

The History of
VOTE (Voices of Teachers in Education)
and
COPE (Committee on Political Education)
By Ross Stonefield

In 1955, shortly after the merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrialized Organizations (CIO), COPE was created by consolidating the CIO's Political Action Committee (PAC) with the AFL's Labor's League for Political Education (LLPE). This new group was tasked with “encouraging workers to register and vote, to exercise their full rights and responsibilities of citizenship”, and to engage in political education and activities.

COPE conducted research into legislative issues and politicians, organized grass-roots mobilization efforts to track the voting records of state and local legislators, interviewed and screened candidates running for office, and made endorsement recommendations to the AFL-CIO. COPE also worked directly with candidates for political office by providing financial contributions to those supportive of worker's rights.

Focusing on union members and their families, COPE led registration drives, prepared public relations and education campaigns, and created and distributed publications about candidates and their positions on the issues affecting workers' lives, such as health care, pension benefits, and safe working conditions.

Originally operating as a top-down organization within the AFL-CIO that shared information from a governing body to local chapters, COPE was later decentralized, eliminating the coordinating body for the local organizations. Local COPE chapters are still active across the United States.

COPE operates within various labor unions, including teachers' unions and is primarily focused on political activity and supporting candidates who align with the interests and values of the labor movement and those of teachers.

An outgrowth of COPE is VOTE (Voices of Teachers in Education) which has a history rooted in the recognition of importance of teacher input in shaping education policies. The organization has worked to provide a platform for teachers to share their experience, concerns and ideas, and to advocate for policies that support effective teaching and learning environments.

Both VOTE and COPE have been instrumental in advocating for policies that support teachers, education funding, and the overall improvement of the public education system. Throughout their histories, VOTE and COPE have collaborated with other organizations, engaged in grassroots efforts, and utilized various advocacy strategies to advance their goals. Their work has contributed to shaping educational policies, influencing legislation, and promoting the interests of teachers and education as a whole.

Although distinct entities, they have complementary roles in advocating for teachers and education-related issues. While VOTE focuses on empowering teachers and amplifying their voice, COPE engages in political activity to support candidates and policies that align with the interests of teachers and the labor movement. Together, they have made a significant contribution to the advancement of education and the rights of teachers and teacher unions. Both, however, are solely funded by voluntary donations. No union dues can be used for political activities.

But how and when did VOTE become so effective?

Charles A. Jerabek (July 23, 1922 – June 28, 2006) was an American politician who served in the [New York State Assembly](#) from 1969 to 1972. He represented an assembly district which included much of Suffolk County on Long Island and ran on both the Republican and Conservative party lines. In 1971, he and a group of conservative Republican legislators spent time together creating deals in order to get support for Governor Rockefeller's state budget. Four of the bills that they wrote were specifically anti-teacher. These bills included eliminating sabbaticals for a year, eliminating minimum teacher salaries, requiring state college instructors to spend a minimum amount of hours in the classroom each week, and a fourth bill, weakening tenure, which was the single most important aspect of the laws affecting teachers. In the middle of the night in 1972, all four laws were passed including changing the probationary period for tenure from 3 to 5 years. This change particularly enraged teachers.

Lynn Costello, a high school social studies teacher in East Islip, Long Island and a dedicated educator, first heard about these bills from the local newspaper "Newsday". One of the sponsors of all four bills was Charles Jerabek. His name immediately became a symbol for the events that were about to take place.

At that time, New York's unions were divided into two camps - NYSTA (New York State Teachers Association which was created in 1845) and UTNY/UFT (United Teachers of New York/United Federation of Teachers which was created in 1960). They were basically competing teachers' groups - upstate and Long Island vs New York City. These two organizations were not working together until the Jerabek bills were passed. They recognized that the bills passed because the two camps were opposing each other rather than speaking with one voice. For the first time Manny Kafka, President of NYSTA and Al Shanker, President of the UFT finally decided to collaborate and combine their political strategies after years of tension and disagreements.

In March of 1972, the two unions merged to form NYSUT. Manny Kafka originally called for a strike to protest the Jerabek bills but the Taylor Law was in place whereby each teacher

would be fined two days pay for every one day of a strike, not a good thing for teachers who were making a pittance in salary. He then came up with another idea: why not donate a day's pay to VOTE, NYSTA's two-year-old political action committee. Although VOTE was established around 1969, contributions were notoriously lacking and soliciting these funds was not easy. Even though calls from the NYSTA (New York State Teachers Association) headquarters were made, and even though friendly legislators tried to intervene, the bills were passed. In 1970, contributions to VOTE state-wide were \$7500 with the East Islip local raising only \$150. But once Jerabek's name and everything he stood for was attached to the VOTE campaign, teachers finally came through. In 1971, East Islip raised \$15,000, two other Suffolk County locals raised over \$22,000 each and there was a state-wide total of around \$600,000 - quite a turn-around.

Recognizing that every politician needs money to run his/her campaign, the union leaders knew what to do with the funds that were raised. With a war chest in hand, the 1972 political campaigns were in their sights. Of course, they would be using most of these funds to support sympathetic candidates throughout the state. But Lynn Costello knew that at least a portion of the funds was going to be used to defeat Jerabek. Never before did teachers have the political clout to remove a politician, yet Costello knew he had to prove that there would be payback for hostile legislators. Jarabek had always run as a Conservative but also had the Republican Party backing. Through discussions with Republican Party leaders, donations from the war chest, and lots of political wrangling, Costello and his colleagues made sure that Jerabek was not endorsed by the Republican Party who would run another candidate, John Cochrane, for the office. Though the teachers never endorsed Cochrane directly or donated to his campaign, they did donate \$20,000 to the Islip Republican Committee which used those funds to help elect their endorsed candidate. Jerabek had to run solely on the Conservative ticket. Costello and other Suffolk County teachers unions organized phone banks, rallies and fund raising, and spent the campaign season supporting the Republican Party candidate who was now somewhat more sympathetic to teachers. The results of the November election were finally in - Cochrane, the Republican had 14,220 votes, Morrison, the Democrat had 9,161 votes and Jarabek received a paltry 7,651 votes - he was defeated! After the election, Jerabek went to work in state government but he never ran for a political office again. In the not so distant future, all four Jerabek bills were overturned. Teachers learned a new lesson: NYSUT had power and that donations to VOTE and to COPE could make a real impact.

Today:

We know that powerful corporate interests are still trying to weaken teacher unions. They continue to try to reduce our pensions, remove tenure, reduce salaries, cut aid to public schools and universities and minimize our impact at every turn. However, we know that VOTE/COPE funds continue to be the only way we can counter these attacks. VOTE/COPE is funded only by voluntary donations and up to 40% of a local's contribution is rebated for local political action. This is how we show our political clout. This is how we fight for children. This is how we show that educators are not to be taken for granted. This is how we win!

*Footnotes:

Lynn Costello, communication with author, October/November 2023

Gaffney, Dennis (2007) "Teachers United; The Rise of New York State United Teachers"

New York State Teachers Association (1932) Educational Monograph

Taft, Philip (1974) "United They Teach; The Story of the United Federation of Teachers"

The University of Maryland Library Archives