

Our Point of View

BY ERIC FEAVER
MEA-MFT PRESIDENT



Rebuilding for now and down the road

Blowing up the board

Early in April, 340 MEA-MFT member/leaders from bargaining units all over Montana gathered together in Helena for our annual representative assembly and blew up the board of directors.

It was a dramatic moment in our evolving union history, the most dramatic moment since the former Montana Education Association and Montana Federation of Teachers merged 16 years ago and became MEA-MFT.

When we merged, we married two different boards of directors.

That worked. Appropriate for the moment. But as our merged union grew, the board grew, and, perhaps unexpectedly, as it grew larger it became less interactive. More directors did not mean more individual voice, more engagement, more ownership in our union, what we do and why.

Further, as our board grew larger, so did its costs.

Over the last several years, MEA-MFT has done what good governments do – worked to live within our means. We know our members are not overcompensated for what they do. And like taxes, dues matter. In

this context, we have reduced staff, staff costs, and office overhead. We have cut back the number of delegates we send to conventions of our two national affiliates. We have stopped killing thousands of trees and embraced electronic means of communication and information sharing. We are doing what it takes to devote our members' dues dollars to quality programs and services, from professional development to organizing to collective bargaining to leadership training to legislative lobbying to days in court defending member rights and core values. We must prove again and again that MEA-MFT is worth every dues penny our members pay.

So, now we have a board of 22: 17 districts, one director at large, and four officers, down from a board of 34 with more directors sure to come if our representative assembly had not blown the old board up.

Along with our officers our entire new board is elected at and accountable to our representative assembly. This is huge. With one unavoidable exception, large local affiliates, be they in one community or statewide, will no longer decide all by themselves who will serve on our board of directors.

Yes, for sure, leaders on our new board of directors will face intended and unintended challenges exploring ways to best represent our mem-

bers and local affiliates. But leaner, meaner, and more focused, our new board will confidently learn how to keep MEA-MFT at the forefront of the Montana labor movement and a bright, shining star among state affiliates in NEA and AFT.

MPEA merger?

But blowing up the board was not the only big event at our April representative assembly.

By unanimous vote, delegates adopted New Business Item #2:

At the direction of the president, over the next year, MEA-MFT shall explore piecemeal or full merger opportunities with the Montana Public Employees Association (MPEA). The president shall report outcomes to the 2017 MEA-MFT RA.

This is the first time ever an MEA-MFT governing body has directly declared support for launching merger discussions with MPEA.

MEA-MFT and MPEA have worked together for years bargaining the state employee pay plan, defending public employee defined benefit retirement, opposing so-called "right-to-work," and growing the AFL-CIO. All good.

For years we have adhered to one memorandum of understanding after another pledging interest in each other's well-being and suggesting if not promising that an MEA-MFT/MPEA merger would be a good thing, if and when, for our two unions, the AFL-CIO, and the Montana labor movement.

We shall now see if that time is all "if" or just a matter of "when."

If "when" is to come, yet another dramatic moment in the evolving history of our GREAT union.

And whereas blowing up our old board of directors had to be done regardless, our new board is far better constituted to contemplate the possibility of an MPEA merger. ●