

National Catholic Register

Alternatives to Teachers' Unions

August 28-September 3, 2005

COMMENTARY & OPINION

BY JOHN OMLIN

My wife Cindy and I have always been careful consumers. As pro-life Catholics, we don't want our hard-earned money to promote activities or agendas that destroy human life. For example, we avoid shopping at stores that support abortion through donations to Planned Parenthood, the nation's largest abortion supplier.

So, it was natural for us to become alarmed when we learned that her teachers' union, the National Education Association (NEA) and its state affiliate, the Washington Education Association (WEA), supported abortion and helped to elect pro-abortion candidates.

At its 2005 representative assembly, the National Education Association's pro-abortion stance was obvious when it refused to allow the addition of language from its policy on the use of animals in the classroom promoting "compassion and respect for all living things" from being inserted into its policy on family planning.

In 2004, the National Education Association co-sponsored the pro-abortion "March for Women's Lives." The teachers' union supports distributing contraception through school-based family-planning clinics. It is aligned with programs recommending comprehensive sexuality education that oppose abstinence-only education, and endorse abortion, contraception, masturbation, use of sexually-explicit materials, reproductive education for adolescents and Planned Parenthood.

In the 1980s and '90's, Cindy was working as a

Speech-Language Pathologist for Spokane Public Schools and was a member of the teachers union. She served as a union representative and attended the Washington Education Association's Leadership Academy. As she read union literature and became more involved in the organization, she grew increasingly distressed.

She became aware that her union dues were used to actively promote, through our nation's political process, a philosophy of secularism and relativism (recently characterized by Pope Benedict XVI as "a particularly insidious obstacle to the task of educating") and a political ideology that undermined moral values by promoting homosexual "marriage" and abortion on demand.

She brought this to her union director's attention. He falsely told her that less than 1% of her union dues was used for political activity. She knew from reading union publications laced with partisan politics unrelated to education issues that the union was, in fact, heavily engaged in politics with union dues.

For years, Cindy was frustrated because Washington state requires nonunion teachers to pay for union representation whether they are union members or not. She felt trapped and violated. But in 1992, a phone call from a school counselor who had read Cindy's editorial column in the *WEA Action*, changed her life. Barbara Amidon informed her that teachers had the constitutional right not to fund union politics with mandatory union dues and that a group of teachers who had challenged the WEA's calculation of the representation fee had received a 70% reduction in their dues. She wondered if Cindy would be interested in exercising her rights.

Not only did Cindy exercise her rights, she and Barbara informed other teachers about their rights. They started a newsletter informing teachers how their union dues were being spent and organized a class action lawsuit challenging the union's calculation of its representation fee for nonunion teachers. (In right-to-work states, such as Idaho, forced union dues are illegal.)

In 1994, the Washington Education Association averted a class action lawsuit by granting nonunion teachers a 50% reduction in dues for two years (50 times more than the 1% claimed by her union director!). The federal class action lawsuit challenging the representation fee was filed in 1996 with the help of the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation.

Thanks to the efforts of this brave group of teachers, nonunion teachers in Washington may now object to the use of their dues for politics and receive a \$200-\$300 rebate in union dues. (The other option teachers have is to request religious objector status. Religious objectors are allowed to send 100% of their union dues to a mutually-agreed-upon charity.)

In his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) Pope John Paul II said that "the role of unions is not to 'play politics.'" When they do, he said, "they easily lose contact with their specific role, which is to secure the just right of workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society; instead they become an instrument used for other purposes."

Clearly, this has happened with the teachers' union. The National Education Association is extremely partisan. A 2002 study by the Center for Responsive Politics found that since 1988 the National Education Association had given \$21 million in campaign contributions, 95% of that to Democrats. When the teachers' union endorses some Republicans, we have observed that they stick to those GOP candidates who support the union's position on abortion.

Cindy determined that she could not support the teachers' union and stay faithful to Christ.

For years, she and likeminded educators have worked both within the union and outside the union to restore legitimacy to the spending of teacher union dues — all to no affect. Instead, they were rebuffed by union leaders with intimidation and hostility.

In fact, the Washington Education Association filed a lawsuit against Cindy and Barb in an apparent attempt to silence all teachers who oppose the use of union dues for political purposes. The suit was infuriating!

It appeared the union (and its bank of staff attorneys) was trying to bankrupt us, but we trusted God would make things right, and he did. The teacher union's case collapsed for lack of merit. But, rather than being silenced, Cindy and her colleagues took their movement to a new level.

They established Northwest Professional Educators (NWPE), a nonprofit, non-union professional educator's organization affiliated with the Association of American Educators that focuses on students as teachers' highest priority, and improving the professionalism of educators. The Northwest Professional Educators group serves public and private educators in Washington, Idaho and Oregon, and does not spend its members' dues supporting anti-Catholic agendas such as abortion and homosexual "marriage." It is one of 11 independent teachers' associations affiliated with the Association of American Educators.

Across the country there are more than a quarter of a million educators who have abandoned the nation's two largest teachers unions — the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association — to join alternative associations that provide professionalism and legal protection teachers need without the partisan politics. Some of these independent organizations are larger than the teachers' unions in their own states, such as Texas, Georgia and Missouri.

Nonunion professional organizations provide many of the same benefits as a union, but at a fraction of the cost. Northwest Professional

Educators and the Association of American Educators provide \$2 million in legal and liability insurance, attorney fees for job protection issues, professional development, teacher scholarships and classroom mini-grants, and give their members a voice on education issues at the state and federal level.

The nonunion organizations respect the beliefs and values of their members by not spending member dues on political parties, candidates or controversial social issues unrelated to education. Because of this, the dues are less than \$15 a month. Union dues, however, often run between \$600-\$900 per year due to the heavy focus on politics unrelated to representation or education and the requirement that a teacher belong to the state and national union in order to belong to the National Education Association's local affiliate.

Catholic teachers who work in the public schools, like all workers, are called to live their faith in the marketplace and the workplace. Thankfully, teachers have choices that are morally sound as well as economically beneficial. They can join alternative professional educator organizations for less cost and more legal protection.

To me the choice seems very clear, since no Catholic dedicated to the service of youth can faithfully support an organization that defends the annihilation of our young in its most vulnerable stages.

Teachers should investigate this, exercise their rights and look at their options. Teachers of faith should learn this so that they can fulfill their vocation. The public schools are desperate for people of integrity who live their faith in every area of social, professional, cultural and political life. Our young people critically need your wisdom, your example, your sacrifice, your witness.

"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him" (Deut. 30:19-20).

As our dearly departed Pope John Paul II said so eloquently in life and in death, "Be not afraid!"

*John Omlin writes from
Mead, Washington.*

Information

Association of American Educators, www.aaeteachers.org, (800)704-7799;
Northwest Professional Educators, www.nwpe.org, (800)380-6973.

For more information about teacher union politics, see www.ichoosecharity.org/why.php.
For information on workers' rights not to fund union politics, see National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, www.nrtw.org, (800) 336-3600.

www.ncregister.com