

UNION PRESIDENTS MAKE \$500G, WHILE TEACHERS FACE PAY-CUTS, AND LAY OFFS



Whilst teachers across the country face uncertain situations, pay cuts, pay freezes and even layoffs, those at the helm of two of the biggest teachers unions saw their pay packets inflate by 20 percent last year, to rake in almost half a million dollars each. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association's Dennis Van Roekel, earn nearly \$500,000 apiece. Weingarten saw her pay jump to \$407,323 between 2010 and 2011 while her opposite number Dennis Van Roekel, got his salary raised to \$362,644. Other additions like paid expenses and stipends saw the salaries swell further to \$493,859 for the former and \$460,060 for the latter, making the take home between them a neat little one million dollars. Many educators have derided and disparaged the huge salaries drawn and say that it does not behoove those who are supposed to be looking after the welfare of teachers to draw such exorbitant salaries, more so since the average nationwide salary for teachers is an inadequate \$44,000 a year. Executive Director Gary Beckner Association of American Educators highlighted the ironical mismatch saying that nearly 600 staffers of the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association were getting six figure salaries. "In terms of salaries, union executives rake in nearly 10 times the average household income and far more than any teacher," he said. "Are teachers or anyone in the private sector experiencing those increases in times of financial hardship?" he questioned. Tracie Happel, an elementary school teacher in Lacrosse, Wisc., who has been an outspoken critic of the autocratic and unfair practices of the unions said that even though most school teachers live from paycheck to paycheck, the union heads have a protective padding of excessive salaries that keep them insulated from the tough lives the teachers have to lead. "It's always about the union. It's never about the teachers or students," Happel said. "When you're a teacher, you know you will not always be able to have the money for renovations on a house or go away on vacation, but it's a tough pill to swallow when you can't do those things when the people who are supposed to represent us get paid more and more every year." Happel said that she was not in a difficult financial situation at the moment, but many of her colleagues are in unfortunate situations. "They are finding it hard to pay their bills. They are having trouble with basic monthly bills." Weingarten, president of AFT issued a statement saying, "Last year, I and the other two AFT officers, as well as all management took a voluntary pay freeze. We did so because no one knows better than we do the economic distress our members are experiencing. Unlike in the corporate sector, all of my salary, benefits and expenses are fully disclosed," implying that whatever she received was above board and paid to her through a transparent visible mechanism. But John Ellsworth, a teacher in the Michigan's Grand Ledge Public Schools, told the Mackinac Center, a Michigan-based think tank, feels that it is worth the while to get the best that money can buy, because we need qualified and competent persons to represent us against an uncaring and indifferent government. "Public education is vital for the preservation and growth of our nation and its economy," she said. "Leaders of the national teachers' union try to rally people behind this truth. I wish we had people serving in government who recognized the importance of public education, but instead children and teachers need their own advocates since politicians abandon public education so readily." Tony Amorose, a history teacher with the Dearborn School District in Michigan, said that no one is resentful or envious of the salary that the union official are getting, but the difference between the salaries of the teachers and them rankles and seems unjust. He as a teacher with 21 years of teaching experience earns around \$74,000 a year but what about the others, he complains. "It would be nice if the unions held the line a bit in a show of solidarity, said Amorose. "I don't mind paying dues, but I don't see them going down with my compensation. They keep going up. I find it a bit frustrating that they would give themselves such significant salary and compensation increases." Michael Van Beek, Mackinac's director of education policy said what rankles him is not the six figure salaries and whether they merit them or not, it's the way they get it, that is not right, he feels. "These compensation levels are not based on market demand," Van Beek said. "This pay largely relies upon monopolistic collective bargaining privileges these unions enjoy, which forces school employees to financially support them. This is why transparency of these unions is so important." Ironically, even while two union leaders' salaries saw a generous increase, membership to the unions shows a substantial decrease. Kristi LaCroix, an English teacher from Kenosha, Wisc., alleged that the Unions were reluctant to conform to Gov. Scott Walker's controversial reform plan because it would have given teachers the choice to be represented by a union which would give them the ability to avoid paying mandatory dues. "They [the unions] want us to be seen as laborers and not professionals," she said. "I get nothing for my dues except them going to keeping ineffective teachers employed and treated like a servant."