

Tuesday, January 3, 2006

Teachers' Pets

The NEA gave \$65 million in its members' dues to left-liberal groups last year.

If we told you that an organization gave away more than \$65 million last year to Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH Coalition, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Amnesty International, AIDS Walk Washington and dozens of other such advocacy groups, you'd probably assume we were describing a liberal philanthropy. In fact, those expenditures have all turned up on the financial disclosure report of the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers union.

Under new federal rules pushed through by Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, large unions must now disclose in much more detail how they spend members' dues money. Big Labor fought hard (if unsuccessfully) against the new accountability standards, and even a cursory glance at the NEA's recent filings--the first under the new rules--helps explain why. They expose the union as a honey pot for left-wing political causes that have nothing to do with teachers, much less students.

We already knew that the NEA's top brass lives large. Reg Weaver, the union's president, makes \$439,000 a year. The NEA has a \$58 million payroll for just over 600 employees, more than half of whom draw six-figure salaries. Last year the average teacher made only \$48,000, so it seems you're better off working as a union rep than in the classroom.

Many of the organization's disbursements--\$30,000 to the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association, \$122,000 to the Center for Teaching Quality--at least target groups that ostensibly have a direct educational mission. But many others are a stretch, to say the least. The NEA gave \$15,000 to the Human Rights Campaign, which lobbies for "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equal rights." The National Women's Law Center, whose Web site currently features a "pocket guide" to opposing Supreme Court nominee Sam Alito, received \$5,000. And something called the Fund to Protect Social Security got \$400,000, presumably to defeat personal investment accounts.

The new disclosure rules mark the first revisions since 1959 and took effect this year. "What wasn't clear before is how much of a part the teachers unions play

in the wider liberal movement and the Democratic Party," says Mike Antonucci of the Education Intelligence Agency, a California-based watchdog group. "They're like some philanthropic organization that passes out grant money to interest groups."

There's been a lot in the news recently about published opinion that parallels donor politics. Well, last year the NEA gave \$45,000 to the Economic Policy Institute, which regularly issues reports that claim education is underfunded and teachers are underpaid. The partisans at People for the American Way got a \$51,000 NEA contribution; PFAW happens to be vehemently anti-voucher.

The extent to which the NEA sends money to states for political agitation is also revealing. For example, Protect Our Public Schools, an anti-charter-school group backed by the NEA's Washington state affiliate, received \$500,000 toward its efforts to block school choice for underprivileged children. (Never mind that charter schools are public schools.) And the Floridians for All Committee, which focuses on "the construction of a permanent progressive infrastructure that will help redirect Florida politics in a more progressive, Democratic direction," received a \$249,000 donation from NEA headquarters.

When George Soros does this sort of thing, at least he's spending his own money. The NEA is spending the mandatory dues paid by members who are told their money will be used to gain better wages, benefits and working conditions. According to the latest filing, member dues accounted for \$295 million of the NEA's \$341 million in total receipts last year. But the union spent \$25 million of that on "political activities and lobbying" and another \$65.5 million on "contributions, gifts and grants" that seemed designed to further those hyper-liberal political goals.

The good news is that for the first time members can find out how their union chieftains did their political thinking for them, by going to www.union-reports.dol.gov, where the Labor Department has posted the details.

Union officials claim that they favored such transparency all along, but the truth is they fought the new rules hard in both Congress and the courts. Originally, the AFL-CIO said detailed disclosures were too expensive, citing compliance costs in excess of \$1 billion. The final bill turned out to be \$54,000, or half of what the unions spent on litigation fighting the new requirements. When Secretary Chao refused to back down, the unions took her to court, and lost.

It's well understood that the NEA is an arm of the Democratic National Committee. (Or is it the other way around?) But we wonder if the union's rank-and-file stand in unity behind this laundry list of left-to-liberal recipients of money that comes out of their pockets.

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