

Alternative Teacher Unions Growing

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SPOKANE, Wash. — Cindy Omlin was a member of a teachers union for many years and even served as a union representative before she learned how the group was spending her money. “The more I read, the more alarmed I became with their agenda,” said the former public school speech-language pathologist. “The union pushes abortion without limits and promotes homosexual ‘marriage.’ I had been an ignorant, loyal union member for many years before I learned that teachers had the right not to support the union’s political activities.”

Omlin and public school counselor Barbara Amidon brought a class-action lawsuit against the union, the Washington Education Association. That lawsuit resulted in a string of others, including three by the state’s attorney general regarding the association’s illegal political activity. In the end, the group was charged with the largest campaign-finance violation in the state’s history, resulting in fines and penalties of more than \$1.3 million.

Omlin and Amidon are not alone. As educators head back to classrooms this fall, an increasing number have abandoned the nation’s two largest teachers unions — the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association — embracing instead alternative associations that do not support immoral social causes, such as abortion, with their union dues.

With the help of the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, Mount Vernon, Wash., physical education teacher Jeff Leer filed a federal lawsuit against the Washington Education Association to examine the union’s dues. As a result of that lawsuit, which was settled out of court, Leer discovered that money the union had claimed was spent on legitimate union activity was far below what the union had reported.

“There is always more spent on political activity than the union admits to,” Leer said. “We’ve found

that out only because we’ve gone to court and have been able to open up the union’s books.”

“After years of trying to hold the union accountable, we saw that there was no change,” Omlin said. “Teachers cannot influence the union, so we formed a non-union, teachers’ professional organization focused on students.”

Omlin’s organization, Northwest Professional Educators, is one of 10 independent teachers’ associations affiliated with the California-based Association of American Educators. The group currently has more than 300 members.

Same Benefits, Less Cost

Non-union organizations provide many of the same benefits as a union, but at a fraction of the cost. Northwest Professional Educators offers \$2 million in liability insurance, covers members’ legal fees and provides professional development. The cost is \$144, compared with the traditional union’s dues of between \$500-\$700 per year.

As employees in a compulsory union-fee state, Washington educators are forced to pay money to the union. However, they have two options for reducing their dues. Educators can apply to be a religious objector, thereby diverting 100% of their dues to a union-approved charity, or they can become an agency fee payer. As an agency fee payer, the educator still pays dues, but is eligible for a rebate of the percentage that the union uses for non-representational activities, such as political organizing. That amount can sometimes be up to 70% of the union member’s dues.

In other states, such as Idaho, forced union dues are illegal. In addition to Idaho, the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation identifies 21 other right-to-work states.

The Acton Institute has compiled a monograph titled "Liberating Labor" that examines how labor unions can be made more just.

"Many teachers don't realize that they have a choice, or that there are any alternatives," Green said. "The Church would demand, from a moral perspective, that if a teacher discovers that their money is being used to subsidize Planned Parenthood or other such organizations, one would have the duty not to support that."

Growing Fast

As one example, the National Education Association was a co-sponsor of the April pro-abortion "March for Women's Lives" and supports distributing contraception through school-based family planning clinics.

The National Education Association's own internal polls reveal that 49% of its membership describe themselves as Democrats. Yet, in 1998, 95% of the union's \$3.4 million in contributions went to Democrats. Five percent went to Republicans.

"The unions are ideologically contrary to a good percentage of teachers," said Booker Stallworth, communications director with the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a Washington organization that has supported independent teachers' associations. "The unions put their agenda and goals ahead of students and their teachers."

Non-union groups now count more than 250,000 members in 18 states. In at least four states — Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri and Texas — membership in independent teacher associations outnumbers membership in the nation's two largest unions.

In response to the rise of such associations, the NEA, in its November 1994 issue of its monthly magazine, NEA Now, described the Association of American Educators as "a stalking horse for right-wing groups."

Still, not everyone sees the independent teacher associations as a threat. Myron Lieberman, who has studied teachers unions for 40 years, said he hasn't seen any significant growth.

"The independent organizations are opposed to collective bargaining, while most of the teachers in this country are covered by collective bargaining laws," said Lieberman, chairman of the

Washington, D.C.-based Education Policy Institute. "This is the reason that such associations are not growing."

He noted that states such as Texas and Missouri are not covered by a bargaining law. "The reality is that teachers are interested in organizations primarily to look after their material interests," he said. "These associations appeal to a niche group."

Teachers such as Jeff Leer disagree.

"Teachers want to teach. The unions should be telling teachers about their rights," Leer said. "The independent associations are growing because a large number of teachers are growing weary of what seems to be the state and national teachers unions' political agenda unrelated to education."

"In our worst states, we're growing by 10%," said Association of American Educators spokesman Tracey Bailey. "In our best states, we're growing by between 30-50%, including states like Florida that have a collective bargaining law. By the NEA's own admission, they are growing at only .9%."

Bailey stressed that educators welcome the choice of who will represent them.

"When teachers are given a choice, and allowed to exercise that choice over time," Bailey said, "the majority will choose to be involved in less partisan, less radical and less unionized organizations."

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