

Nevada teachers union challenges Democratic caucus rules

Kate Randall
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With the Nevada presidential caucuses less than a week away, a bitter dispute has opened up between factions of the trade union bureaucracy backing rivals for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Last Friday, the Nevada State Education Association (NSEA) filed a lawsuit against the Nevada Democratic Party's decision to create at-large precincts inside nine Las Vegas resorts on the day of the caucus. While the teachers' union has not officially endorsed New York Senator Clinton, a number of its top officials are supporting her.

The suit by the state body of the National Education Association (NEA) came just days after Culinary Workers Union Local 226 endorsed Illinois Senator Obama. The Obama and Clinton camps had hotly contested for the endorsement, since the union includes 60,000 workers in the state's hotel and casino industry. Many of the workers who will vote in the at-large precincts are members of the Culinary Workers Union.

Filed by the 20,000-strong NSEA and six Las Vegas-area residents, the suit argues that the Nevada Democratic Party's decision to create at-large precincts inside the resorts violates state election law. Workers on the Las Vegas Strip will be able to attend these precincts rather than return to their home precinct. Using a complex formula, the suit asserts that voters at these precincts could elect more delegates and have more influence than voters in Nevada's 1,754 other precincts.

The legal challenge is thoroughly undemocratic on its face and would serve to disenfranchise thousands of shift workers who would be unable to leave work to participate in the caucuses, scheduled to take place at noon next Saturday, January 19. Although the new plan for delegate selection was adopted in final form last

September, it was not until Obama gained the Culinary Workers' endorsement that the NSEA filed suit.

While the caucus system is inherently undemocratic—discriminating against voters who are unable to leave work to participate—the NSEA suit does not challenge the system as a whole. It merely seeks to strike down that aspect of the caucusing that would detrimentally affect Hillary Clinton's chances to win.

While not joining in the NSEA's lawsuit, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW) has also denounced the Nevada state Democratic Party's decision to create at-large precincts inside the casinos, saying it provides unfair advantage to the Culinary Workers Union and its endorsed candidate.

Rick Sloan, communications director of IAMAW, which has endorsed Senator Clinton, commented to the *Los Angeles Times*, "The deck is stacked in Vegas. The fix is in." He said that the new rules don't provide similar caucusing opportunities for workers at McCarran airport, who are largely organized by the IAMAW. "They didn't mention the post office. Or the workers at other sites" where the unions have backed Clinton, he said.

Senator Clinton has sought to distance herself from the lawsuit, saying the NSEA has not officially endorsed her campaign. In an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday morning she said, "I don't think it is supporters of mine that have filed the suit." In a statement, Clinton campaign spokesperson Phil Singer said, "We hope the courts and the state party resolve this matter. We will respect their decision and focus our efforts on running a strong campaign."

However, the Clinton campaign has clear connections to the lawsuit. The NSEA is employing a law firm—Kummer, Kaempfer, Bonner, Renshaw and

Ferrario—that has close ties to the New York senator. An attorney at the firm, former Nevada Democratic congressman James H. Bilbray, has endorsed Clinton and is campaigning for her in the state. Also, NSEA Deputy Executive Director Debbie Cahill was a founding member of Clinton’s Nevada Women’s Leadership Council.

The Obama campaign has been quick to condemn the suit. The senator’s Nevada campaign director, David Cohen, commented, “We believe as a party, and a country, we should be looking for ways to include working men and women in the electoral process, not disenfranchise them.”

Culinary Workers Union Local 226 Secretary-Treasurer D. Taylor said, “This is an attempt to disenfranchise people who are largely women, largely people of color, and people who do the kind of work that makes this town go.” Taylor accused the NSEA of “tactics that are like those the Republicans use to suppress minority votes in Florida.”

In reality, however, the opposition of Obama and his union supporters has little to do with defending the voting rights of Nevada workers and everything to do with shoring up support for the senator’s presidential nomination bid. The Nevada race, coming on the heels of the Obama’s victory in Iowa and Clinton’s in New Hampshire, is seen as a key contest.

Organized labor is one of the central cogs in the Democratic Party’s election machinery, providing thousands of campaign workers and millions of dollars to candidates at all levels. With more than 13 percent of all workers belonging to unions, Nevada is one of the most unionized states in the West, and significant human and financial resources are at stake.

With their endorsements of frontrunners Obama and Clinton, different factions of the union bureaucracy are supporting two big-business politicians whose programs are sharply at odds with the interests of their memberships—whether on the economic issues facing working people or the Democrats’ complicity in the Bush administration’s war policy. At stake for union officials are potentially lucrative appointments and other kickbacks should their candidate win.

In Nevada, the trade union bureaucracy’s scramble to win support for their chosen candidate has reached a high pitch, more resembling a gang turf war than an electoral contest. Millions of dollars in union funds and

thousands of man-hours have been squandered in the process.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which has endorsed Clinton, has flown 100 paid organizers to Nevada in advance of the caucuses, and is expected to send 100 more in the next few days.

Under the contract negotiated between hotel and casino employers and the Culinary Workers Union, which has endorsed Obama, the union’s members are eligible to take as long as six months leave from their jobs to do political work, with the union paying their salaries during this time.

There are currently about 200 Culinary Workers members working as paid organizers for Obama in Nevada. Next Saturday, members will get time off to participate in the caucuses, some with pay. The Nevada operation is a prime example of the role played by the trade unions in US electoral politics in propping up differing factions of the Democratic Party.



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