

Teachers unions trying to retain clout

By Stephanie Simon, Politico

It's designed to be an impressive show of force: Thousands of unionized teachers plan to rally today in cities from New York to San Francisco to "reclaim the promise of public education."

Behind the scenes, however, teachers unions are facing tumultuous times. Long among the wealthiest and most powerful interest groups in American politics, the unions are grappling with financial, legal and public-relations challenges as they fight to retain their clout and build alliances with a public increasingly skeptical of big labor.

"I do think it's a moment of truth," said Lance Alldrin, a veteran high-school teacher in Corning who has split from his longtime union after serving for a decade as the local president.

The National Education Association has lost 230,000 members, or 7 percent, since 2009, and it's projecting another decline this year, which will likely drop it below 3 million members. Among the culprits: teacher layoffs, the rise of non-unionized charter schools and new laws in states such as Wisconsin and Michigan freeing teachers to opt out of the union.

The American Federation of Teachers has been able to grow slightly and now represents 1.5 million workers – but because many new members are retirees or part-timers who pay lower dues, union revenue actually fell last year, by nearly \$6 million, federal records show.

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