

Freedom Foundation and Opt Out Today backgrounder

Opt Out Today is a deceptive marketing campaign from the Freedom Foundation, a corporate-backed front group from Washington state that has a long history of attacking workers and opposing public education.

The goal of groups like the Freedom Foundation is simple – to divide us so they can undermine trust in our public schools and our union so educators will drop their union membership.

The Freedom Foundation is funded by wealthy corporate foundations, including groups affiliated with the billionaire Koch family. The foundation's agenda is clear: weaken public-sector unions and swing the balance even more in favor of corporations and wealthy CEOs.

The group has actively opposed measures that would benefit workers, such as raising the minimum wage, implementing paid sick leave and increasing retirement security.

The Freedom Foundation released a 42-page report in 2014 attempting to convince policymakers that mandatory paid sick leave policies were bad for business and workers. Its founder, Bob Williams, also helped write a "toolkit" on shrinking state governments by cutting employee pensions, raising the retirement age and health insurance costs, and delaying raises.

The Freedom Foundation also associates with, and in some cases participates in, discriminatory and hateful activities targeting people of color, women, immigrants and LGBTQ+.

While working as the Freedom Foundation Oregon Director, Anne Marie Gurney wrote in a personal blog: "We all know there were good and bad slave owners, just like there are good and bad dog owners."

Funders and backers

There's big money behind the Freedom Foundation's failed attack on workers.

The Freedom Foundation is part of the State Policy Network, a nationwide web of dark money front groups with the self-proclaimed goal to "defund and defang unions." SPN operates think tanks in 49 states that receive funding from national foundations to push an extreme agenda often not supported by voters in those states.

Funders of the Freedom Foundation include:

- The Bradley Foundation is a Wisconsin-based organization with a \$900 million war chest. It spends millions of dollars a year to end defined-benefit pensions for public employees and privatize our public schools across the nation. Former Enron executive and hedge fund manager John Arnold started the foundation.
- The Murdock Trust uses its \$1.3 billion in assets to give millions to anti-worker and anti-LGBTQ groups including The Alliance Defending Freedom, a hate group that backed North Carolina's anti-transgender "bathroom bill" and gay conversion therapy providers.
- Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund enable anonymous donors to give untold amounts of money to extreme causes across the country. Billionaires like the Koch family have used Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund to funnel their millions to groups promoting attacks on unions, climate change denial and Islamophobia.
- Sarah Scaife Foundation is based in Pennsylvania and uses its nearly \$600 million in assets to give to anti-immigrant and white supremacist organizations including the Center for Immigration Studies, a known hate group whose leadership has ties to white nationalism and racist groups.

Opt out tactics

Operatives from the Freedom Foundation/Opt Out Today have been trying, and failing, for years to destroy unions by harassing workers about their union membership.

They send emails and sometimes dozens of postcards urging educators and other public employees to drop their union membership. And they've contacted local presidents trying to get them to disband their local union – it didn't work.

The Freedom Foundation has even hired people to show up to workers' homes and offices unannounced. Some people have reported that they lied about their identity, claiming they are representatives from the union while trying to coerce members to sign paperwork.

During the last two and a half years, educators pulled together in more ways than we can count to make sure that students got the support they needed and everyone stayed safe. Our unions were a major resource for bargaining, teaching materials and best practices around safety. Don't forget. We are more powerful and can make positive changes in our schools and communities when we have a collective voice.