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Taxpayers subsidize teachers unions

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Sunday, April 8, 2007



Promising to improve California's public schools, the newly elected president of the California Federation of Teachers has just pledged to "weigh in on the issues of the day -- ending the war in Iraq, cleaning up the environment, implementing a single-payer universal health care system, protecting people's personal and civil rights, and having a progressive tax system." If you're wondering what these issues have to do with education, you're not alone.

Across America, there are more than 3 million public school teachers, most of whom are organized through the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. As the nation's two largest labor unions, they wield enormous political influence and aren't afraid to use it. Much of this power comes through the dues union leaders deduct from teachers' paychecks -- supposedly to improve the working conditions of the teachers they represent.

In California, for example, the state teachers association represents 340,000 workers and collects more than \$150 million each year in mandatory dues. This power also comes from taxpayer subsidies and other unfair benefits that unions have negotiated through collective bargaining agreements in school districts across the nation.

Earlier this year, the National Center for Teacher Quality launched an online database of union agreements for America's 50 largest school districts -- www.nctq.org/cb/. Although this database is a huge step toward better transparency and accountability, teachers unions haven't exactly been thrilled. As it turns out, the teachers unions enjoy excessive perks that often run counter to interests of students and teachers alike. Similar perks are enjoyed by some union members in private employment, but taxpayers don't foot the bill for them.

In many of the nation's largest districts, including San Francisco, a teacher who decides against joining the local union is required by contract to pay a fee to that union. Another perk is paid leave for teachers to conduct all sorts of union business. According to the database, the overwhelming majority of the nation's largest school districts grant such leave, which is terribly costly to school districts -- siphoning away money that could be used to buy additional textbooks or raise teacher pay.

In many districts, contracts also mandate an allotment of time at faculty meetings to discuss union matters. Some districts are contractually obligated to allow unions free use of equipment like copy machines, telephones and computers -- even during a teacher strike.

Contracts often allow teachers and other union representatives to use a school district's internal mail system for union correspondence, so the union doesn't have to pay for postage. And this generally holds true no matter the content of the mail. Union dues are automatically withheld from teacher paychecks in thousands of districts across the country. This is a major perk for the unions and saves them the substantial expense of collecting fees from their members.

But is it appropriate for the government to collect money on the union's behalf? Disturbingly, many of these funds wind up promoting a one-sided political agenda, as the new president of the California Federation of Teachers has made quite clear.

Last year alone, the NEA used its member dues to donate millions of dollars to partisan groups like Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, People for the American Way and leading Democratic polling firms.

And even though unions can no longer contribute directly to political action committees, the NEA and AFT have contributed funds to the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Leadership Council and other partisan causes. Union leaders might be happy about those donations, but are they a fair use of resources derived from public funds?

Teacher unions supposedly exist to improve the working conditions of the teachers they represent. In reality, however, they often promote an aggressive political agenda that doesn't reflect the interests of their members, let alone the local school districts.

Performance-based pay for teachers is a prime example. In the nation's inner-city schools, the best teachers often leave for better salaries, nicer neighborhoods and less-stressful work. Merit pay, however, makes it possible for these schools to retain good teachers by paying them more. But the unions fight tooth-and-nail against such measures.

All of these perks taken together represent a staggeringly large taxpayer subsidy to teachers unions. And now that the National Center for Teacher Quality has made all this information available to the public, the full scope of the subsidy is there for all to see. Those who seek to improve the quality of our nation's public schools -- parents, teachers and the local school board members who negotiate these contracts -- have a lot of homework to do.

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This article appeared on page **E - 2** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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