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THE FINAL WORD

LETTER

Teacher: Why I left the MEA

As I studied Michigan's right-to-work law in March of 2013 and looked ahead to my retirement this coming June, I began to weigh the pros and cons of my 34-year membership in the Michigan Education Association.

Foremost was the thought of formerly being in a closed shop. In all other aspects of my life I had the responsibility of free will and self-determination. Yet in my professional career, I had been locked into an affiliation with an organization that would grow to such size and scope that it lost its original intent and purpose.

Instead of serving members, the MEA became self-serving. The top 10 administrators in the union make more than the governor, and 30 percent of its 400 employees have six-figure salaries. The average teacher in Michigan makes about \$55,000.

While our local was asked to take zero pay raises during the Great Recession of late 2007 through 2011, MEA leadership already making more than \$100,000 took double-digit wage increases each year. Those below the \$100,000 benchmark garnered single-digit raises.

Over the years I've seen the MEA become far too political. I am not sure if the politicians found the union and the money or the union found them, but this marriage was made and not in heaven. Why would any organization that has a diverse membership wish to divide itself along political party lines? This simple act, in and of itself, serves to alienate half of the membership. There is an endless barrage of political prompting to vote for their candidate or support certain legislation, even if you are soundly opposed.

So, for my 35th and final year of teaching I chose to opt out of the MEA under Michigan's worker freedom law. I could better use those funds to put toward my retirement, my wife, and my son in his final year of college.

I submitted a letter in Sept. 2013, shortly after the school year began, informing the Petoskey Education Association of my decision. I expected a hand shake and a "thank you" for 34 years of dues. Instead, I was threatened and told if I didn't pay I could be turned over to a collections agency or face legal action.

With the help of the [Mackinac Center Legal Foundation](#), I filed an unfair labor practice complaint against the MEA and the Petoskey Education Association at the Michigan Employment Relations Commission. Several other teachers around the state did the same.

We were told that the union's bylaws only allow members to opt out during the month of August. In 35 years of teaching that was the first I ever heard of it. There are 365 days in a year and they are only going to give you less than 10 percent of that to decide if you want to be in the union or not?

After much back and forth, the MEA recently agreed to recognize my rights and those of Miriam Chanski, a fellow teacher from West Michigan, to opt out. The other teachers who filed complaints at MERC still face union opposition. But at a MERC hearing recently, the MEA said there are about 8,000 teachers statewide who have not paid their dues for this year. The union developed a policy to go after these people, up to and including trying to ruin their credit.

Throughout my career, I made it a priority to work with my students and give them all the information they needed to make an informed decision. The MEA should do the same. Hopefully it will learn this important lesson from its teachers.

William Ray Arthur is a physical education teacher at Petoskey High School and member of the state and national high school wrestling coaches Hall of Fame.