

# OEA BARGAINING ADVISORY

## A Fact-Based Argument in Support of Collective Bargaining and Teacher Salaries

“And where are the others that might have stood side by your side in the common good?” -  
Maurice Ogden, *The Hangman*

A children’s poem written more than four decades ago still paints a vivid and dreadful image of a hangman busy in the construction of his gallows. He builds the scaffold and tests the twisted rope eagerly anticipating the execution of his victims, one after another. Fast forward to 2011 and the next one chosen for this metaphorical fate could very well be a public school teacher. Her crime is that she joined her union and enjoys the benefits of a collectively bargained labor agreement.

Exploiting the lingering effects of the “great recession,” a vocal minority has orchestrated a methodical and relentless crusade against teachers and the unions that represent them. They attack the agreements that establish teachers’ wages, benefits and terms and conditions of employment. They slam the decades’-old law that granted school teachers, and other public employees in the state, the same basic rights that are available to those employed in the private sector. They reserve particularly venomous commentary for what has been portrayed as excessive pay to those who educate our children.

Assaults of this type are not without precedent. In its long and proud history, the labor movement in this country has had more than its share of harsh critics. Challenging the detractors has often resulted in a fate that is anything but metaphorical. Those who have spoken out for the rights of workers have been vilified, beaten, imprisoned and martyred.

The current campaign, cloaked under the guise of fixing Ohio’s ailing economy, to sway public opinion and shift public policy against unionized school teachers is nothing more than a thinly veiled ruse to silence the voice of organized labor and to punish those who remain committed to the struggle for employee rights. “Let us break the backs of the unions,” they say. “Let no voice other than ours be heard.”

These union bashers rely on scare tactics, hyperbole and linguistic acrobatics to scapegoat school teachers, and other public employees, for Ohio’s economic problems. However, such Machiavellian tricks are unnecessary in defending teacher contracts and collectively bargained salaries. Obfuscation is a ploy of the weak-minded. On this side of the debate, we base our arguments and judgments on objective data and facts.

*Fact: Collective bargaining has served as a mechanism for improving teacher pay.*

In the decade prior to the passage of Ohio’s public employee bargaining law in 1983, the consumer price index rose by 124.3 percent. Yet, the average salary of public school teachers

increased by only 110.6 percent, or 89 percent of the rate of inflation. Put another way, for every one dollar increase in the cost of goods and services, average teacher salaries rose by just 89 cents. During this same ten-year period, those entering the profession fared even worse. With an 83.9 percent growth rate, the salaries of beginning teachers trailed inflation by 33 percent.

Conversely, between 1984, when the bargaining law went into effect, and 1994, the growth in the average salary of teachers was 60.9 percent, outpacing the aggregate inflation rate by 43 percent. Though to a lesser extent, beginning teacher pay also experienced real growth. At 53.5 percent, the increase in the average salary for new teachers exceeded consumer price increases by 26 percent. We interpret the data to mean a legitimate voice at the table is essential for improving teacher pay.

*Fact: Collectively bargained improvements in teacher pay are modest in a robust economy.*

While collectively bargained pay raises and teacher salary levels became a point of contention when the economy tanked, the critics were largely silent on the subject when it was flourishing. In 2008, the incomes of Ohioans fell dramatically. Fueled by rising unemployment and reduced work hours and earnings; the average federal adjusted gross income of Ohio taxpayers decreased by ten percent below 2007 levels. That same year, the average salary of the state's public school teachers rose by 2.3 percent.

What the critics fail to point out, however, is that from 2001 through 2007 overall income levels grew at twice the rate of teacher salaries. Over this period, incomes rose by 44 percent. Yet, teacher pay increased by an average of only 22 percent. When the numbers for the period from 2001 through 2008 are added together, teacher pay, which rose 24.9 percent, lagged behind the 29.3 percent growth in average income levels by 4.3 percentage points.

Dating back to 1986, the first year for which the Ohio Department of Taxation reports income levels, through 2008, the average income for all taxpayers grew by 142 percent. During this same timeframe, the average salaries of public school teachers increased by 108 percent. For beginning teachers, salaries rose 105 percent.

It is indisputable that many wage earners and their families have suffered tremendously since the beginning of the recession. However, it is equally clear that unionized educators do not insist on, or enjoy, the type of pay increases granted to most others when the economy is not struggling.

*Fact: Teacher pay continues to lag behind that of those employed in comparable professions.*

In a 2008 study, *The Teaching Penalty*, the Economic Policy Institute found that, on average, teachers are paid 14.3 percent less than those employed in comparable occupations. Moreover, this pay disadvantage was found to have increased over time. Looking at national data, the pay penalty was found to cut across all 50 states.

