

Nevada labor defeats paycheck protection

Labor defeat averted

by Alison Reardon

“Follow the money,” says Deep Throat to Washington Post Reporter Woodward in my favorite quote from the movie *All the President’s Men*. Deep Throat and Woodward are in a dark parking garage discussing the Watergate break-in and disclosure of the Republican Party’s campaign funding. More than any other event in recent politics,

workers paychecks and improve them would grind to a stop.

Why is this anti-labor movement happening now? In 1996, under the newly-elected leadership of President John Sweeney, the AFL-CIO targeted anti-worker legislators running for election. The efforts of the AFL-CIO did not go unnoticed, garnering the wrath of the Republican Party and, more importantly, wealthy anti-union businessmen. The result: in the last year ballot initiatives have been sponsored in 13 states by right-wing factions of the Republican Party or allied organizations to stop unions from participating in the political process

The attack on labor in Nevada

In Nevada, one of the “paycheck protection” measure’s biggest backers was Sheldon Adelson, who is building a huge hotel and casino in Las Vegas. Adelson, a multi-billionaire whose wealth comes from his sale of his computer business, earns more interest per hour than most of us make in annual salary. Adleson, who has also vowed to bust the Culinary Union in Las Vegas, pledged to spend \$2 million of his own money to see ‘paycheck protection’ become law.

In fact, in 1996 corporations spent \$11 for every \$1 unions spent for political purposes. However, corporate America is not suggesting that every stockholder sign an authorization for political contributions from those corporations. If unions have to ask their members if money should be spent on politics, shouldn’t corporations and other groups that spend money on politics do the same? The rules should apply to all groups equally – not just unions.

Unions in Nevada already operate under a handicap. Nevada is a ‘Right to Work’ state where there are no compulsory union dues. Employees join unions voluntarily and therefore pay Union dues voluntarily. (In states where unions may negotiate agency / closed shops, federal law requires unions to separate their political money from other expenses. If members request, that portion of their dues will be refunded).



Impact Visuals

Watergate revealed to the American people the connection between money and politics. Interestingly, in the 1990s it has been the political Right that has called for “stopping the money” affecting elections. However, conservatives don’t want all money stopped, only money from labor unions. Sponsors of so-called “paycheck protection” measures use this catchy sound-bite title to package their ballot initiatives, which require all union members annually sign cards declaring what portion of their dues can be spent for political purposes. In Nevada this summer, a “paycheck protection” initiative was narrowly averted from being placed on the ballot. It’s funny, though; if ‘paycheck protection’ passed, the work unions do every day to protect

AFL-CIO fights back

The Nevada AFL-CIO mounted a significant effort to counter the 'paycheck protection' initiative. First, a Political Action Committee (Nevadans for Fairness) consisting of labor and political leaders formed to lead the fight. Some business leaders also joined when they saw that businesses would be responsible for the paperwork on the deductions. Second, labor drafted a counter-initiative to require full disclosure of all campaign contributions from all sources to all candidates. Third, we filed a legal challenge to the Republican initiative.

We gathered enough signatures to place our full disclosure initiative on the ballot. And a week before the filing deadline, Las Vegas Superior Court Judge Levitt declared that the Republican initiative violated the state Constitution. To stop a Republican appeal, Nevadans for Fairness agreed to withdraw the full disclosure initiative. Although a victory for us, it was disappointing to drop our initiative. But we live to fight another day.

Member involvement

In this process we learned that Unions need to educate and involve their own members more. The State of Nevada Employees Association/AFSCME, the union I work for, has a flat dues structure in which all members pay \$21.63 per month. Of that, only 75 cents per month (\$9.00 annually) is deposited into our union PAC for political contributions to pro-labor candidates we have endorsed. Members decide the amount of that contribution and who will be endorsed. Our union is not unusual. Every union of which I have been proud to be a member (Machinists, Laborers, and the American Federal of State County, and Municipal Employees) are all democratic — it's up to members to be involved. The problem has always been, will members involve themselves in their union? Too often the answer is NO.

However, less than 15% of the American workforce is unionized. Worse, now more than ever, some union members vote against their own interests. A growing percentage of union membership votes Republican.

Unions historically supported Democratic candidates because Democrats, more than Republicans, support working people. This is

true in Nevada. Here, state workers are the only group of employees prohibited from entering into collective bargaining agreements. In 1997, the Republican-controlled State Senate killed an attempt by Democrats and labor to change that.

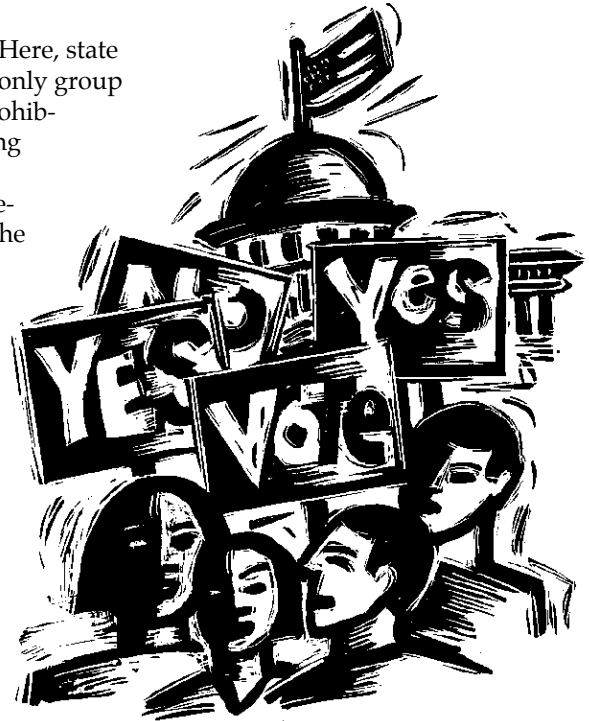
Or look at the pro-employee legislation passed while Democrats controlled Congress:

the 40 hour work week (Federal Fair Labor Standards Act or FLSA), job safety laws and enforcement (Occupational Health and Safety Administration, OHSA) the Family Medical Leave Act (FLMA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), just to name a few. These laws benefit all employees, not just union members.

It is because union dues are spent on lobbyists working in local, state and federal seats of government to combat anti-worker legislation that businesses have joined forces to impede unions' access to dues. Unions are the only voice for working people, and corporate America doesn't like it. Real "Paycheck Protection" for working people means continued union involvement in politics.



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