

# Unions Support Educational Progress

By [David B. Cohen](#) on December 5, 2016 1:00 AM



*This blog post is **dedicated to the vision and memory of Pat Dolan** (left), whose extensive work supporting labor-management collaboration undoubtedly contributed to the quality and improvement of schools and districts across the country. Dolan passed away November 29, 2016. I had the privilege of working with Dolan intermittently in the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN) and its California branch (CalTURN) for about four years (2012-15),*

*and always appreciated his clarity and wisdom. He could explain the ins-and-outs of labor relations in ways that felt simultaneously like a revelation and a self-evident truth, like I suddenly understood something I'd long known. As much as he knew and understood, he was always open to new learning, and receptive to other points of view, other experiences. And of course, anyone who ever saw him present or facilitate will fondly recall his illustrations and diagrams, which made his points clearer in the moment, and looked a little nonsensical after the fact, absent Dolan's running commentary. There's no replacing Dolan in our work, so we'll have to trust that his influence was strong enough to keep us moving in the right direction.*

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This past Saturday, I put in a full day's work, meeting with fellow members of my teachers' union executive board. An extended period of collaboration gave us time to take care of some immediate business, and then delve more deeply into a review of where we are and we need to go as an association.

I'm not sure what outsiders imagine we might do in a meeting like that. Perhaps they envision us plotting ways to jam the gears of education reform. They see us hunched over some diagrams or peering at our laptops as we hatch all sorts of schemes to build our political power, enrich ourselves at taxpayer expense, and frustrate any effort by our administrators to deal with the bad teachers in our midst!

And after all, we were meeting in secret, *behind closed doors*. So, as a service to the community, I'm going to pull back the curtain and expose some of the inner workings of my own union. Here's the strategizing we engaged in yesterday when no one was listening.

We're going to continue improving communications with teachers. We want to make sure that all of our members are informed about what's going on in our district, and we want to make sure they have every opportunity to communicate back to us as well so that we can represent their teaching needs fairly and accurately. Another decision we made—privately, without consulting all education stakeholders!—was to add *more social events* to our calendar. We even discussed the merits of different types of events in different locations. But not content to stop there, we then considered how to boost our member recognition and appreciation efforts. At this point we're trying to identify and acknowledge our members who go above and beyond in helping our students and building bridges with our community. (We're sneaky that way.) And speaking of the community, we came up with ideas to try to be more involved in local community organizations, seeking to expand our union's presence in all sorts of groups and settings. If our strategizing leads to success, teachers will be well-positioned to execute our grand plans... to help children, and help other community members to do the same.

Shocking, isn't it?

Sarcasm aside, I'm proud of the work of my local union, and I know teacher union leaders around the country whose union participation and leadership are grounded in the firm belief that our collective strength must be put to use in service of our profession and our students.

Beyond what's happening at the local level, my state union is doing more to support and improve education. Nearly all year long there are conferences and trainings going on, including some they can bring to our district. Quite recently, I participated in a two-day training from **CTA's Human Rights Department**, learning about unconscious bias—what it is, where we get it, why it matters, how to recognize it, and how to mitigate its effects. Our district is providing the training to all staff, including district and site administrators, certificated staff, and classified staff.

Our state union supports the **Institute for Teaching** (IFT), a nonprofit organization that promotes strength-based, teacher-driven change. While researching my book, I visited and wrote about some of the many **teachers who have used IFT grants** to fund projects giving students some powerful learning experiences; they use union backing to promote students' family and community relationships, leadership, health, innovation, scholarship, and global awareness.

If they have their way in the courts, union critics will soon create a significant impediment to our ability to carry out this work. They want to eliminate "fair share" union dues, forcing unions to represent every teacher without compelling every teacher to pay their fair share for that representation. Critics of the current system say that teachers who don't wish to support the union are compelled to be part of an

organization they don't support as a condition of employment. They're not. A teacher doesn't have to join the union, and teachers can withhold a portion of their dues that would be directed towards political activities they don't support. But I think it's reasonable, and so far the **Supreme Court has agreed (*Abood v. Detroit Board of Ed.*)** that a union with a legal mandate to represent all teachers can also require all teachers to pay for the services they automatically receive. Earlier this year, many SCOTUS observers assumed the court would overturn its precedent in the case of *Friedrichs v. CTA*, but **Justice Scalia's death left the eight-member court deadlocked**; for now, the precedent stands. Any new appellate case, and a Trump-appointed ninth justice, would likely be enough to reverse *Abood*. While we'd like to think that nearly all teachers would voluntarily pay their union dues, we also know that people in general don't like to pay for something they think they can have for "free"—especially if they know other people are taking advantage of the "free" ride. Looking to the Midwestern states where unions have recently suffered major setbacks (Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan come to mind), I'm deeply troubled by what may come to California and other strong teacher union states.

This blog post may not do much for teacher recruitment efforts, and we certainly need to **address our teacher shortage**. I hope this post motivates more teachers to work more with their unions, and I hope it gives pause to union critics to be careful what they wish for: weakened unions are not good for education, equity, or democracy.

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Photo: Pat Dolan discussing labor-management collaboration at CalTURN, by David B. Cohen