

AAE Helps California Teachers Declare Independence

By La Rae Munk

A small group of local teachers in the Warner Springs, CA school district have taken what may seem like a brave step in declaring their independence from the California Teachers Association (CTA) and the National Education Association (NEA). If not brave, then unusual because no one involved in education circles can remember the last time a local affiliate of the CTA voted to formally disaffiliate.

The NEA represents over 2 million classroom teachers across America, and the CTA, the NEA's largest state affiliate, claims to represent over 200,000 of those teachers. It is the union's concept of representation, or, more precisely, the CTA/NEA's claim that they "represent" the views of all their members, that became an issue for the local Warner Springs teachers.

"For years I faced a moral dilemma when it came time to pay dues to the CTA and the NEA because I was embarrassed that they used my dues to support causes I found personally offensive," says Doris Burke, one of the leaders of the Warner Springs disaffiliation movement. Burke and a number of her colleagues formed an independent local association, the Associated Warner Educators (AWE), to represent the interests of other dissatisfied teachers in the district. AWE incorporated in order to be legally recognized as the bargaining unit for Warner Springs teachers. In California, most school districts have contracts that compel teachers to select a union to act as the exclusive bargaining agent for all teachers in the district even if they don't wish to be represented by the selected group. The majority of the teachers in Warner Springs voted to have AWE be that agent rather than the CTA.

Ms. Burke says the leadership of AWE is using a more collegial approach to bargaining rather than the old adversarial methods used by the CTA. "Pitting attorneys against each other on opposite sides of the table has never been the best approach. We're all in this together, so we believe it will serve everyone in the district better if we negotiate King Arthur style around the table," says Ms. Burke. She adds, "AWE will always strive to put the needs of our students first. If we do that, there will be much less conflict in negotiations."

Ms. Burke and her colleagues are not the only teachers dissatisfied with their state affiliate or with the NEA. In what still may be the best kept secret in America, another 250,000 teachers have joined a growing movement toward independent alternatives to the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—the other huge national teachers union. These independent groups want to make it clear that the NEA and AFT don't speak for all teachers in their states. Most teachers, like those in California, are unaware of the existence of these alternatives. It would amaze them to learn that the independent groups in the states of Texas, Missouri, and Georgia have actually grown larger than the NEA or AFT affiliate in those states. Like the Warner Springs teachers, what prompted the emergence of these groups was the NEA and AFT policy of requiring local affiliate members to join the state and national affiliates. When the NEA began enforcing this "unified" dues structure in 1975, a number of NEA locals broke away and formed their own independent unions. Some have grown into statewide organizations. These associations charge dues that range from \$150-\$200 a year, far less than the dues NEA members are forced to pay to support their local, state, and national affiliates.

Like the Warner Springs group, these independent associations are tied together by a number of common threads. For instance, all of the independents object to the NEA and AFT's policy of requiring members to pay dues to the state and national in order to be a member of their local organization. The AAE is assisting in the development of these alternatives to monopoly unionism, and was instrumental in helping the Warner Springs teachers form their new local association. AAE Executive Director, Gary Beckner, says that the alternative groups are also magnets for teachers who object to the controversial social agendas and the partisan politics of the NEA. He adds, "Teachers deserve choices too and with the specter of an NEA/AFT merger on the horizon, teachers will have even less of a choice of who represents them, if not for the existence of these breakaway groups across the country." He calls this a "back to the future" movement, back to the days when teachers could voluntarily join a local, state, and/or national association. And he adds that if the movement continues to grow, it will temper a monopoly system that has become too heady with power.

AAE is working hard to launch more independent state teacher associations and to mobilize the existing ones into a force that can counterbalance the influence of the NEA/AFT and cause them to be more responsive to teachers with different views.

AAE's efforts have not gone unnoticed by the unions. In fact, the NEA has labeled the organization "a stalking horse for right wing groups" and "an enemy of public education." To which Tracey Bailey, an AAE Advisory Board member and a National Teacher of the Year, says, "No wonder the NEA reacts the way they do; the AAE represents that which is so sorely needed – professionalism and a focus on children first. This stands in stark contrast to the current environment of organizations like the NEA protecting the status quo and using their members' dues to lobby for controversial social issues!"

Doris Burke adds, "I don't think of myself as a radical, and as a long time public school teacher, I'm certainly not an enemy of public education. It's just that the NEA wouldn't give me a choice like it once did. Now, thanks to the AAE I have a choice and my conscience is clear! To borrow the thoughts of Robert Frost—This is my 'road not taken.'"

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