

California initiative attacks AFL-CIO political contributions

Proposition 226: The issues before workers

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On June 2 Californians will vote on a ballot initiative that would require union members to sign an annual authorization before any portion of their dues money could be spent for political purposes. Unions would be compelled to reduce dues for those who refused to sign the authorization.

The measure, known as the Campaign Reform Initiative, or Proposition 226, is being promoted by right-wing forces, primarily from the Republican Party, and a section of big business. Exploiting the widespread disgust of workers with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and their disaffection with the Democratic Party, these forces have been able to win strong support for the measure, including from union members. According to opinion polls, the proposition is headed for approval.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes Proposition 226 and urges a vote against it. The backers of the initiative present it as a measure to defend the democratic rights of rank-and-file union members. They concentrate their fire on the high-handed and bureaucratic practices of the AFL-CIO. But while the immediate target is the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and its Democratic Party allies, the ballot initiative is ultimately directed against the democratic rights of the working class.

Our opposition to Proposition 226, however, in no way implies support for the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, nor does it cede to the union officials any "right" to use workers' dues money to support big business politicians in general, or the Democratic Party in particular. In opposing this initiative, we simultaneously oppose the status quo, i.e., an entrenched union apparatus which suppresses any independent political activity by the working class.

We are in solidarity with the many thousands of workers in the unions who are fed up with the betrayals of the union bureaucracy and justly feel that their rights are being trampled on within the AFL-CIO. We are likewise in solidarity with the even greater number of workers outside the unions who recognize that the AFL-CIO is indifferent to their plight. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake with serious consequences to allow these legitimate sentiments to be manipulated by right-wing, big business forces who are deeply hostile to the working class.

For workers, it is not a question of lining up behind either of the official camps in the political battle over Proposition 226. This initiative raises complex political issues which can be addressed seriously only on the basis of a perspective that is fundamentally opposed to that of trade union bureaucracy as well as the big business politicians.

The first question posed by the ballot proposition is: how is the grip of the trade union bureaucracy to be overcome—at the hands of the capitalist politicians and the government, or through a militant, democratic and class conscious movement of the workers themselves? The second basic question is: what strategy should be advanced, in opposition to the dead-end policies of the AFL-CIO, to fight against layoffs, falling living standards and attacks on workers' democratic rights?

Who is promoting Proposition 226 and what does it say?

The political and corporate interests behind Proposition 226 are bitter enemies of the working class. The measure was drawn up by three Orange County businessmen who oppose public education. It has been backed by wealthy Republican donors, Governor Pete Wilson, US Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and other GOP leaders. Under the slogan of "paycheck protection," these forces are waging a multi-million-dollar campaign to pass similar initiatives in 20 other states.

The propaganda of the initiative's supporters is laced with American chauvinism and hostility toward foreigners. The proposition claims that contributions from "foreign interests" are corrupting the electoral and governmental process. It glosses over the multi-million-dollar donations through which US corporate interests buy politicians and dictate governmental policy. According to Proposition 226 everything is on the up and up as long as the bribery is carried out by red-blooded American bosses.

A moment's reflection should convince workers that any measure which makes an appeal to anti-immigrant prejudices is destructive of the democratic rights of the working class, since workers can defend their interests against the attacks of big business only through the greatest possible unity of the exploited and oppressed.

On the question of using union dues for political contributions, Proposition 226 states: "No labor organization shall use any portion of dues, agency shop fees, or any other fees paid by members of the labor organization, or individuals who are not members, to make contributions or expenditures except upon the written authorization of the member, or individual who is not a member, received within the previous 12 months."

In considering this language, three points should be stressed:

First, this measure is not limited to the AFL-CIO and its bureaucratized affiliates. While in principle no class conscious worker would oppose measures giving the rank and file greater say over how its dues money is spent, this proposition could be used, and in the future would be used, against new labor organizations of a genuinely democratic character that arose out of a workers' rebellion against the AFL-CIO. Workers should decide the procedures and methods for carrying out collective political activity, not the corporate-dominated government.

Second, the pro-business agenda of those promoting the ballot initiative is indicated by the absence of any restrictions on the ability of big business to make political contributions. Like all right-wingers who seek to dupe the public with populist-sounding demagoguery, the backers of Proposition 226 repeatedly denounce "special interests," meaning all groups whose demands cut across the profit drive of the big corporations.

Finally, workers should not be indifferent to how the influence of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is broken. It is the task of the workers themselves to remove the dead weight of the trade union apparatus and construct new organizations for industrial and, above all, political struggle in defense of

the working class. If the job of sweeping away the union bureaucracy is ceded to the big business politicians, the inevitable result will be deeper attacks on the democratic rights of workers and the elimination of all that remains of the social conquests—pensions, health benefits, etc.—won through the struggles of previous generations of workers.

The AFL-CIO's "Defeat Proposition 226" campaign

Underlying the trade union bureaucracy's campaign against Proposition 226 is the drawing of an equal sign between the AFL-CIO and the working class. On the basis of this premise, the bureaucracy and its supporters argue that any measure curtailing the political operations of the AFL-CIO is, by definition, an attack on the political and democratic rights of the working class.

