

# The Attempt to Silence Working Families

*Initiatives to limit the role of working families and their unions have only one purpose, and that's to further skew the political balance of power in America*

■ **As working families and their unions increasingly speak out on important political and legislative issues, a coordinated, nationwide campaign to silence them is mounting.**

Corporations, right-wing foundations and national anti-union lobbying groups are introducing initiatives and legislation in all 50 states designed to limit working families' participation in the political process by singling out unions for burdensome restrictions.

Backers of the initiatives claim to be protecting the interests of working Americans and represent their proposals as "campaign finance reform." In truth, the initiatives are designed to silence the voice of working America. They exacerbate -- they don't alleviate -- the flaws and imbalances in a campaign finance system that already heavily favors corporations and the wealthy. And they are a direct response to the AFL-CIO's aggressive education and mobilization efforts among working families that in 1996 increased the minimum wage and prevented cuts in Medicare, pensions and education.

■ **In the political process, corporations already outspend unions 11-to-1.** In the 1996 election cycle, corporations accounted for more than 40 percent of the \$1.6 billion raised by political candidates and parties -- while unions accounted for less than 4 percent. And the disparity is growing. Corporations outspent unions by a ratio of 11-to-1 in 1996, compared to a ratio of 9-to-1 in 1992. In "soft money" contributions (unlimited contributions to parties and committees), the gap is even wider: In 1996, corporations spent 23 times more than unions did. New restrictions on unions' participation in the political process will further tilt the balance of power in favor of corporations.

■ **The initiatives single out unions, proposing tight controls and burdensome regulations that wouldn't apply to anyone else.** They would silence the voice of working families, without limiting political spending by corporations or special interest groups such as the National Rifle Association, Chamber of Commerce or Christian Coalition. And they're just unnecessary: Union members already have more protections than members of other organizations, and unions are already subject to more stringent reporting requirements.

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■ **This is a concerted effort to retaliate against working families and their unions for exposing the right-wing agenda.** This is *not* a grassroots movement by union members. The overwhelming majority of union members *support* their union's involvement in political activities. It is a nationwide, coordinated effort by corporations and national right-wing foundations and lobbying groups, who are introducing similar initiatives and legislation in all 50 states. These are the same groups that tried to block the increase in the minimum wage, dismantle job safety laws, and cut Medicare, education and pensions. In 1996, working families -- through the AFL-CIO's "Labor '96" education and mobilization campaign -- stopped them, and now it's pay-back time.

■ **As it stands, union members have a choice.** No worker can be forced to fund a union's political and legislative activities. Union members choose whether to join the union, set their own dues, elect their own leaders and vote on where and how their money will be spent. The minority of workers who disagree with union political activities can choose not to belong to the union. In those states where they still pay a fee to cover the representation the union is required to provide them, they are not required to pay the amount that goes for political and legislative activities. Corporations, by contrast, don't give shareholders, employees or customers any say in their political activities.

■ **Union members want their unions to be active in the political arena.** By a 6-to-1 margin, union members want their unions and the AFL-CIO to speak out about politics and legislation, according to a 1996 poll by Peter Hart Research and Associates. The overwhelming majority of union members support the AFL-CIO's position on working family issues: 86 percent, for example, approved of "fighting to protect Medicare from large cuts" and "fighting to increase the minimum wage." A full 90 percent approved of their union's efforts to educate and involve them in the political process.

■ **Initiatives to further skew the political balance of power are being disguised as "campaign finance reform." They're not.** The current campaign finance system already unfairly rewards wealthy contributors. To be serious, reform efforts can't just limit the role of working families and their unions. Instead, serious reform should limit all campaign spending, provide for public financing to give voters a chance to hear from all candidates, and take other steps to make sure no group has an unfair say in how our government is run.