

Who's Listening to Teachers?

By Gary Beckner

Union members now have the opportunity to see their money at work. For the first time since 1959, the Department of Labor is requiring unions to disclose how they spend their members' dues.

Teachers should be interested to know that their union, the National Education Association, has used their membership dues to give over \$65 million in gifts, grants and contributions primarily to liberal causes, many of which have nothing to do with educating our children.

For example, the NEA gave \$15,000 to the Human Rights Campaign, which supports equal rights for gay, lesbian and transgender individuals. The Fund to Protect Social Security, whose mission is to defeat personal investment accounts, received a whopping \$400,000 from the union. Disclosures such as these illustrate the NEA's true colors-it is a gift-giving arm to a liberal agenda.

With this in mind, the union does not proportionately represent its members. According to a NEA commissioned poll conducted by Michigan-based Star Research, fifty percent of its members said that they were conservative or tended to lean conservative. Only 40 percent described themselves as liberal or tended to lean liberal.

As early as the 1960s, the NEA began to veer dramatically to the left of its membership. Teachers began to show their displeasure by joining only their local associations and not sending dues along to the state or national entities. The NEA put a stop to that by "unifying" its dues structure. No longer could a teacher belong to just the local NEA affiliate without being forced to financially support the state affiliate or the NEA at the national level. In one fell swoop, the NEA moved from a basis of voluntary membership to a system of mandatory dues and exclusive representation. The NEA then used these forced dues to help elect "friendly" legislators who in turn helped the union establish

and perpetuate a virtual monopolistic representational system. Except in Right-to-Work states, NEA leaders no longer have to sell their organization to teachers, and there is little competitive pressure that would cause the union to be accountable to its members.

However, as Future Shock author Alvin Toffler observed, "Knowledge is a hard thing to monopolize." Challenging information is now beginning to find its way to educators, and it is awakening them to the detrimental effects that the NEA can have on education in general, and on teachers' reputations and livelihood in particular.

The new federal rules introduced by Labor Secretary Elaine Chao are a good first step to try to make the unions more transparent in how members' dues are spent. However, as revealing as the new reports may seem, the unions still have much discretion in how to detail their expenditures. In other words, it is not inconceivable that vast amounts of spending are buried and hidden through creative reporting techniques.

Many teachers have given up on trying to change the unions from within and are looking for alternative membership organizations. In fact, hundreds of thousands of teachers have already left the union and have joined non-union, non-partisan professional associations that offer many of the benefits they need, but without the politics. The growth of these organizations is the greatest hope that one day the NEA will be forced to listen to its members rather than the other way around.

--Gary Beckner is the executive director of the Association of American Educators, the national organization to which Northwest Professional Educators is affiliated. (www.aaeteachers.org)

(This story was published Saturday, January 14, 2006.) www.nwanews.com/adg/Editorial/142541/