Similar studies have determined that this pay inequity exists among all public sector jobs. These findings persist even when benefit calculations are rolled into the comparisons.

*Fact: Absent collective bargaining, teachers stand little chance of achieving an adequate salary.*

One of the primary responsibilities of any labor union is to advocate for the economic interests of its members. Absent such advocacy, the financial security of school teachers would be jeopardized. As a companion piece to *The Teaching Penalty*, the Economic Policy Institute calculated that unionized public school teachers enjoy a 23 percent pay advantage over their nonunion counterparts.

In Ohio, the largest concentration of nonunion public school teachers is found in charter schools. For the 2009-2010 school year, teachers who worked for charter schools received an average salary of \$33,888. The average salary of those teaching in traditional public schools was \$56,992. On average, the salaries of charter school teachers in Ohio are only 59 percent of those received by traditional public school teachers.

In 1967, Ohio first established a state minimum teacher salary, whereby no teacher could be paid less than the statutorily prescribed pay levels. At that time, the minimum salary that could be paid to a brand new teacher with no prior teaching experience was \$5,000. Last increased in 2001, the current state minimum is \$20,000. If the 1967 amount had been adjusted for inflation, the state minimum teacher salary for 2009 would have risen to \$32,116. For 2009, the average beginning teacher salary in Ohio was \$32,389. Collective bargaining has done for teachers what the legislature has not; i.e., provide increases in pay that provide economic security.

*Fact: Annual step increases do not lead to inflated teacher salaries.*

Rooted in Ohio law is the notion that increases in teacher salaries be tied to additional training and experience. Every collective bargaining agreement in the state expands upon that idea. Locally negotiated teacher contracts capture the parties' agreement as to which training and experience levels are appropriate for additional compensation.

Some individuals, from outside the public school system, insist that experienced-based pay increases are an anathema to their belief that training and experience has no bearing on the knowledge, skills and abilities of teachers. They say, "Teachers should not receive a salary increase simply because they spent another year in the classroom." Such a view is nonsensical. It is difficult to imagine a profession where an individual with two decades of experience has fewer competencies than a novice in the field.

Moreover, the claim that the experience and training driven compensation system for school teachers yield exorbitant salaries is simply not true. In fact, a particularly ominous finding

reported in *The Teaching Penalty* is that the pay disadvantage is most severe among senior teachers.

To those who are appalled that someone who teaches small children can, in some wealthy school districts, earn an annual salary of \$80,000 to \$90,000 after working nearly three decades in the profession and having earned a PhD or 30 to 60 semester hours beyond a masters' degree, our response is this: "It is indeed regrettable that this earnings potential is not yet available to every public school teacher in the state."

*Fact: The bargaining law has resulted in fewer, not more strikes by public employees.*

Another component of this onslaught is the declaration that the right of teachers and other public employee groups to strike must be revoked. It has been asserted that public employee strikes harm our children, cost taxpayers and disrupt the delivery of essential services.

Prior to the passage of the bargaining statute, strikes by public employees in Ohio were illegal. Strikers could be fined or fired and their leaders sent to jail. This comprehensive law gave all public employees the right to join unions and to engage in collective bargaining with their employers. It also gave most groups of public employee the right to strike. Additionally, the law established rules for negotiating labor contracts and created procedures for resolving disagreements that were bound to occur once the playing field had been leveled. Simply put, the law established a set of hoops that must be jumped through before a strike can take place.

When public employee strikes in Ohio were illegal, there averaged about 60 strikes a year. The threat of job loss of striking employees and jail time for union leaders did not curb labor unrest. In 2010, Ohio experienced zero public sector strikes. Over the past twelve years, a total of 49 strikes have occurred. Fewer work stoppages have occurred over a twelve-year period where strikes are legal than in a single year when they were not.

*A perspective on the facts.*

These facts tell a far different story than the tale being spun by anti-teacher, anti-union voices. However, facts are meaningless unless people are willing to speak up and tell the truth.

The hangman had no power over the townspeople until they gave it to him. Fearful of retribution, they remained silent; always relieved when another day passed and their necks were spared from the noose.

If we do not stand side-by-side in the common good, we too shall succumb to the fate of the noose. If we do stand together, then the united voice of 128,000 OEA members will be heard. The united voice of the other 230,000 public employees who enjoy the rights, benefits and salaries gained through collective bargaining will be heeded. The united voice of 358,000 servants of the public, along with their friends, families and communities will not be ignored.