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Teachers' Union Shuns Obama Aides at Convention

By **SAM DILLON**

NEW ORLEANS — For two years as a presidential candidate, [Barack Obama](#) addressed educators gathered for the summer conventions of the two national teachers' unions, and last year both groups rolled out the welcome mat for Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#).

But in a sign of the Obama administration's strained relations with two of its most powerful political allies, no federal official was scheduled to speak at either convention this month, partly because union officials feared that administration speakers would face heckling.

The largest union's meeting opened here on Saturday to a drumbeat of heated rhetoric, with several speakers calling for Mr. Duncan's resignation, hooting delegates voting for a resolution criticizing federal programs for "undermining public education," and the union's president summing up 18 months of Obama education policies by saying, "This is not the change I hoped for."

"Today our members face the most anti-educator, anti-union, anti-student environment I have ever experienced," Dennis Van Roekel, president of the union, the National Education Association, told thousands of members gathered at the convention center here.

[President Obama](#) and Mr. Duncan have supported historic increases in school financing to stave off teacher layoffs while seeking to shake up public education with support for [charter schools](#), the dismissal of ineffective teachers as a way of turning around failing schools, and other policies. That agenda has spurred fast-paced changes, including adoption of new teacher evaluation systems in many states and school districts, often with the collaboration of teachers'

unions.

But it has also angered many teachers, who say they are being blamed for all the problems in public schools.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Duncan played down the tensions. "I have great respect for the leadership of both unions," he said. "We're trying to push a lot of change, and we've seen extraordinary breakthroughs in the last 18 months. But we won't agree on every issue."

He noted the considerable range of views among union leaders nationwide. "Some state and local unions are very thoughtful and progressive and are embracing innovation," he said. "Others are more entrenched in the status quo."

Still, administration officials are concerned about the souring relations, and have been working to ease tempers, partly by emphasizing what they consider to be positive leadership by teachers' unions in some regions.

"The administration is aware of the anger and wants to do whatever they can to cool it off, including getting third parties to issue words of praise for the unions when warranted," said Chester E. Finn Jr., a Republican who last month used his influential education blog, [Flypaper](#), to highlight the forward-looking positions taken by union leaders in Delaware, Tennessee and six other states. Mr. Finn said he decided to write the post after an administration official pointed out how many local unions had helped lead overhaul efforts.

Better relations are important to the administration. Mr. Van Roekel's association, with more than three million members, says it spent \$50 million in 2008 to help elect the president and more than 50 candidates for Congress and governors' offices, most of them Democrats.

The [American Federation of Teachers](#), with 1.4 million members, also spent millions of dollars to help elect Mr. Obama and other candidates in 2008.

"If the teachers sit on their hands this fall, it would be a disaster for Obama and the Democrats," said Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation who has studied the teachers' unions.

In a skirmish last week over federal education financing, the administration and the teachers'

unions were bitterly at odds. Last year, Congress approved \$100 billion in education stimulus funds, about half of it to help states avoid school layoffs.

With that money now running out, House Democrats proposed spending \$10 billion more to shore up school district budgets, paying for it, in part, with \$800 million in cuts to Race to the Top and two other competitive grant programs Mr. Duncan created to spur his initiatives. Mr. Duncan and the White House supported the \$10 billion in new spending, but objected to trimming the grant programs, infuriating union leaders.

“For the [Department of Education](#) to say, ‘Everybody else has to sacrifice, but our pet programs must be spared’— that makes me so angry I don’t even know how to say it,” said [Randi Weingarten](#), president of the American Federation of Teachers, which has often been more supportive of administration initiatives than the National Education Association .

E-mail messages pleading for the jobs measure rained down on Congress from thousands of union teachers, and despite a veto threat by the White House, Democrats in the House voted overwhelmingly on Thursday to create the \$10 billion school jobs fund and to trim Mr. Duncan’s grant programs. The bill must be reworked by the Senate. On Friday, Mr. Duncan shrugged off what appeared to be an administration setback, expressing confidence that lawmakers would eventually find a way to spare Race to the Top.

One group that helped the administration defend Race to the Top was the New Teacher Project, a nonprofit that has pressed for changes in the way teachers are evaluated. Timothy Daly, its president, said the angry rhetoric from union leaders now was less important than the long-term changes the administration has begun to coax from them.

“Sometimes union leaders need to show their members that they are vociferously pushing back,” Mr. Daly said. “But in several areas of the country the unions have come quite a distance.”

As examples of what he called innovations that unions have recently supported, Mr. Daly pointed to a “revolutionary” new contract for teachers in Washington, D.C., a far-reaching state law overhauling teacher tenure passed in Colorado with Ms. Weingarten’s support, and a new contract in New Haven, under which tenured teachers who are ruled ineffective and do not improve may be fired.

“Teachers are like anybody else, we don’t want to make changes,” said David Cicarella, president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, who helped negotiate that contract. “But those days are over. The public is sick of hearing that an ineffective teacher has tenure, that you can’t touch them.”

Here in New Orleans, many state and local teachers’ union leaders have expressed ambivalent views on the Obama administration.

“We have to recognize that with Obama we have a voice in the decision-making, they listen to us,” said Earl Wiman, president of the Tennessee Education Association. But he added, “Mostly what we’ve seen out of this administration is a top-down, put-your-thumb-on-somebody kind of philosophy, and it’s aroused more frustration around federal education policy than I’ve ever seen.”