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Teachers Can Get Good Benefits without Paying Union Member Dues

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The Association of American Educators, along with the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, kicked off a back-to-school campaign this fall to inform teachers and the public about the many organizations offering them insurance and other benefits ... without paying costly union dues.

The campaign started Labor Day weekend and continues in each state, informing communities and individuals through public service announcements.

"It is a way to let employees know about their rights, and we are offering free legal aid as well," said Patrick Semmens, director of legal information at the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Springfield, Virginia that provides free legal aid to employees whose rights have been violated by compulsory union membership.

"In many cases, especially in the states in which this campaign is being waged, teachers are unaware that they do not have to join the union, and they are often unaware there are other options," said Heather Reams, associate director of the Association of American Educators (AAE). The Mission Viejo, California-based group is one of the nation's fastest-growing national nonunion teachers' associations, with members in all 50 states.

Better Deal

The two largest national teacher unions—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—promise to provide legal protection, job security, and collective bargaining for members. Currently, two million teachers nationwide are union members, and of that number, 1.3 million must pay union fees or be fired, according to a recent survey by the National Institute for Labor Relations Research (NILRR).

The California Teachers Association, the NEA state affiliate, offers up to \$1 million in professional liability insurance. Union dues for California teachers average \$57.42 per month and can reach \$1,048 per year, according to the United Teachers of Los Angeles, the city's chapter of the group.

Many teachers, however, do not realize they can get similar or better services without the hefty price tag. AAE, a nonunion professional association, offers California teachers \$2 million in insurance at an average of \$15 a month, just \$180 a year.

Candidate Support

Teacher unions seem to keep dues-paying members in the dark about how and where the money is being spent, critics say. For example, members of the Wisconsin Education Association, the NEA's state affiliate, didn't know \$1.5 million of their dues money would be used to pay for television ads to influence voters on hotly contested state Assembly races, according to an August 20, 2008 story in the Madison newspaper Capitol Times.

Dues taken directly out of teachers' paychecks are consistently given to political parties, candidates, or causes that not all teachers support. During the 2007-08 school year, the NEA set aside \$50 million to support the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential election, according to a July 5, 2008 article in The Hill, a Beltway newspaper in the District of Columbia.

"Teachers are not all the same, [and that practice] is presumptive and insulting to teachers as individuals," said Semmens.

Union lobbyists consistently oppose innovations that would increase their members' choices. In particular, unions oppose the individual's right of association and the right to choose whether to belong to a union and pay its bills.

California is one of 23 states in which public school teachers must belong to a union, and therefore must pay dues. The remaining states are referred to as "right-to-work" states, in which people have the recognized right to work without being compelled to join a union, according to the NLRB.

Mislabeled Content

No one would know this from the NEA's Web site, which describes "right-to-work" states as "states where unions can't negotiate agreements that require all employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement to pay for the costs of union representation. Such agreements eliminate 'free riders' who enjoy the benefit of an agreement without supporting or joining the union."

AAE and a similar group, the Westlake, Ohio-based Christian Educators Association, provide the benefits teachers want without coercion—and without the baggage of partisan politics. Both are open to teachers in all 50 states and are giving teachers more control over where their paychecks go. Teachers are able to speak with paralegals and attorneys through the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation.

"The Association of American Educators," Reams said, "has always found that teachers are happy to hear they have a choice."