
Joshua D. Brumfield: WV teacher ‘unions’ are right-to-work in action (Gazette)

By Joshua D. Brumfield

Over the years I have heard teachers complain about West Virginia teacher unions being weak and ineffective. I have heard my colleagues say the union only halfway fights for respectable teacher salaries.

Where are the unions on the current PEIA cost increase? Shouldn't they be fighting the Legislature on this? Why are we required to do more and more each year and never get any compensation for the work?

Regrettably, I find it difficult to totally disagree with some of the naysayers on this issue. I understand their frustration with teacher unions. I understand that the unions are not juggernauts like the Teamsters or the UMWA. I also understand that teacher unions, while not perfect, have made progress and have done a lot of good work for the profession. However, I believe many teachers fail to understand why the American Federation of Teachers and West Virginia Education Association have not been effective.

Look no further than right-to-work. Essentially, teacher unions in West Virginia already match RTW. All teachers benefit from union progress, yet teachers aren't required to pay union dues. Nonpaying teachers benefit exactly the same from gains the union negotiates with the Legislature (pay raises, sick days, insurance, planning time, etc.).

The point is, West Virginia teacher unions are weaker because of this RTW structure. Imagine the negotiating power teacher unions would have with the Legislature if every single teacher was a dues-paying member. Some states, such as our neighboring Maryland, have the ability to bargain collectively. This statutory authority allows unions to more effectively lobby lawmakers and pass laws that are in the best interest of teachers and students.

As a result, teachers experience higher pay, have fewer teacher shortages and most importantly have a greater overall satisfaction in their profession. Because of the overall lack of support West Virginia teacher unions receive from the teaching profession at large, it should not surprise anyone that teacher pay in this state is among the worst in the country, that we have a major teacher shortage, that lawmakers consistently pass legislation that most teachers disagree with and that the financial shortfall with PEIA, if left up to Republicans in the Legislature, will be passed on to teachers and other state workers.

The bottom line is, if workers want an effective union that truly represents their interests, then all employees must contribute. Workers should understand that RTW legislation abolishes this fundamental union principle. Once employees vote to unionize, all employees should respect the decision of the majority. This is the foundation of our democracy.

So if unions are forced to compete with limited funds against corporate lobbyists with unlimited funds, they will never get the attention of our lawmakers. The fact is, West Virginia teacher unions do the best they can without overall financial support from the entire teaching profession. The sad truth is, once

RTW passes, this will be the reality for all labor unions in the state.

Republicans are determined to pass RTW during this 2016 session, even if it requires overriding Gov. Tomblin's veto. Labor unions that have had success in the past such as the UMWA and Teamsters will unfortunately start to experience the same frustrations that teacher unions encounter. Sadly, the final result of RTW means less union bargaining power with the Legislature to make jobs more desirable for West Virginia workers.

Republicans will tell you this is about choice. They will tell you it will raise wages. They will tell you it will bring more jobs.

Tell them that the choice to be a nonpaying freeloader has directly put West Virginia teachers at the bottom of almost every category nationwide.

Tell them you understand their underlying motivation to bust all unions by breaking their financial ability to lobby. Tell them if Republicans truly cared about people and good-paying jobs, they would pass laws prohibiting the financial influence major corporations have on lawmakers, instead of passing RTW that goes after the very organizations, labor unions, which advocate for workers, not corporate profits.

Joshua D. Brumfield, of Yawkey, is an educator and former Lincoln County assessor.