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## LABOR DAY: FEWER AND FEWER LABOR UNION MEMBERS SHARE THE HISTORY

By GARY LANDRY

As our nation prepares to celebrate Labor Day 2002, a day created by the labor union movement in 1882, a few facts have come across my desk. First and foremost, union membership is at its lowest level in 60 years. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, only 13.5 percent of wage and salary workers were union members last year and that number continues its five-decade slide as more and more American workers find that they are better off without a union.

Astonishingly, organizations sympathetic to the labor movement, paint an even more dismal picture of worker unionization. According to a report published by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), a world socialist organization founded by Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution, union membership has fallen to 16.3 million from a peak of some 22.2 million workers in 1975.

Furthermore, the report goes on to point out that while the number of union members in the United States today is the same as it was in 1952, the workforce has more than doubled since that time—from 50 million to 121 million. That leaves a rate of one union worker for about every eight employees compared with a high point of about one-in-three in 1953 and one-in-five as late as 1983.

What's worth noting is that in 2001, workers in the public sector (read, government employees) continued to have unionization rates that were about four times higher than their counterparts in private industry. The unionization rate of government workers was

37.4 percent, compared with 9 percent among private sector employees.

In Florida, one of 22 Right to Work states in the nation, the largest government employee labor union is the teachers union. In fact, upon the merger of the two independent state teachers unions in May 2000, the teachers union is now Florida's largest labor union, government or private. But even merger can't hide the fact that union membership, even among this government sector, is on the decline.

The teachers union claims to represent 122,000 teachers and other school employees in Florida. But the key word is "represent." That word cannot and should not be confused with actual number of members. The union does represent about 122,000 school employees, because the union bargains the contract for both members and non-members alike.

The fact of the matter is that only about half of the teachers in the state were dues-paying members of the union last year. As in the case with labor unions across the nation, younger workers are much less likely to be union members than their older counterparts. The ICFI report says that only 6 percent of younger workers are union members compared to 20 percent of workers between the ages of 45 and 65. The teachers union has been wailing about the rapid aging of the teaching workforce in Florida. That signals a faster decline in teachers union membership as those teachers, statistically more likely to be union members, reach retirement and younger teachers continue the trend of shunning unions.

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No place is this more evident than in Miami-Dade County where teachers union membership was at about 48 percent in October 2001, but by April of this year, had fallen to 39 percent.

Low teachers union membership rates are common in school districts across Florida where fewer than half of the teachers opt for union membership. In fact, in Calhoun County, none of the district's teachers belong to the union, and in Liberty County, only 3 percent of the district's teachers are union members.

There are many reasons why younger teachers see no value in joining the union. I believe it can best be seen by looking at the salary schedules negotiated by the union. Those schedules reward older teachers—those most likely to be union members—at the expense of younger teachers, those less likely to choose union membership.

By comparing the first ten steps of practically any district salary schedule, (a step generally equates to each year of experience) the lowest possible raises almost always go to teachers on the first ten steps, while raises—as much as 30 times more—go to teachers on the higher steps. In fact, in most districts, the total amount of money given to teachers during the first ten years of their careers, ends up being less—as much as \$3,500 less—than the amount they would have to pay in dues for the union's contract negotiating 'service' and so-called other ancillary benefits. In Dade County, for example, the union charges members \$831 a year in dues. Over ten years, that totals \$8,310 in dues. With starting pay set by union negotiators at \$32,425, and pay at the end of ten years set by the same union negotiators at \$35,950, a union member will have paid in more than \$8,300 in dues for only \$3,525 in total raises. In Duval County, dues are \$508 a year. Over the same ten year period, teacher pay negotiated by the union rises from \$30,000 to \$34,157. Over ten years, the union teacher would have paid \$5,080 in dues for \$4,157 raises.

Similar comparisons can be made by looking at the salary schedules for any district in the state. Younger teachers are obviously doing the math. Their calculations add up to their being better off without this kind of union "service."

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