

School Reform News

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Michigan Union Misrepresented Illegal Strike Goals

By Ben DeGrow

Having uncovered a local union leader's use of public emails to organize an illegal walkout, a Michigan taxpayer activist group says the record exposes a campaign of deception.

The Wayne-Westland Education Association (W-WEA), a suburban Detroit chapter of the Michigan Education Association (MEA), went on strike for four days last October. It was the first MEA-backed work stoppage in 14 years. Union leaders garnered public support by insisting their aim was to reduce class sizes.

But the Muskegon-based Education Action Group (EAG) says it obtained email messages and attached documents they say show the union was much more interested in protecting school district contributions to MESSA, the MEA-controlled health insurance provider.

"I think the union needs to come clean about what was truly behind the strike," said EAG Vice President Kyle Olson.

Coming Clean

A local school official agrees.

"Don't be trying to tell the community you're doing something for the children when you really are trying to improve your health benefits," said Bill Gabriel, an elected trustee of the Wayne-Westland Board of Education.

The email messages at the heart of the controversy either were sent or received by W-WEA President Nancy Strachan. MEA officials declined to comment.

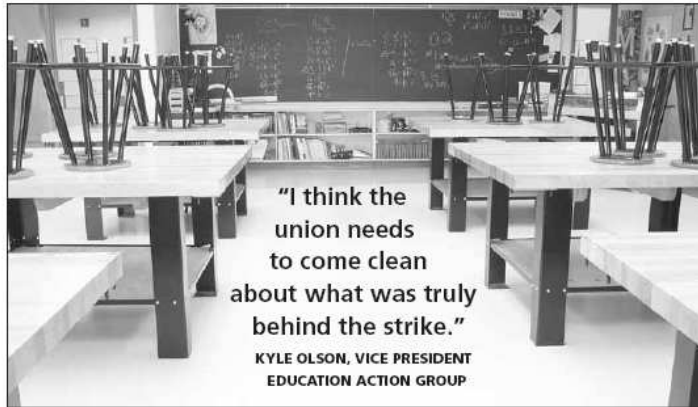
Under Michigan law, public employee strikes are illegal and can carry penalties for participating employees and for labor organizations. On October 9 a district court judge enjoined the action and ordered teachers back to work but waived the penalties. At press time the district's bargaining negotiations remained open.

Revealing Motives

On November 11, EAG submitted an initial Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the school district for Strachan's publicly administered emails.

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**BILL GABRIEL, TRUSTEE
WAYNE-WESTLAND BOARD OF EDUCATION**



"The district said they had no problems, and agreed they were public records," Olson said.

The union responded by filing suit against the school district, claiming release of the requested information would irreparably harm contract negotiations by exposing draft bargaining proposals.

A judge issued a restraining order preventing the district from fulfilling the request. The school district granted a second FOIA request by Olson in January, specifically exempting the items cited in the union's legal objections.

The email communications EAG posted online exposed the focus of union bargaining strategy. In an email sent less than three weeks before the strike, Strachan admitted, "Our goal is to drop all the HMO's [sic] and have only MESSA Choices."

EAG says districts that have switched from MESSA to private health insurance providers have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Sizing Up the Public

The emails also show numerous instances of Strachan soliciting teachers for fact-finding session testimony on "the effects of increased class sizes." Responding to one teacher who asked if the fact she "never had a class size that was overloaded" would disqualify her testimony, the W-WEA president made a startling admission.

"She admitted they bargained to raise class sizes before, and now it's the earth-stopping issue," said Olson.

In a November 2008 speech to the MEA Fall Representative Assembly, Strachan boasted of active support from community businesses, students, and their family members during the strike.

But Olson says these community residents just served as the MEA's public

face during the walkout.

"It's not just some outraged group of parents who want the best for their kids," Olson said. "It's the union trying to put the union's economic situation first."

Teaching Opportunity

Since the work stoppage, union leaders have worked with some community members to organize a recall election

against two school board members. At press time, no petition signatures had been submitted.

Gabriel believes public awareness of the MEA's agenda remains low. "I don't think citizens know there's an organization trying to control the schools," he said.

Olson hopes the Wayne-Westland strike might offer another lesson to those who press for reforms affecting one of the nation's most-powerful lobbying groups.

"The union will do anything it can to [put] its agenda first," Olson said. "Reformers need to understand that the union will do anything to stop reform."

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INTERNET INFO

Education Action Group, Wayne-Westland background and FOIA documents: <http://www.meaexposed.org/Wayne-Westland.htm>

TEN PRINCIPLES of SCHOOL CHOICE

1. Allow parents to choose
2. Funding should follow the child
3. Schools should compete
4. Empower school leaders
5. Empower teachers
6. Give parents adequate funding with incentives
7. Allow schools to succeed or fail
8. Preserve the autonomy of private schools
9. Teach democratic values
10. All parents should be free to choose

From *Ten Principles of School Choice*,
The Heartland Institute, 2004.
<http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?articleid=16856>

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