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EDUCATORS NEED TO JOIN LABOR'S FIGHT AGAINST PAYCHECK PROTECTION LAWS

By Kelly Candaele, Peter Dreier. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 22, 1998. Vol.44, Iss.37

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, conservative groups, business leaders, and their Republican allies in Congress and state legislatures are on the warpath against organized labor. Their chief weapon is the so-called "Paycheck Protection Act," versions of which are being considered in Congress and in 19 states so far; a similar measure became law in Washington State in 1992.

The act would bar unions from using any member's dues for political purposes such as for television ads, direct mail, lobbying, campaign contributions, and get-out-the-vote efforts—unless the union received written consent from the member each year. If Congress passes the act, it will essentially eliminate labor's political influence in the United States; similar results would occur in any state that passed such a measure.

Why should higher education care?

Consider what has happened in Washington State since 1992, when voters passed a measure similar to the Paycheck Protection Act. During the past six years, political contributions made by the Washington Education Association have fallen by 80 per cent, and those made by unions belonging to the state A.F.L.-C.I.O. have declined by 40 per cent. State support for public education also has declined significantly, according to Bob Maier, a lobbyist for the W.E.A. And in the 1994 elections, conservatives were able to take control of the Legislature and to help change the state's Congressional delegation from overwhelmingly Democratic to overwhelmingly Republican.

The lesson, then? That passage of the Paycheck Protection Act would devastate not only labor, but other liberal constituencies as well, such as supporters of public schools and higher education, environmentalists, senior citizens, and advocates for civil rights, children, and the disabled.

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 education and other progressive causes. (Of the 13 million union members nationwide, each individual typically contributes about \$20 a year for political purposes.) If labor is eliminated from the political equation, Republicans and conservative Democrats will gain long-term control of Congress and most state legislatures. In reality, the only thing the Paycheck Protection Act protects is corporate profits and conservative politicians.

On the surface, the act has an obvious appeal. Why shouldn't union 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 v. Communication Workers of America*—to prevent their money from being used to support labor's political goals. Any worker represented by a union has the right not to pay that portion of his or her dues that supports political activities.

The Paycheck Protection Act would not, however, require corporations to get shareholders' permission before making campaign contributions or paying for lobbyists. Yet business interests already outspend labor in federal elections. In the 1996 election cycle, corporations spent 11 times as much "hard" money—direct donations to candidates—as unions did. In terms of "soft" money—contributions to political parties and committees—the ratio was 19 to 1.

Nor would the act require groups such as the National Rifle Association, the Christian Coalition, the Sierra Club, the American Medical Association, the Chamber of Commerce, or other voluntary organizations to get members' permission before spending their dues for political purposes. The Paycheck Protection Act 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.

REPUBLICANS understand that labor's political clout is key to Democratic hopes of regaining a majority in Congress. As part of its efforts to rebuild itself after decades of decline, labor played a key role in helping to re-elect President Clinton in 1996 and in narrowing the Republican margin in Congress, partly by spending about \$35million for televised "voter education" ads in key Congressional districts. Since then, labor helped defeat Mr. Clinton's "fast track" trade proposal and successfully pressured Congress to raise the minimum wage. With more Democrats in Congress, unions would push for an even wider agenda-an agenda that would include national health insurance, stronger workplace-safety laws, and more support for public education, for example.

Now, as part of a counteroffensive designed to throttle the labor movement's political comeback, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott are insisting that a federal version of the Paycheck Protection Act be included in any new campaign-finance-reform bill.

The last time that unions faced such an assault was in the 1950s. At that point, the labor movement was bigger and more powerful than it had ever been, representing more than a third of American workers. Business groups attacked the unions by placing so-called "Right to Work" initiatives on the ballot in six states. Those measures were designed to destroy unions by allowing employees to benefit from the gains of union contracts-shorter working hours, increased wages, and health benefits-without having to pay dues or even join a union.

The most visible battle over "Right to Work" took place in California in 1958. Passage of the initiative in such a populous state would have dealt a crushing blow to organized labor, so unions went to unprecedented lengths to insure its defeat. At the beginning of 1958, polls showed that the average voter in California was in favor of the concept of "Right to Work," a phrase that was as vague as it was politically clever. The state A.F.L.-C.I.O. mounted a grassroots campaign, forging alliances with civic, 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 (Pat) Brown, who won an overwhelming victory in the election for Governor that year and who went on to create California's extensive system of higher education, "Right to Work" lost by a 2-to-1 margin, winning in only five of California's 58 counties. This year, California once again is a key battleground in an orchestrated effort designed to limit labor's power. Proposition 226, a state-level version of the Paycheck Protection Act, will appear on the ballot next month. Conservatives view the proposition as an opportunity to test their message and strategy in a major state before they seek a showdown in Congress.

The local consequences of the proposition's fate are important, too. In 1996, California's unions played a key role in the state's legislative races. The unions mobilized members in a broad grassroots effort, helping Democrats win in key districts and restoring thin Democratic majorities in both houses of the Legislature. Since then, the Democrats have been able to expand the state's budget for education, approving the construction of a new campus for the University of California system, reducing some fees for college students, and preventing the diversion of funds from higher education to build six new prisons.

For California Republicans, Proposition 226 is more than a way to undercut union influence. Without labor's political support, Democrats will be hard-pressed to maintain their control of the Legislature, or to elect a Democratic governor this fall, when Pete Wilson's term ends. And whatever party controls the Legislature in 2001 will control the Congressional redistricting process.

California's unions have an uphill battle in their fight against Proposition 226. A recent statewide poll found that 60 per cent of people who said they would probably vote in the election supported the measure, after pollsters read them the wording. Even union members endorsed it by a similar margin.

The fight will be won or lost on television, which is where most voters get the bulk of their information. But labor also can have an impact by mounting an aggressive grassroots effort that reaches beyond its own members and links opposition to Proposition 226 to a larger vision of the future. That vision should include more public investment in education, greater protection of the environment, a higher minimum wage, and an end to attacks on immigrants and affirmative action.

In California and elsewhere, unions have to persuade enough voters that the labor movement is not simply a specialinterest group, but a key political force in protecting members of the middle class and the poor from corporate America's assault on their living standards.

EDUCATORS-whether or not they are union members-should oppose Proposition 226 and other forms of the Paycheck Protection Act. Organized labor has long been a champion of public education, lobbying for smaller class sizes, scholarships, improved facilities, and higher salaries for university employees. Faculty members, students, and college administrators need to help mobilize opposition to Proposition 226 and similar legislation, explaining to their friends, colleagues, and anyone else they

can reach that these laws will do great harm to higher education.

Liberal groups need to recognize that without a strong labor movement, their own agendas and causes are much less likely to succeed. Leaders of educational associations need to play a significant role in the fight against Proposition 226. If voters pass it, the act would do more than prevent unions from using members' dues for political purposes. It could lead to the death of liberal politics in California-and its ramifications could quickly echo across the United States.

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