

# **Claire Waites**

**Employee of Baldwin County Public Schools (Alabama)  
and a 2004 & 2008 National Education Association (NEA) Representative Assembly Delegate**

Testimony before the Full Committee  
U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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I would like to thank Chairman Issa, Ranking Member Cummings, and the members of the committee for allowing me to tell my story.

My name is Claire Waites. I am a resident of Daphne, Alabama and I am an employee of Baldwin County Public Schools where I hold the position of Eighth Grade Science Teacher. I am also a member in good standing of Baldwin County Education Association (BCEA), Alabama Education Association (AEA), and the National Education Association (NEA).

In 2004 and again in 2008 I was nominated and elected by my colleagues as a delegate to the national convention of the NEA. The NEA refers to its convention as its Representative Assembly (RA).

The 2004 NEA Convention was held in Washington D.C. In preparation for attending my first national convention, I attended a meeting of the local Baldwin County NEA. The president of the local at the time, Pat Siano, briefed us on what was expected of us. During this briefing, she told us about the NEA Children's Fund. The accurate name for the fund is The NEA Fund for Children and Public Education.

President Siano told us that we were all expected to contribute to this fund and that this contribution requirement was "nonnegotiable."

On arrival in Washington D.C. at the NEA Convention, we were told that we were required to attend a morning meeting of the Alabama delegation every day. Every day during that meeting, we were told by the Alabama NEA President to contribute to the Children's Fund.

Oddly, we were even told specifically how to contribute. We were instructed that we must make two different payments. In the beginning I was puzzled by the fact we had to make

two different payments and that neither of the payments were tax deductible. After all, it was a charity or so I thought at the time. It certainly sounded like a charity, and I even speculated on what they might use the money for, classroom grants, and underprivileged children.

Instead of making the contribution right away, I procrastinated for several days because my money was very tight. Every morning the Alabama NEA president would preach to us that we (Alabama NEA) needed to be 100% supporters of the Children's Fund. I soon began to fear they would know I was the only hold out especially since my local NEA President, Pat Siano, kept telling us to donate. I eventually donated the money with misgivings, and consoled myself with the fact it was for children.

Later that day, while in the restroom, I over heard two ladies from California discussing the Children's Fund. I asked them if they were required to give and the ladies told me no. They did not give to it because it is a political contribution.

I cannot tell you the rush that came over me at that time. It was a mixture of anger and stupidity. I felt as though I had been totally duped. To add insult to injury, later that afternoon, then NEA President, Reg Weaver announced the NEA would be endorsing John Kerry for President. President Weaver went on to announce the NEA Children's Fund had raised a large amount of money; and that, too would go to our friend in education, John Kerry.

I felt a wave of illness come over me like none I have ever felt before. These who were supposed to be my people; duped me into donating to a candidate I was voting against.

I immediately went out, bought a re-elect George Bush button, and wore it the rest of the convention.

In 2008, I was again nominated and elected to attend the NEA National Convention. I recounted in my mind what had happened to me in 2004 so that I would be strong and stand up to the powers that be and skip the Children's fund contribution. I was not going to repeat the same mistake!

Because of a conflict, I missed the first night of the 2008 NEA Convention. However, I arrived the next day to meet Dr. Jeanne Fox, an administrator in my school whom was also a delegate. The Baldwin County NEA President in 2008 was Saadia Hunter. Dr. Fox and I were in phone contact with President Hunter. Hunter told Dr. Fox that she had made contributions to the Children's Fund on behalf of Dr. Fox and me using the money Hunter had withheld from our travel money provided by the local. Delegates are given 80% of their travel money up front and are given the rest on the last day of the NEA Convention if they were on the convention floor 80% of the time.

I was furious about this, Dr. Fox handed me the phone and I told Ms. Hunter she had no right to do that. She could not make a political contribution in my name under any circumstances. She replied that it was not a political contribution, this was a contribution to a children's fund. I explained to her what I had learned about the Children's Fund in 2004, and that I did not want to contribute. I continued to tell her I thought making an involuntary contribution in my name could be illegal, and the two small payments (instead of one big one) also showed something improper was going on.

President Hunter replied that she did not think I was correct in my statements and would have to confer with Dr. Joe Reed, the Alabama NEA leader, about it and get back with me. President Hunter said she would see about getting my money back.

That night Dr. Fox and I went to the room in which the Alabama NEA delegation met to find the Alabama's President Peggy Mobley. We went to find President Mobley that night, but did not find her until the next morning. I explained to her my Children's fund contribution was made without my permission and I wanted my money back. She refused and told me they did not do that.

When I pressed the issue with her, she became condescending and told me that she would make sure my money didn't go to the presidential campaign. I told her once again I wanted my money back.

That same day I spoke again with my local NEA President Hunter about the involuntary contribution. She admitted that my contribution would go to the Obama campaign (another candidate I did not support) and that contributing in my name was probably illegal. She now told me (presumably after checking with the AEA) that I could not get my money back. She suggested that I should not insist upon getting my Children's Fund Contribution back because part of my travel money included an amount for the donation. I told her I still wanted my money back. Needless to say, I never got my money back.

John Hudson, an employee of the Alabama NEA, told me that my local NEA union included the Children's Fund contribution in the expense reimbursement of every Baldwin County convention delegate.

To this day, my involuntary contribution to the Children's Fund has not been returned. Instead, I believe it was used to help elect Senator Obama – which was completely contrary to my wishes. I went to the 2008 NEA Convention determined that I would not be duped into involuntarily supporting the NEA's Children's Fund. Despite my firm determination, again my money, unwillingly, was used to support the NEA's political activity fund known as the Children's Fund and political candidates who I opposed.