

I saw a news report out of Twin Falls last month that got me thinking a bit more about the current state of public employee union negotiations. Thanks to the education reforms passed by the Legislature last winter, labor negotiations between the teachers' union and school boards must be conducted in an open meetings. Until now, the teachers' union and school boards in most school districts have ducked behind closed doors to hash out their multimillion dollar deals under the cover of secrecy. Now, the two sides must meet publicly.

That led the Times-News to report in May that for the first time ever, "members of the public watched as district officials and local teachers union representatives started bargaining." What a concept, and what an improvement over the old, secretive backroom dealing method the taxpayers had been stuck with before. Today, the public can see school labor union offers and counter-offers and scrutinize what elected officials are giving and why. And once those agreements have been completed, they're supposed to be made available online.

Unfortunately, not all union labor negotiations will be exposed to the light of day. The education reforms apply to schools, but leave untouched the common practice of police and fire unions meeting privately with their city councils and coming up with labor agreements outside of the scrutiny of the public venues. Under the state's Open Meeting Law, these labor agreements can still be negotiated in private.

Such agreements contain clauses for paid time off, automatic pay increases, robust insurance coverage and retirement benefits, among other perks. For example, Boise's contract with its police officers and firefighters include automatic pay increases of 2.5 percent this year and another 2.5 percent next year. Coeur d'Alene's contract with police officers includes 5 percent pay increases for employees with standard or above standard performance reviews and 10 percent for employees who are promoted. Such agreements also bind the hands of elected officials and department leaders by dictating which employees are laid off in the event of budget reductions and which are hired, and how various police and fire stations are staffed. Evergreen clauses -- clauses that keep the labor contracts in place until they're renegotiated -- are forbidden in school labor agreements but still allowed elsewhere in Idaho government.

While the teachers' union negotiations are limited to wages and benefits, such restrictions are not in place for the police and fire unions. Those unions still use labor agreements to control many aspects of local government operation and force city leaders to accept terms that drive up the cost of government.

Property owners keep wondering why their taxes keep going up, and why their cities cost more to operate year over year despite repeated claims by local government officials that they've done everything possible to trim spending. The answer lies behind the door of city council meetings where city and union leaders meet privately to divide taxpayer riches. The Legislature ought to continue its union reforms and extend them to all collective bargaining units, not just the teachers' union.

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