a rebate of about \$300 of their dues money every year and opt out of political spending, doing so comes with a price. Teachers must resign from the union, lose certain legal protections and lose voting privileges on their contract. And even though they have "resigned" from the union, the union will still take about \$700 a year for a "fair share." Teachers must apply for this rebate yearly.

So why does CTA not let its members decide if they want to contribute to CTA's various political funds? It is simply because the union knows that if these donations were voluntary, the vast majority of teachers wouldn't contribute a penny.

So does CTA really care about the needs and opinions of its teachers, or does it just see its members as convenient ATMs to further its own political agenda?

Teachers should closely examine whether they want to continue giving their hard-earned money to candidates and causes in which they have no interest or find repellent. And CTA needs to fess up to its arrogant attitude that it knows what's best for teachers, when, in fact, what teachers actually think about various issues is of no concern to it.

LARRY SAND recently retired after teaching in Los Angeles and New York for more than 28 years, and is president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network. He wrote this article for this newspaper.