

# WebMemo



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## Creating a Crisis: Unions Stifle Education Reform

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The Senate will soon consider creating a \$10 billion “Education Jobs Fund.” The measure has already been included in a war funding bill passed in early July by the House. Union influence and power has continued to prevent meaningful education reform, and another public education bailout from Washington will further empower unions, which will make it more difficult for states to implement the common-sense changes that are needed to improve American education in the long run.

**Education Unions Funded by Forced and Voluntary Contributions.** Teachers unions generate the bulk of their capital from their millions of dues-paying members. During the 2009–2010 school year, the National Education Association (NEA) national affiliate received \$162 per teacher and \$93 per public school staff member.<sup>1</sup> Public education employees also contribute an average of \$300 per year to their state and local union affiliates.

Today, employees in 28 states can lose their jobs if they refuse to join a union or pay union dues. In most states, teachers unions can use their members’ dues to contribute to campaigns and other political causes. In all but five states, even though members elect their union representatives, “union leaders appear to pursue an agenda disconnected from the concerns of their members.”<sup>2</sup>

An NEA member survey found that 50 percent of dues-paying members identified themselves as being more conservative than liberal, but 91 percent of the NEA’s campaign and political contributions went to Democrats or left-leaning causes. The two

major teachers unions make 95 percent of their political contributions to Democrats.<sup>3</sup>

Teachers unions also dominate election spending. According to the Federal Election Commission, as of July 2010, unions had contributed \$9.7 million of the \$24.7 million in campaign spending, representing 39 percent of total expenditures. By contrast, corporations had spent just \$3.4 million.<sup>4</sup>

With a budget of more than \$355 million, the NEA spends more on campaign contributions than ExxonMobil, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, and the AFL-CIO combined.<sup>5</sup> During the 2007–2008 election cycle, the NEA and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) spent more than \$71 million on campaigns for issues and candidates, spending more than \$100 per teacher in five states.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the millions in campaign contributions, the NEA provides hundreds of thousands of dollars in member dues to left-leaning groups such as Planned Parenthood, the Service Employees International Union, and Health Care for America Now.<sup>7</sup> The AFT funds groups that include the Rainbow PUSH coalition and ACORN.

National union leaders receive plush salaries. The national affiliate of the NEA paid more than 370 of its employees salaries of \$100,000 or more in

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2009. Several executive board members earned well over \$200,000. NEA President Dennis Van Roekel was provided a salary of slightly under \$300,000, and Vice President Lily Eskelsen received over \$240,000 in 2009. NEA Treasurer Rebecca Pringle received \$321,000 last year.

### Strengthening Union Control and Influence.

Over the past five decades, unions have successfully lobbied to prevent public education employees from having to contribute to the cost of their own health insurance premiums, for increases in pensions and other benefits, and against provisions such as parental school choice. They have also fought against tenure reform and merit pay for teachers and, more recently, have been at the forefront of the Obama Administration's push for another \$10 billion public education bailout.

Democratic leadership claims that the creation of a \$10 billion Education Jobs Fund would save 140,000 public education jobs. Assuming this figure, each job "saved" would cost more than \$70,000; the average teacher salary for the 2008–2009 school year was \$54,000. Moreover, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 57 percent of public school teachers nationally are unionized. Assuming a conservative estimate of \$300 per teacher in average union dues to state and local affiliates, teachers unions have

around \$24 million in dues at stake in the Education Jobs Fund.<sup>8</sup>

The \$10 billion public education bailout being considered by Congress would be on top of the nearly \$100 billion appropriated to the Department of Education through the so-called stimulus bill in 2009. But the Administration seems to be withholding these funds from states with weaker union support. Of note, applications from states with demonstrably improved academic track records were rejected by the Department of Education during the review process for phase I Race to the Top (RTTT) grants, the Obama Administration's signature education reform program. Department reviewers for the RTTT grant initiative noted that certain states did not have enough union "buy-in" for their reform plans. Notably, the two states that won RTTT grants of \$500 million and \$100 million, respectively—Tennessee and Delaware—had nearly 100 percent union buy-in.<sup>9</sup>

### Unions Weaken American Education.

Researchers have found that public school teachers "have more compressed wage structures than (overwhelmingly nonunion) private schools, even when the private schools nominally have similar pay schedules."<sup>10</sup> Unions also create barriers to entry into the teaching profession by opposing alternative teacher certification programs that would allow

1. Mike Antonucci, "The Long Reach of Teachers Unions," *Education Next*, Fall 2010, at <http://educationnext.org/the-long-reach-of-teachers-unions/> (July 19, 2010).
2. James Sherk, "What Do Union Members Want? What Paycheck Protection Laws Show About How Well Unions Reflect Their Members' Priorities," *Heritage Foundation Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 06-08, August 30, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2006/08/What-Do-Union-Members-Want-What-Paycheck-Protection-Laws-Show-About-How-Well-Unions-Reflect-Their-Members-Priorities>.
3. Michael Beckel, "Teachers Unions: Background," *OpenSecrets.org*, August 2009, at <http://www.opensecrets.org/industries/background.php?ind=L1300> (July 19, 2010).
4. T. W. Farnam, "Unions Outspending Corporations on Campaign Ads Despite Court Ruling," *The Washington Post*, July 7, 2010, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/06/AR2010070602133.html?sid=ST2010070605201> (July 19, 2010).
5. Antonucci, "The Long Reach of Teachers Unions."
6. *Ibid.*
7. National Education Association, Form LM-2 Labor Organization Annual Report, December 15, 2009, at <http://neaexposed.com/documents/NEA2009LM2Cover.pdf> (July 20, 2010).
8. James Hall, "Propping Up the Teachers Unions," *The Foundry*, July 6, 2010, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2010/07/06/propping-up-the-teachers-unions/>.
9. Andy Smarick, "The Full Story on Race to the Top," *American Enterprise Institute Education Stimulus Watch Special Report* 3, March 2010, at <http://www.aei.org/docLib/edstimwatch.pdf> (July 20, 2010).

more mid-career professionals and those without traditional teaching degrees into the classroom.

In states with school choice provisions for children (such as tax credit and deduction programs, public and private school choice, charter schools, virtual education, and homeschooling), teachers unions are typically the primary opponents of such options. This outcome has been particularly unfortunate in Washington, D.C., where the highly successful and overwhelmingly popular D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which provides vouchers of up to \$7,500 for low-income children to attend a private school of their choice, is being phased out primarily because of pressure from teachers unions.

**The 800-Pound Gorilla.** Another federal bailout for education from Washington would ultimately

help unions perpetuate the failed status quo. Instead of seeking more federal assistance, state leaders should consider alternatives to the traditional paradigm that is acceptable to the NEA and AFT, such as reforming public pension plans, requiring teachers to contribute to their health insurance premiums, and reforming hiring practices and teacher compensation.

Many of the problems plaguing American education today can be attributed directly to union power, which can be curtailed through common-sense reforms at the state level. Breaking the stranglehold from these unions is the first step toward making long-term, meaningful education reform.

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10. Andrew Coulson, "The Effects of Teachers Unions on American Education," *Cato Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Winter 2010), at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/journal/cj30n1/cj30n1-8.pdf> (July 20, 2010).