

# A REPORT OF THE HERITAGE CENTER FOR DATA ANALYSIS

WHAT DO UNION MEMBERS WANT?  
WHAT PAYCHECK PROTECTION LAWS  
SHOW ABOUT HOW WELL UNIONS  
REFLECT THEIR MEMBERS' PRIORITIES

JAMES SHERK

CDA06-08

August 30, 2006



214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE • Washington, D.C. 20002 • (202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

NOTE: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

otherwise campaign directly, so long as they do it themselves.

No database of union spending of so-called soft money exists, so it is impossible to say if paycheck protection laws actually prohibit union leaders from spending dues on priorities their members do not share. Circumstantial reports certainly suggest that union leaders simply ramp up their unconstrained soft money spending when their members have the option of opting out of hard money donations.<sup>31</sup> The Washington State teachers union responded to the paycheck protection law passed in 1992 by sending members' mandatory dues to the Community Outreach Program, from which teachers did not have the choice of opting out. The COP then spent millions of dollars of teachers' dues on political causes, effectively sidestepping the law.<sup>32</sup>

Unions may well have found ways to circumvent the intent of most of the paycheck protection laws passed by the states, finding ways to spend their members' dues on politics even when their members object. There is simply not sufficient information on union soft money spending to draw conclusions about whether or not paycheck protection reduces union political activity. What is clear is that paycheck protection laws reduce the direct union contributions to candidates.

## CONCLUSIONS

Many American workers belong to unions as a matter of necessity. Some would lose their job if they left their union; others join because they want to participate in the union that negotiates their wages and benefits. All of these workers pay mandatory union dues that are spent by the union leadership. The priorities of these union leaders often seem out of step with those of their mem-

bers. Six-figure salaries, activism on causes that do not concern most workers, and heavy political involvement do not appear to resonate with most union members.

Paycheck protection laws, which require workers to agree to have their union dues donated to political campaigns, provide an opportunity to test how closely unions reflect their members' wishes. The results are clear and unambiguous. Union campaign spending falls by 40 to 50 percent once workers get a say in how their dues are spent. Unions are not spending their members' mandatory dues in accordance with those members' wishes. Unions may well use loopholes to get around these restrictions, but the fact that they need to use loopholes shows how out of touch they are with their members' priorities.

Union leaders are pursuing an agenda that union members do not support. Union members need to have more options in order to ensure that unions pursue their priorities. Congress and the states should pass more effective paycheck protection laws that close the loopholes unions have used to continue spending their members' dues even over their objections. Workers who find that unions still do not pursue their priorities should not be forced to belong to a union in order to keep their job. Workers should not be forced to serve their union's priorities, but unions the priorities of their workers.

—James Sherk is a Policy Analyst in Macroeconomics in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation. The author thanks Heritage Foundation interns Ben Keefer and Kevin Kellert for their invaluable contributions to this paper.

---

31. Andy Furillo, "Unions Have Blunted Bids to Curb Political Spending," *The Sacramento Bee*, June 27, 2005, p. A1, at [www.sacbee.com/content/politics/story/13137532p-13981621c.html](http://www.sacbee.com/content/politics/story/13137532p-13981621c.html) (July 11, 2006).

32. Michael Reitz, "Paychecks Unprotected: Lessons Learned From California and Other States," *Capital Research Center Labor Watch*, January 2006, at [www.capitalresearch.org/pubs/pdf/LW0106.pdf](http://www.capitalresearch.org/pubs/pdf/LW0106.pdf) (July 11, 2006).