

## When Teachers Unions Back War Escalation

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Region: [USA](#)

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On July 12th I received an Email from the American Federation of Teachers with a soft pink headline and an image of a heart. It said: "Pink Hearts. Not Pink Slips." That sounded nice. The text continued:

"Now is the time to tell the Senate to put our children first. The House of Representatives approved an emergency spending bill that included \$10 billion to save educator jobs and \$5 billion for Pell Grants. It is now up to the Senate to do its part and approve the same level of assistance when it returns to Washington, D.C., this week."

That was true, I suppose, in as far as it went, but horribly misleading because of what it left unsaid. Congress had not passed an emergency bill to save teachers' jobs. Congress doesn't treat such things as emergencies. This was a bill that had been sat on for half a year, and the teacher funding was an amendment tacked onto it. The bill itself served primarily to dump \$33.5 billion into escalating a war in Afghanistan by sending 30,000 more troops plus contractors. It was called an "emergency" bill purely in order to keep war spending off the books and make the government's overall budget look less imbalanced than it is.

Now, it's hard to blame teachers unions for promoting a bill, any bill, that saves teachers' jobs. The National Education Association, too, has been promoting the same bill. It's easy enough to blame the peace movement for not building relationships with the teachers unions. And no doubt the Democratic House Leadership gets the lion's share of blame for packaging teacher funding together with war funding. But there's something extraordinarily revolting about an Email that asks us to "put our children first" by escalating a criminal foreign war.

There are activists within the teachers unions and the labor movement as a whole advocating for school and jobs funding only if it is clean of war money. The National Education Association Peace and Justice Caucus and U.S. Labor Against the War are examples of grass roots movements for peace within the world of organized labor. But they have an uphill struggle. At its recent convention, the NEA voted down a proposal to support the sort of measure recently legislated in Maryland requiring that parents give permission before the military gets access to students' test results and contact information. The NEA is now on record supporting such access for the military without parental consent. Surely that's not contributing to the well being of our children, the state of our economy, or the availability of public funds for non-military educational purposes.

The cynical view on war funding bills maintains that wars will be funded no matter what, and so we should use those opportunities to tack good things onto the same legislation. If the

Senate won't pass teacher funding by itself, then the House is actually being responsible and moral by packaging it into war funding that the Senate won't dare vote against. Thus explains the cynic.

But there's another way to look at this. If war and military funding is eating our economy and our public treasury out from the inside, then we must stop it, regardless of how much more comfortably we can rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. The bill that the House passed on July 1st and sent to the Senate put three times the money into war that it put into schools, and thereby (if it becomes law) escalated a war, guaranteeing much larger expenses going forward. The same bill also advanced the cause of dismantling Social Security. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi buried in this legislation a requirement that if the Senate passes any proposals from the President's deficit commission, the House will vote on them, regardless of what they are. And we know what they are most likely to be. So, this bill fundamentally advances the transfer of our resources from retirement funding to war funding. Should the tacking on of a relatively small amount of teacher funding redeem such legislation? Isn't there another way we could fund our schools?

If war funding were separated from human needs funding in the U.S. House of Representatives, then the war funding would have to be passed, as long as it can continue to be passed at all, by the Democratic leadership and primarily Republican congress members. This process would be educational and useful in identifying who really stands where, and who deserves to be voted out of office. Meanwhile, teacher funding would pass with primarily Democratic votes. In the Senate, war funding would pass easily with bipartisan support, up until the House stopped passing it, at which point the Senate would be powerless to keep it flowing. The funding of useful items, like schools, on the other hand, would involve a tougher fight, but only as long as the Democratic Senate leadership chose to keep the filibuster rule in place. Even then, the senators deserving of unelection would be clearly identified.

As of now, Senator Tom Udall has promised to create a vote on reforming or eliminating the filibuster rule in January, but that vote could be brought about earlier if the necessary leadership were pressured into existence. And the same pressure that could eliminate the filibuster and minority rule in the U.S. Senate could also pass through both houses of Congress the funding of an educational system beyond our wildest imaginations. A movement that combined the strengths of labor with peace and justice advocates could shift the vast bulk of our public spending from wars and the military to education and other useful, non-destructive endeavors. Such a shift could fund top quality free public education from preschool through graduate school. That sounds like a fantastical dream at a moment when we're just hoping to avoid more layoffs, but it is a plausible strategy for a movement that takes a different direction.

The labor movement does not actively promote and cheer for wars the way it used to do so reliably and so self-destructively. But neither does it, by and large, oppose the single biggest pit into which we dump our hard-earned pay. At the same time, the peace movement does not sufficiently work for justice and peace in our own cities and towns. Rather than building a broad-based coalition movement to shift public spending from where we don't want it to where we need it, the peace movement tends to focus on non-binding resolutions that avoid the subject of funding and thereby also avoid the possibility of gaining allies in the struggle.

There is nothing altruistic in the idea of peace activists helping workers and the unemployed

here at home. That's how you build a movement for any political end, and that's how you keep our young people from becoming cannon fodder. There's also nothing selfless in unions advocating for only the clean funding of jobs and human needs. The wars are endangering us all and bankrupting us all and all of our children. I know people in both movements who agree with this. I don't know how to build a united front willing to take risks for it.

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**David Swanson**, special to the International Labor Communications Association, is the author of the new book "Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union" by Seven Stories Press. You can order it and find out when tour will be in your town: <http://davidswanson.org/book>.

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