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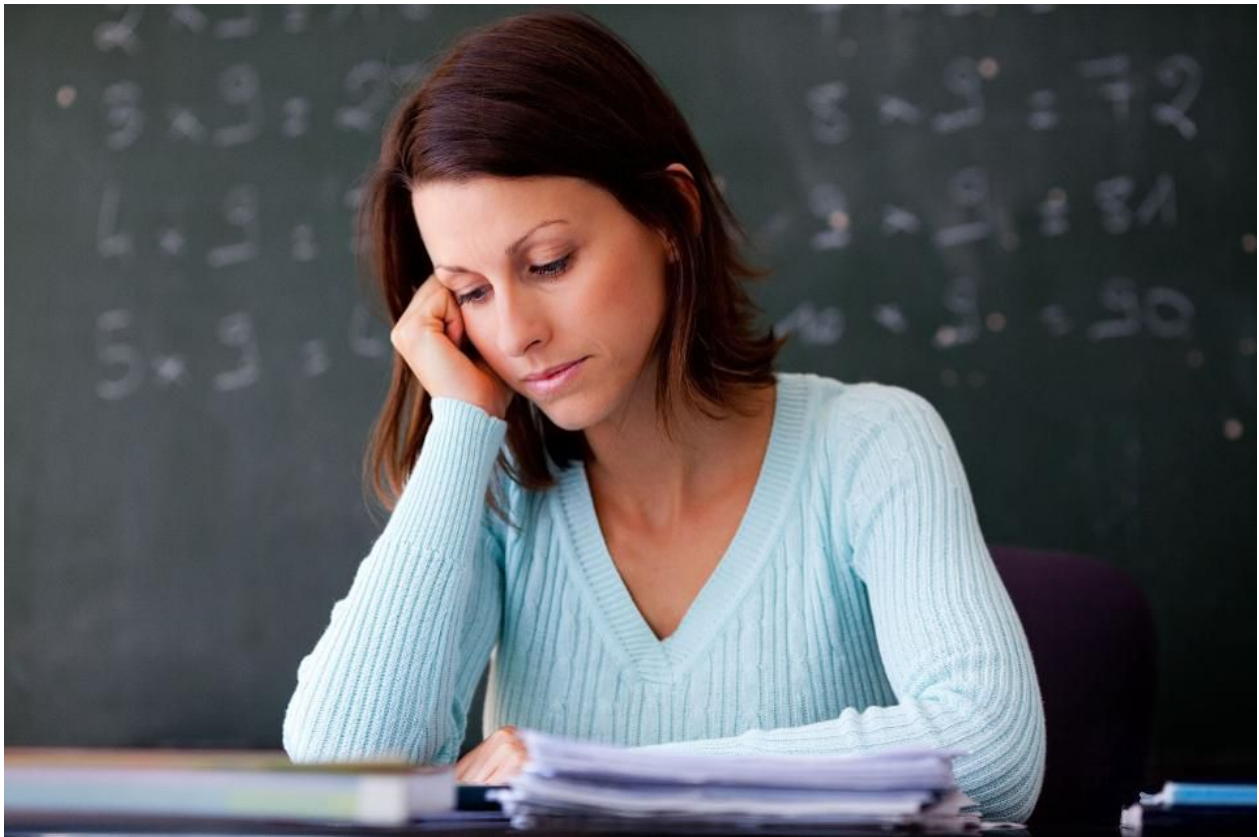
Why Do Teachers Join The Union?



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Education

I look at K-12 policies and practices from the classroom perspective.



Teacher in a classroom. (Getty Royalty Free)

The past year has brought a renewed focus on teachers unions. This was the year that saw a wave of [state-wide teacher strikes](#), a wave that continues right now in [Washington state](#). It was also the year that brought [the Janus decision](#) which threatens to extend the effects of Right-To-Work to states that have not yet seen that law come to their state capitol. And conservative groups have been poised to [launch a campaign of encouraging teachers](#) and other public employees to quit their unions, even as unions have hunkered down to work at holding on to members.

It seems like a good time to ask the question: Why do teachers join the union at all?

For some people, the teachers union is a nest of crazy leftists, people **who don't care about students** but are just in the education biz for the money. But union members represent a far more complex group. Remember, one in five AFT members and one in three NEA members **voted for Donald Trump**. Union leadership itself, when trying to exercise some political clout, has reason to promote the idea that the unions are a monolithic whole, a unified army ready to be unleashed. But that's not true for all issues. Many of the same criticisms lobbed from outside the unions are also leveled from inside it.

So what unifies teacher union members? It's this statement:

I want to be a teacher, and--

I want to be a teacher, and I need to provide my family with a decent standard of living.

I want to be a teacher, and I can't do it well when I have to constantly watch my back because I could be fired at any minute for any reason.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to work alongside people who didn't settle for my district as an employer of last resort.

I want to be a teacher, and I don't want to be forced to sacrifice my entire life every time my employer decides to have me give extra time for free.

I want to be a teacher, and I don't want to risk my family's livelihood every time I stand up against injustice or stand up for my students.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to work for someone who provides the support or resources to help me do the job.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to be treated fairly, professionally and respectfully.

I want to be a teacher, and because I cannot negotiate any of these conditions successfully as just one person, I'm joining a union so that we can work for these conditions for all of us, together.

Every classroom teacher has great responsibility and very little power. The past several decades have foisted more responsibilities on them even as they have been given less and less power to decide how best to meet the demands set for them (get those test scores up, lift your students out of poverty, make sure you're following the newest set of standards that were just handed down, etc...).

Meanwhile, states and school districts have steadily stiffed teachers financially, not just in the form of teacher pay, but in the money that is spent on supplies, support, and classrooms. The wave of strikes this year is just one measure of the discontent that conditions have stirred up among teachers. After all, a strike may be stressful and difficult, but those teachers plan to come back. The spreading slow-motion walkout that folks keep euphemistically calling a [national teacher shortage](#) is more problematic because those are people who have decided to walk away from the classroom for good. States like Wisconsin, which stripped its unions of power with [Act 10](#), are [feeling the shortage](#) acutely.

Being, or even just becoming, a teacher comes with obstacles that can make a teaching career seem unsustainable. In a well-run district in a well-run state, good administrators and good policy makers can tackle those obstacles. But those folks just pass through for a few years while a teacher hopes for a lifetime in the classroom. What are the odds that she will always be working for good obstacle-tacklers? I suppose we could trust all the bosses to benevolently tackle those obstacles, but history does not give us optimism on that score; in fact, it's the bosses who created some of the obstacles in the first place.

Some union foes see the unions as an unnecessary buffet of caviar and gold-encrusted lobster, but for those who want to teach, the union is like the oxygen supply in a submarine--critical to completing the mission (even if they haven't actually joined). It's a system that doesn't always work well, but the alternative is

millions of teachers struggling to survive on their own, with hundreds of thousands deciding they just can't do it.

Teachers do not join the union because they want to get rich or get out of work or decide elections. They join the union because they want to teach. If we could just remember that this Labor Day and all the school days to follow, conversations about the union might be a little more productive.

I spent 39 years as a high school English teacher, looking at how hot new reform policies affect the classroom.