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Teacher Walkouts Point to Failed Union Representation of Teachers

Over the past two months teachers have walked out of classes shutting down schools in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado and [most recently North Carolina](#) to protest inadequate pay, failing benefit programs – particularly teacher pensions— and inadequate teaching materials. In response to questions from CEAI members in Arizona, CEAI provided [helpful guidance for Christian teachers](#) about the risks of participating in such walkouts.

School administrators and school boards have not opposed the walk outs, so, they have been viewed as [political action taken against the state legislatures](#) rather than traditional union led strikes against an employer. It is unclear whether the walkouts have been legal. In general, parents and the public have supported these walkouts – reflecting their belief that public schools are underfunded.

Except for Colorado, the teacher walkouts have taken place in right-to-work states where teachers are not forced to pay fees to the union. The US Supreme Court in [Janus v AFSCME](#) is likely to rule in June that such fees are unconstitutional.

The walkouts demonstrate that teachers do not need unions to organize job actions and provide them with a voice. As [Education Week reported](#), the actions have typically been led by younger teachers rather than elected union leadership. Independent organizations not the AFT and NEA have taken the lead, using social media rather than union meetings to organize the activities.

The work stoppages also highlight the failure of the NEA and AFT, despite their near monopoly over the past forty years, to build the broad foundation of political support necessary to adequately fund our profession and the schools. In states across the nation teachers have low salaries and failing pension plans. For a quick understanding of this discouraging situation I encourage you to view this [three-minute video](#) and read [Doing the Math on Teacher Pensions](#) published by the National Council on Teacher Quality. To quickly see the condition of the teacher pension plan in your own state click on this [interactive map](#). The map indicates that most states

are failing in both the ability of the pension plan to provide adequate retirement benefits for teachers and in fiscal sustainability.

While some would say that this dire situation demands heightened union activism – just the opposite may be true. The teaching profession needs to be supported by a broad base of Republicans, Democrats and independents in every state. Typical union advocacy has pitted Democrats against Republicans in a long-term, no-win battle that has diminished teachers in the eyes of the public and failed to promote education excellence.

Even though I served for many years as a teacher union leader, I have grown increasingly troubled with the overall impact of teacher strikes and public demonstrations on our profession. While they may deliver short term wins, in the long haul they have failed to build broad based public support for the profession. As a Christian, I cannot help but think that the lawless mob that fashioned a golden calf while Moses received the ten commandments (Exodus 32) and the crowd calling for Pilate to crucify Jesus and spare Barabbas, illustrate that collective action frequently brings out the very worst of human nature.

Collective action and the traditional union model is probably not the best choice for a profession that relies on public support and endeavors to inspire every student to individual excellence rather than masking performance problems through collective scores.

Other models might serve us far better. Doctors, lawyers, architects and many other professions have all benefited from affiliation with associations that protected and advanced the standards and reputation of their profession while allowing individuals to negotiate their own salaries. Professional athletes have utilized a model of negotiations that promotes team excellence while allowing the very best athletes to command top dollar salaries.

A favorable decision in the *Janus* case, one that would prohibit the teacher unions from exacting a fee from non-members, may loosen the teacher union's grip on our profession, and allow us to explore other models that do not compromise the consciences and rights of individuals, but instead rewards and encourages the development of each teacher's unique gifts and skills. For the most recent information from CEAI about the Janus case and how it may impact you and your colleagues visit www.ceai.org/unions.

Prayers for the Teaching Profession – As we close out the school year and look toward a decision in the Janus case, it would be a good time for us to pray for our profession – that a system will emerge that will encourage and support teachers to achieve excellence in the classroom – and that many Christians will enter the profession and prosper as both teachers of academic content and vessels of Christ's love for our students.

CEAI is interested in your thoughts. We would like to know if you feel that union representation is the best model for teacher representation or do you have thoughts on other systems that might work better? Members are encouraged to enter comments below. Personal

comments may be addressed to the author at JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.

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