

Forced-Unionism Abuses Exposed

The facts Big Labor bosses would rather you didn't hear about.

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Compulsory unionism breeds corruption. In each issue of "Exposed," the National Right to Work Committee will highlight yet another example of union-boss abuse spawned and perpetuated by Big Labor's government-granted privilege to force workers to pay union dues, or be fired.

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‘Another Nail’ in the Detroit School ‘Coffin’

In 1999, the last time Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT/AFT) union bosses ordered teachers and other public-school employees in the Motor City out on an illegal strike, 172,000 schoolchildren were kept locked out of their classrooms from August 31 until September 9.

Today, just 129,000 students are enrolled in Detroit Public Schools (DPS). Early this month, the system was once again hobbled by a DFT-boss strike.

The hollowing out of the DPS system is not primarily the result of parents and children leaving economically troubled Detroit. Nor are children transferring in great numbers to private schools. Instead, the exodus of students, which is expected to continue and even accelerate over the next few years, represents a quiet, but massive rebellion against Big Labor control over public education.

Independent-minded teachers as well as schoolchildren and parents are participating in this rebellion. Many teachers who were formerly employed in the DPS system and thus forced, as a condition of employment, to accept DFT officials as their monopoly-bargaining agents in contract negotiations and pay dues or fees to the DFT, are now educating children at one of dozens of charter public schools in the Detroit metro area.

Roughly 53,000 children from the city are now enrolled in these taxpayer-funded, but independent schools. Teacher union bosses wield monopoly-bargaining power at only a couple of them. And charter schools have existed in Michigan for barely more than a decade.

It's no mystery why Detroit parents are jumping at the charter-school opportunity to get their kids out of the teacher union boss-controlled DPS system.

The graduation rate of DPS students is an abysmal 50%, and a shocking 22% for students who stay in the system until their high school years. That's the lowest rate among the nation's 50 largest school districts. Nearly half of the DPS's 225 schools failed to meet the modest goals of the federal No Child Left Behind Act this year.

Lack of funds cannot explain the system's horrible performance. In a relatively low-cost city, public schools take in more than \$10,000 per pupil annually from state and federal taxpayers, above and beyond what they get from local businesses and individuals. Median pay for elementary school teachers is nearly \$53,000 a year, far above the national average.

Teacher union officials frequently try to pin the blame for gross misgovernance of Detroit schools on the city's board of education. In doing so, they conveniently ignore the fact that, with the exception of a few years early this decade, the board has been dominated by teacher union-boss lackeys and appeasers who secured office in low-turnout elections.

Over the years, DFT bosses have strong-armed the board into removing proposed contract provisions that would have offered "merit pay" for teachers who reliably show up for work and do an acceptable job. Union bigwigs have also succeeded in quashing board proposals to lengthen school employees' workday, now just six hours, not long enough for many conscientious employees to do their jobs. In reality, the DFT bosses, not board members or any other public officials, run Detroit public schools.

This fall's illegal strike, although it has made national headlines, represents only a tiny fraction of the harm resulting from teacher union officials' monopoly control over Detroit public education. As a *Detroit News* editorial headline pungently explained, the strike is just "another nail in [the] Detroit school coffin."

While it's a positive development that, due to the expansion of charters, tens of thousands of Detroit children who once would have been stuck in the DPS/DFT morass are now enrolled in independent schools, Michigan elected officials owe it to the children who remain in the system to fight for change.

And real change must begin at the state level. It is the Michigan Legislature that, roughly four decades ago, first authorized Big Labor monopoly bargaining and forced union dues in public education. The Legislature retains the power to roll back these special privileges for DFT and other teacher union bosses, starting with the most egregious one: the power to get teachers fired for refusal to fork over compulsory union dues or fees.

Restoring teachers and other education professionals' Right to Work without contributing to teacher union bosses' treasuries could pave the way for a host of other important education reforms in Detroit and throughout Michigan. But as long as Michigan legislators refuse to take this first step, then the teacher union boss-dominated DPS system will continue hurdling toward a complete and costly implosion.

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