



State “Teacher Bill of Rights” Is Needed

by Robert P. Hunter

Summary

Current Michigan law forces tens of thousands of teachers to support a labor union in order to keep their jobs. A law that allows voluntary support of unions would improve the State education system and the teaching profession.

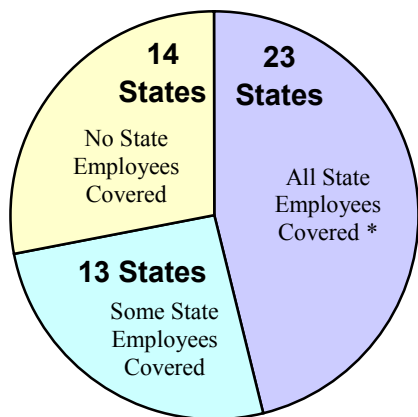
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The great majority of Michigan public school teachers pay hundreds of dollars annually to the Michigan Education Association, a labor union. They do so not as a matter of free choice, but because they have *no* choice. More and more teachers are bravely raising objections to the MEA—its practices and its politics—and it’s time for the Michigan legislature to listen to their concerns and come to their rescue.

Comments like these from Russ Billings, a teacher in Genesee County, Michigan, and member of the MEA, are not uncommon though they are not always stated openly: “The union uses our money for their pet political causes, which many members oppose, and resists any request for full and honest disclosure.” Cheryl Loss, another teacher and MEA member who teaches in Branch County, Michigan, adds, “Because they run a monopoly that relies on forced payments, union officials can provide services to the membership that are deficient and feel no obligation to give straight answers to questions about the fundamental rights of their own members.”

Michigan’s compulsory union law, the Public Employment Relations Act, is the culprit. It gives teachers collective bargaining rights, but sacrifices their individuality by vesting exclusive power in a union to represent their interests. For example, teachers who excel in the classroom and want to be judged and compensated on a merit basis are thwarted by standardized union contracts that protect and reward too many lackluster, uncreative educators.

Compulsory Unionism and State Employees



U. S. States Grouped by Type of Union Law

* Michigan teachers are included in this group.

Teachers like Frank Dame of West Branch in northeast lower Michigan, who try to limit their support of the MEA’s social and political agendas, encounter union resistance at every turn. MEA requested Dame’s confidential personnel file after he began challenging union policies a few months ago, even though the union has called for a law that would prevent parents from seeing teachers’ files.

Late last year, a group of Branch County Head Start employees decided that MEA representation simply was not worth the

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money, and petitioned to decertify the union by secret ballot. MEA officials disregarded the employees' right to talk privately among themselves about the election, crashing and disrupting employee-only meetings. No wonder that many Michigan teachers want professionalism, not unionism.

Clearly, there is a need in Michigan for a "Teachers' Bill of Rights." Its first order of business should be to grant individual teachers greater freedom to represent themselves or to choose an alternative collective bargaining agent. Mandatory union membership and compulsory dues as a condition of employment should be abolished, thereby making unions more responsible and accountable to their members. Michigan is one of only 23 states that cover all public sector workers with mandatory collective bargaining; 14 states do not force it upon *any* public sector workers at all, including teachers.

Unions should represent only those teachers who freely choose such representation in writing. Employees who want to strike out on their own may represent themselves, or even form for-profit instructional companies that contract directly with school districts. Governor Engler had it right when he told the legislature in October 1993 that no teacher in Michigan should be compelled to join or pay dues to a labor union in order to keep his or her job.

A "Teachers' Bill of Rights" would restore the timeless creed of American labor movement's founder, Samuel Gompers, who told workers, "I want to urge devotion to the fundamental of human liberty—to the principles of *voluntarism*. No lasting gain has ever come from compulsion . . . the workers of America adhere to voluntary institutions in preference to compulsory systems which are held to be not only impractical but a menace to their *rights*, their *welfare* and their *liberty*."

Schools are not factories, teachers are not line workers, and students are not widgets. The factory model of labor relations—with its legalized compulsion funded by forced dues—has failed Michigan's teachers as well as its students. Its rigid, standardized approach to employee representation only discourages innovation and creativity at a time when citizens are struggling to find solutions to improve the educational experience for Michigan children.

Enabling our most talented teachers to escape the barriers of restrictive bargaining agreements represents a new framework of employment relations—one in which educators can finally devote their time and energy to doing what they know and love the best: teaching children how to think.

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