



Some Taylor Teachers Challenge Contract

A new contract between the Taylor School District and the Taylor Federation of Teachers that guarantees union dues or bargaining fees for the next decade has drawn a lawsuit from some of the district's teachers.

Three teachers, Angela Steffke, Rebecca Metz and Nancy Rhatigan, filed the challenge Thursday in Wayne Circuit Court, arguing that the contract as approved is invalid because the provision maintaining exclusive bargaining rights extends beyond the expiration of the remainder of the contract.

"This is about our civil rights," said Ms. Steffke, a special education teacher. "This is about fighting for our freedom of association and fighting against coercion in the work place."

"People should have the right to make their own decision about joining a union," said Ms. Metz, an English teacher. "I understand our district is facing financial difficulties and the four-year contract can help solve that, but I don't see any benefit to a 10-year union clause. I respect the TFT's executive board, our negotiating team and my fellow union members, but I resent having my money used to prop up political positions and candidates I do not support."

The three are asking the court to invalidate the provision that maintains union dues until 2023, or at least to require that it expire in 2017 with the rest of the contract.

And the Mackinac Center Legal Foundation, which is handling the case, said prior court decisions favor the plaintiff teachers. The group said in a website on the case that courts tend to reject agreements that last beyond the terms of the elected officials who make them.

"(T)his decision of the Taylor school board would bind the district for the next 10 years and the courts generally frown upon current officeholders attempting to bind their successors to certain policies," the group said.

"This is a desperate attempt by the union to circumvent Michigan's right-to-work law and preserve its own power at the expense of teachers," said Derek Wilcox, attorney on the case.

American Federation of Teachers-Michigan President David Hecker said it was the Mackinac Center that was skirting the law, challenging the contract on the basis of a law that would not take effect until March 28.

"This frivolous lawsuit is just the latest example of corporate special interests trying to take away collective bargaining

rights from hard-working teachers," Mr. Hecker said in a statement. "This contract was ratified overwhelmingly by teachers and school board members, who are deciding what's best on a local level for fulfilling the mission of the district, which is educating children. Partisan politics don't belong in the classroom. It's time for special interest groups like the Mackinac Center to stop trying to intimidate local school officials and employees."

The teachers were angered not only by the separate provision to extend union membership, but also the 10 percent pay cut in the main contract, particularly in light of some other union activity.

"This is the same union that thought it was a good use of its members' dues money to spend \$125,000 on the failed Proposal 2 ballot measure," Mr. Wilcox said. "The president of AFT Michigan got a 20 percent bump in total compensation. Our clients simply don't want what the union is selling."

Union leaders also did not make the contract vote clear, Ms. Rhatigan, said a special education teacher.

"People didn't realize they could have voted down the union clause because it was a separate issue from the contract," she said. "As teachers, we instruct our students to speak out and stand up for what's right. I am willing to practice what I preach. I'm exercising my right to protest. I protest paying dues to a union that thinks working without a contract for two years and then accepting a 10 percent decrease in wages is acceptable."

Meanwhile, Rep. Tom McMillin (R-Rochester Hills) asked Wayne State University officials to testify at a March 5 meeting of the House Oversight Committee, of which Mr. McMillin is chair, to discuss its recent eight-year contract.

"This is a very unusual contract extension, and I believe students and parents struggling to pay tuition, and the taxpayers that help fund the university would appreciate hearing how this is beneficial," Mr. McMillin said in a statement. "The committee is interested in the background of this particular agreement since it appears to be the first of its kind for a university in the state."

However, Greg Bird of Wayne State, in a post on Twitter, refuting the idea that the university had somehow skirted the law, noting the law had not yet taken effect, said the eight-year deal was a new contract, not an extension, because the previous contract had expired.