

The California Union Paycheck Initiative and the political tasks facing the working class

Vote “no” on Proposition 75! Break with the Democrats! For the political independence of the working class!

The World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
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The following statement is posted in PDF format on the WSWS. We urge our readers and supporters in California to download the statement and distribute it as widely as possible.

On November 8, California voters will go to the polls to cast a ballot on the “Union Paycheck Initiative” (Proposition 75). If passed, Proposition 75 will require public employee unions to secure the annual written consent of each member prior to using any portion of that member’s dues money or fees to support political campaigns.

It will also mandate that the unions keep a record of every member’s decision as to which political campaigns he or she is willing to support. If asked, the unions will be obligated to turn over those records to the Fair Political Practices Commission, the state government body that oversees campaign financing.

Proposition 75 is one of eight initiatives being voted on as part of the Special Election called by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger earlier this year.

The Union Paycheck Initiative is backed by the California Republican Party, far-right anti-tax groups, large sections of big business in California, the US Chamber of Commerce, and most recently, Governor Schwarzenegger. Through an umbrella organization known as the Alliance for a Better California (ABC), the Democrats and the public employee unions are waging a \$40 million media campaign against Proposition 75.

The most recent polls, which were released in mid-October, reported that an even percentage of voters, 46 percent, supported and opposed the measure.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the Union Paycheck Initiative and calls on Californians to vote against it. While the immediate targets of the forces backing this measure are the unions and the Democratic Party, the ultimate target is the democratic rights of the working class.

Through Proposition 75, big business and its political representatives are trying to undermine any ability of working people to collectively exert political influence. The Union Paycheck Initiative is an attack on the very principle that the working class has a right to mobilize itself and fight for its own

political interests.

In opposing Proposition 75, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party extend no political support to the campaign against the initiative being waged by the ABC. Our opposition to Proposition 75 proceeds from a fundamentally different premise from that of the unions and the Democratic Party, which are calling for a “no” vote on the Union Paycheck Initiative in order to preserve the political status quo and maintain the unions’ alliance with the Democrats.

We oppose the right-wing attack on the unions embodied in Proposition 75 from the standpoint of a socialist and internationalist program that places at its center the political independence of the working class from the Democratic Party, the existing two-party system, and all parties and politicians who defend the profit system.

This is the antithesis of the outlook and policies pursued by California’s public employee unions. Through the efforts of the ABC, the unions and the Democrats are seeking to channel the opposition among California workers to the policies of Schwarzenegger and the growing discontent among working people over deteriorating social conditions into support for the Democratic Party.

The decades-long alliance of the unions with the Democratic Party has led the working class into a blind alley, with the most tragic results. It is an utterly bankrupt policy, which can no longer be defended by pointing to reforms or improvements achieved through the Democrats, since the Democrats no longer support reforms and instead ape the viciously anti-working class policies of the Republicans.

The collapse of the unions is itself bound up with their refusal to break with the capitalist two-party system and their opposition to the political independence of the working class. Despite everything—social cuts under Gray Davis, the end of welfare under Clinton, Democratic support for the war in Iraq, the Patriot Act and Bush’s tax cuts for the rich—the unions continue to peddle the political snake oil of Democratic Party politics.

It is high time to call a halt to this fraud! It is time for working people to build a new movement to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights—an independent political movement that will fight to end the stranglehold of the financial aristocracy over the life of the people. It is time to build a mass socialist party of the working class.

The trade unions today function as a critical prop for corporate America in its efforts to claw back all the concessions made to the working class at an earlier period. They no longer in any real way represent or fight for the workers. They have become organizations of a corrupt and servile bureaucracy—hostile to the rank-and-file and ruthlessly opposed to any form of democratic accountability or control.

These organizations—tied to the capitalist profit system, the state, and a nationalist perspective—cannot be reformed or revived. It is necessary to build a new labor movement—first and foremost, a political movement fighting for social equality and democracy—that is, a socialist movement.

We are in solidarity with workers who feel their democratic rights are trampled on and their economic interest sold out by the union bureaucracy. We in no way support the union leadership's wasteful and reactionary funneling of union dues to one of the two parties of American big business. Nor do we endorse the anti-democratic and bureaucratic methods by which the union officialdom maintains its control, silences rank-and-file opposition, and pursues policies detrimental to the interests of union members and the working class as a whole. In opposing Proposition 75, we do not in any way seek to imply that California's public employee unions genuinely speak on behalf of workers or can be made to do so.

However, workers cannot be indifferent to right-wing attacks on the unions. The task of breaking the grip of the union bureaucracy cannot be ceded to capitalist politicians, who will use the passage of the Union Paycheck Initiative in order to further their own reactionary agenda.

The forces spearheading the initiative speak for the most predatory and ruthless sections of the corporate elite. They demand nothing less than the destruction of every gain won by the working class in the course of the past century. To them, even the treacherous and bureaucratized unions represent an impediment.

Lewis K. Uhler, who sponsored the campaign to get Proposition 75 on the ballot, is a well-known spokesperson for the most right-wing forces within the Republican Party in California. An anti-tax fanatic who has who has spent the last 30 years lobbying the state and federal government to privatize public infrastructure and destroy social programs funded by state tax revenues, Uhler is representative of the outlook of the leading players backing Proposition 75.

Their claim to be backing the Union Paycheck Initiative because they oppose "special interests" only shows their contempt for the electorate, who they believe will swallow any lie. The entire political system in California and the US is

choking on the flood of corporate money that is used to buy politicians and manipulate elections. The corporate-controlled media excludes any genuinely critical voices, narrowing what passes for public debate to squabbles between well-paid mouthpieces for various factions of the American ruling elite. Socialist views are rigorously censored.

As a result of this travesty of genuine democracy, maintained through the monopoly of two right-wing parties, the social wealth of California and the country as a whole has been plundered to enrich a privileged elite at the direct expense of the living standards of the broad masses of the people. Basic social infrastructure—roads, bridges, dams, levees, housing, health care, the environment—has been starved of funds and neglected, resulting in catastrophes like the California energy crisis a few years back and the even more deadly disaster that unfolded this summer in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

Former body-builder and Hollywood celebrity Arnold Schwarzenegger is nothing but a front man for the corporate "special interests" that dominate California. He was elevated into office by means of a corporate-financed recall election because big business was dissatisfied with the pace of Democratic Governor Gray Davis's assault on the working class.

Since taking office, Schwarzenegger has attacked social safeguards such as workers' compensation and slashed funding for vital social services such as education and health care. He has been able to rely on the complicity of the Democratic-controlled state legislature.

The bitter lessons of these political experiences must be drawn. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* are dedicated to the building of a new political movement that will fight for a genuine alternative to the crisis-ridden and failed profit system. We call on all those who recognize the bankruptcy of the trade union bureaucracy's alliance with the Democrats and the need for a socialist party of the working class to join and help build the SEP.



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