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Peter Dreier

Kelly Candaele

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BUSINESS WOULD HAVE ITS WAY

MISLEADINGLY LABELED THE 'PAYCHECK PROTECTION ACT,' IT'S AN ASSAULT ON ALL LIBERAL CAUSES, NOT JUST UNIONS.

By PETER DREIER, KELLY CANDAELE. Los Angeles Times. May 28, 1998

A majority of California voters next week support Proposition 226, dubbed by proponents the "Paycheck Protection Act," organized labor won't be the only constituency dealt a fatal blow. Environmentalists, senior citizens, advocates for children and the disabled, supporters of affordable housing, civil rights and women's rights groups and champions of public education also will find themselves much weaker politically.

The reason is simple. Organized labor has more resources--both money and members--than any other liberal group to use in helping to elect candidates sympathetic to progressive causes. If unions are eliminated from the political equation, big business will gain long-term control of California politics.

If passed, Proposition 226 would bar unions from using any member's dues for political purposes--TV ads, direct mail, lobbying, campaign contributions and get-out-the-vote efforts--unless the union received written consent from the member each year.

In 1992, voters in Washington state passed a similar measure. Since then, unions' political contributions have declined by 40%. In 1994, conservatives took control of the state's Legislature and changed the state's congressional delegation from Democratic to Republican, including several right-wing extremists.

The last time the unions faced this kind of assault was in the 1950s. Business groups attacked unions by placing so-called "right to work" initiatives on the ballots in six states. These measures were designed to destroy unions by allowing employees to benefit from the gains of union contracts--shorter work hours, increased wages and health benefits--without having to pay dues or even join a union.

The most visible battle took place in California in 1958. At the beginning of 1958, polls showed that the average California voter favored the concept of "right to work," a phrase that was as vague as it was politically clever. The state AFL-CIO mounted a grass-roots campaign, forging alliances with civil rights, religious and community leaders and linking labor's fate with the preservation of Social Security, increases in the minimum wage and support for public education.

With the help of Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, who won an overwhelming victory in the governor's race that year, "right to work" lost by a 2-1 margin, winning in only five of California's 58 counties.

The union movement, which reached a peak of representing 35% of the labor force in the mid-1950s, allowed American workers, especially blue-collar workers, to share in the post-World War II prosperity and join the middle class. Union pay scales even helped boost the wages of nonunion workers. In California, unions played a major role in pushing for the state's once-great system of public higher education, safer workplaces, more affordable housing and a cleaner environment.

Since the mid-1970s, however, in California and elsewhere, the majority of workers have seen their incomes decline, hit by corporate downsizing and layoffs, an increase in temporary and part-time work and the export of good jobs overseas to low-wage countries. The erosion of America's labor movement is the chief reason for the declining wages and living standards and the nation's widening economic disparities. Union membership has declined to 15% of the work force--the lowest since the Depression.

The labor movement today is seeking to rebuild. New leaders have placed renewed emphasis on recruiting new members and

mobilizing them in political campaigns. It played a key role in defeating Clinton's "fast track" trade proposal and in pressuring Congress to raise the minimum wage. Around the nation, unions are waging grass-roots campaigns--like the successful effort in Los Angeles last year--to enact local "living wage" laws to boost pay for employees of private firms with government contracts.

Business and right-wing groups are pushing versions of the "Paycheck Protection Act" in 19 states as part of a counteroffensive designed to throttle the labor movement's comeback. They view California as an opportunity to test their message and strategy in a major state before they seek a showdown in Congress, where House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott have insisted that the measure be included in any campaign finance reform bill.

Republicans know that if unions are out of the picture, the GOP will have an easier time regaining control of the state Legislature and congressional redistricting after the 2000 census, which, with California's 55 seats, will be key to controlling the House.

Proposition 226 would not require corporations to get shareholders' approval before making political contributions. But business interests already outspend labor 10 to 1 in state races, not including corporate-dominated "soft" money. Nor would Proposition 226 require groups like the National Rifle Assn., the Christian Coalition, the California Medical Assn., the Sierra Club or other voluntary organizations to get members' OK before spending their dues money for political purposes. Proposition 226 is aimed only at organized labor, because conservatives know that without labor's political participation and financial resources, other liberal groups will be virtually powerless.

On the surface, Proposition 226 has an obvious appeal. Why shouldn't members be able to decide whether unions can use their dues for political purposes? In fact, union members already have the right--confirmed by the Supreme Court's 1988 decision in Beck vs. the Communication Workers of America--to prevent their money from being used to support labor's political goals.

Unions have to persuade enough voters that the labor movement is not simply a narrow special interest group, but is a key political force in protecting the middle class and the poor from corporate America's assault on their living standards.

Right now, unions are going from workplace to workplace explaining the potential impact of Proposition 226 to the long-term interests of rank-and-file members. But if Proposition 226 passes, it would affect more than how unions use their members' dues. It could weigh heavily on the future of California and national liberal politics.

Credit: Peter Dreier is a professor of politics and director of the Public Policy Program at Occidental College. Kelly Candaele is an elected trustee of the Los Angeles Community College Board

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