

# Townhall of Fame

Honoring the Leaders Among Us



Larry Sand, founder and president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network, speaks at one of the many tea parties that took place across America in 2009. (Photo courtesy: California Teachers Empowerment Network)

## Teaching the Union

by Meredith Jessup

A retired teacher is leading an organization committed to keeping teachers associations accountable and returning power to local classrooms.

One veteran educator's efforts have been making grassroots waves and lending a voice to California teachers disillusioned by self-serving unions.

Recently retired Los Angeles teacher Larry Sand is working to ensure California's teachers have an alternative outlet to the left-leaning political agenda of state and national unions. Sand is the founder and president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network (CTEN), an organization comprised of teachers who disapprove of their

union representation, working to provide the state's teachers with comprehensive information about the unions and their political agendas.

As a former member of the California Teachers Association (CTA), Sand has been well-acquainted with unions' recruiting techniques. It was during one 2005 state ballot initiative campaign to ban the use of public employee union dues for political contributions without prior member consent that Sand became familiar with the union's unruly political tactics. These underhanded methods, Sand explains, forced him to take action in founding the CTEN: "We tried to make it an opt-in situation. Though the [ballot proposition] was popular, the campaign was bungled. ... [T]he teachers unions spent millions to ensure its defeat. Additionally, the CTA raised its dues \$180 a year over three years (\$60 per year) to fight the prop without asking its members' consent."

Sand and a fellow educator worked to send a blast e-mail to 90,000 teachers from across the state that explained

just what the union was doing. "This did not sit well with CTA President Barbara Kerr," he recalls. Kerr threatened Sand and his colleague with jail time: "She claimed we were using school e-mail to promote a political agenda. Nonsense. All we did was let teachers know that their union was sticking it to them."

The story of Sand's defection from the official union stance garnered national media attention, and the union came off looking "rather bullish," Sand says. "But undeterred, they went on with their smear campaign and prevailed: The prop went down."

#### VICTORY FROM DEFEAT

The CTA may have scored a victory at the ballot box during that election, but Sand and Jeralee Smith, a special education teacher from Riverside, Calif., were not ready to accept defeat. Sand and Smith worked together to co-found the CTEN to ensure teachers received the type of balanced information that would enable them to make informed decisions related to their profession, including a teacher's relationship with his or her union.

"We realized that teachers had been kept in the dark about so many things, and we tried to rectify that situation," Sand remembers. "After a lot of hard work and some seed money, CTEN came into being in 2006."

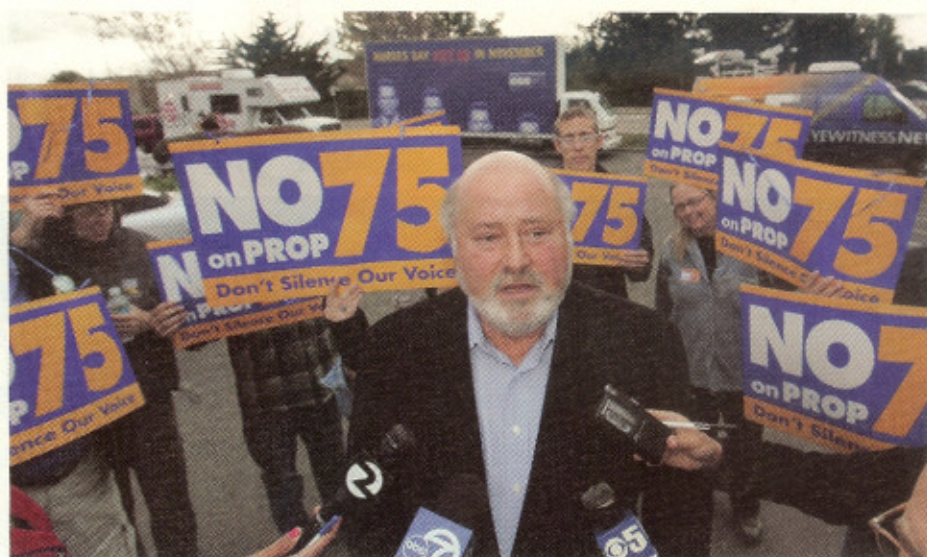
#### THE FUTURE OF CTEN

Since its founding, CTEN has enjoyed steady growth, says Sand. With the free tools available on its Web site—including legal notes, form letters and FAQs—CTEN has helped many grateful teachers opt out of the union.

Through the efforts of Sand and CTEN, California's teachers now have open access to a wide range of information—everything from education policy reform and liability insurance to options of union membership and teacher pay—all from the viewpoint of a fellow teacher.

CTEN's Web site, CTENhome.org, stresses the importance of open dialogue on these matters and equipping teachers with information so they are able to think for themselves. "It has become apparent that there is an urgent need to have an organization that provides reliable and balanced information and peer support for teachers of like mind who may adopt dissenting views or make decisions that could invite criticism and strained relationships."

With an eye on the future, Sand, acting president of the CTEN, says the growing organization plans to continue expanding its efforts. "To date, we have concentrated primarily on teachers. But now we realize that parents and the community at large would benefit from what we have to offer. We are in the process of devising ways to get the word out to the general public," he says. "It always surprises



Liberal Hollywood director and actor Rob Reiner worked to defeat California Proposition 75 in 2005. The measure would have banned the use of public employee union dues for political contributions without prior member consent. (AP/Paul Sakuma)

me how little people know about the powerful effect that teachers unions have on public education."

#### EMPOWERING TEACHERS TO IMPROVE EDUCATION

Conservatives have flocked to support Sand and CTEN for the group's work in empowering individuals to fight back against burgeoning unions and their dishonest representation.

Recently, Sand was invited to share his thoughts on education with a "tea party" gathering in Antelope Valley, Calif. He described to the crowd other political causes into which unions have funneled money, including opposing a ballot proposal that would have banned sex offenders from the classroom, opposing an initiative defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman and opposing the extension of the state's tenure requirements for teachers from two years to five.

The union, Sand explained to the group, also threw its support behind the establishment of a single-payer health system for California and an increase in taxes. "CTA is using your tax money to try to push something that will increase your taxes," he told the crowd. "Something's wrong."

CTEN is slowly shifting the balance of power in education back to the local classrooms by working for change from within. Sand believes that if rank-and-file teachers union members are armed with information about the political activities their dues are funding, they are more likely to demand significant union policy changes. "We are not an advocacy group," he stresses. "We don't tell teachers what we think they should do. We merely give them info and answer any questions they may have. The rest is up to them." •

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