Those—including the union bureaucrats, Democratic Party politicians and various organizations of middle class ex-radicals—who identify the AFL-CIO unions with the working class are perpetrating a fraud. None of them attempt to reconcile this conception with the facts. What is the record of the AFL-CIO? Can two solid decades of direct complicity in job-slashing, wage-cutting and unionbusting be the resume of an organization that represents the interests of workers?

What is the internal regime of the AFL-CIO and its federated unions? Can organizations that consistently betray the interests of their dues-payers, that have seen their membership rolls decline by more than 50 percent, and yet maintain essentially the same people in leading positions for decades at a time, be described as democratic? How many union officials are convicted of fraud and corruption every year?

For more than half a century these organizations have persecuted socialist and militant opponents of the labor bureaucracy. There is a good reason why the term "union goon" is part of the American vocabulary. These organizations are notorious for spreading anti-Asian and anti-Mexican chauvinism. The claim that they embody the democratic and revolutionary traditions of struggle of the American working class would be laughable, were it not for the tragic consequences of such lies for the living standards and basic rights of workers.

The impotence of the AFL-CIO has left its mark on California workers. In the Los Angeles area alone, half of the 330,000 heavily unionized workers in the aerospace, shipbuilding and defense-related industries lost their jobs in the last decade. Union representation in the state has plunged from 40 percent of the work force in the late 1950s to 17 percent today.

What about the claim that the AFL-CIO is opposing Proposition 226 because of its concern for the well-being of workers? The AFL-CIO recently held its Executive Council meeting in Las Vegas. The top officers did not discuss the fate of the Detroit newspaper workers, hundreds of whom lost their jobs after their strike was betrayed. They did not discuss the tens of thousands of workers who had been downsized since the previous Executive Council meeting. They did not discuss the suffering of those kicked off of welfare and food stamps by the Clinton administration. On the contrary, they provided a safe haven and friendly audience for Clinton at the height of the media frenzy over the Monica Lewinsky story.

The one measure the AFL-CIO Executive Council did approve was the allocation of \$13 million to launch a campaign to defeat Proposition 226. Why? What are the bureaucracy's real concerns?

The union officialdom's bloated salaries, expense accounts and privileged social status depend on its ability to do three things. First, to assist corporate management in imposing speedup, forced overtime, wage and benefit concessions and whatever other measures are needed to boost the employers' profits. Second, to block the emergence of an anti-capitalist movement of the working class fighting the economic and

political monopoly of big business. Third, to pour millions of dollars into the Democratic Party.

If the AFL-CIO's ability to dole out workers' money to its allies in the Democratic Party is crippled, the bureaucrats' utility as servants of this big business party and American capitalism as a whole will be seriously undermined.

While in public the union officials talk about defending the political rights of workers, one can be certain that in private discussions with corporate managers and capitalist politicians they argue that Proposition 226 is shortsighted and dangerous, because the collapse of the AFL-CIO would open the way for a far more radical leadership to emerge in the working class.

The bureaucracy's backward political outlook inevitably finds expression in its campaign against the ballot initiative. The AFL-CIO has sought to outflank the proposition's sponsors by echoing the standard anti-foreigner and anti-tax nostrums of the right wing. One statement from the unions' Defeat Proposition 226 campaign denounces the initiative because it is not chauvinist enough.

"Foreign interests," the AFL-CIO complains, "will have more influence than working California families because the initiative would allow foreign entities to contribute to ballot measures." The appeal goes on to state that the proposition places an undo burden on corporations and that "California doesn't need more government and bureaucracy."

A discredited bureaucracy

Another issue the supporters of the union bureaucracy do not care to explore is the widespread popular support for the ballot initiative. A recent Field Poll showed that California voters favored Proposition 226 by a 2-to-1 margin, including 60 percent of those from union households. An internal poll organized by the California Teachers Association revealed that 70 percent of its members favor its passage!

These figures represent a devastating indictment of the trade union bureaucracy. The AFL-CIO and its middle class "left" appendages cannot explain these sentiments. But we can. Millions of workers no longer support the official unions, including a large and growing section of the workers inside of them, because these organizations do not defend the interests of the working class. They have degenerated into the apparatuses of an ossified labor bureaucracy that is hostile to the needs of working people.

How then, should workers respond to Proposition 226? They should oppose the initiative without giving support to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, and they should oppose the AFL-CIO bureaucracy without lending support to the right-wing sponsors of the ballot proposition.

That, however, is only the first step. In the end, Proposition 226 raises, as does every serious social and political question, from the growth of social inequality to the squalid state of capitalist politics, the need for a new movement, genuinely of, for and by the working class. On a mass scale, no such movement exists as of yet. It must be constructed.

This movement must be built on foundations radically opposed to those of the AFL-CIO. It must be genuinely democratic, with its leadership controlled by the rank and file. It must place the needs of working people before the demands of corporate profit. It must fight for social equality and an end to all class privilege. It must be committed to uniting workers of all races, ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. It must therefore take the form of an independent political party of the working class, based on a socialist program.

This is what the Socialist Equality Party fights for. We urge workers, young people and students to consider these issues carefully, and make the

decision to join our party and build it as the mass political party of the working class.



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