



House Committee Addresses Union Dues

A congressional committee is currently weighing in on the battle over union dues, calling it an issue of economic freedom, which is sure to enrage union leaders and spark massive debates at both the state and federal level. The debate is over whether workers should have union dues automatically deducted from their salaries, even if it is against their wishes. And even in the case where members are happy to comply with giving up their salary for union dues, the hearing is to determine whether it fair for the unions to use some of those dues to fund political campaigns for candidates whom the union members may not support.



On Wednesday, an autoworker for the United Auto Workers union testified before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Terry Bowman of the UAW in Washington said, "My union was using my union dues to push a political agenda that I oppose." Bowman contends that the approximately 40 percent of Republican union members are forced to see their dues being spent on campaigns they themselves do not support.

"That means almost six million union workers in the [United States](#) alone feel harassed and persecuted because of the political activities of their union officials," he said.

Similarly, union worker Sally Coomer of Duvall, Washington said, "I feel like a prisoner to the union and its causes when I find that my union dues are going toward political purposes which I greatly oppose."

A Supreme Court ruling determined that unions may spend dues on political purposes. In 2010 alone, unions spent over \$1 billion to finance political campaigns.

But for Bowman, it would be best if workers were given the choice of whether or not they wish to pay union dues. "This would ensure that only those workers who agree with the political activities of their unions are paying for it, and those who, like myself, find the far-left political activities of their unions to be despicable, would not be forced, as a condition of employment, to financially support those activities," Bowman explained.

A matter of this nature has typically been handled by the states, of which 27 permit the automatic subtraction of union dues from workers' paychecks for union dues, whether that worker is in the union or not. The other 23 states are "right-to-work" states, where dues are not automatically deducted.

But according to Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif., pictured above), the chairman of the House committee considering the union dues, the issue is of workers' rights. "Do workers and unionized organizations have a right to know more than they currently know?" he asked. "What [their money is] being used for, and whether in fact it has to be taken from them."

Unsurprisingly, union leaders defend the mandatory union dues, asserting that whether workers pay them or not, they would still benefit from the union's collective bargaining.



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"This creates a 'free rider problem,' where the union is obligated to provide services, but people are not obligated to pay," says Kenneth Dau-Schmidt, a law professor at Indiana University's Maurer School of Law.

Rep. Stephen Lynch (D-Mass.), a former union leader, criticized Wednesday's congressional hearing. "This committee has really been going after union employees. This has not been evenhanded," he insisted. "We've had 16 hearings on busting unions ... and don't hold your breath to see Goldman Sachs come through that door."

While some Democrats believe that the congressional committee is focused on the wrong group, pointing instead to corporate money in politics, some do agree that workers' rights are worth the battle.

"Unions may not force their members to pay for political activities they disagree with," Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) declared. "Unions are already subject to extensive administrative procedures and reporting requirements to ensure they comply with these laws."

However, those requirements have been relaxed under President Obama, who rescinded an order from President Bush that required federal workers be informed of their right to challenge how their money is spent. Polls showed that workers were unaware of their rights.

Fox News adds, "Furthermore, the administration completely disbanded the federal unit in charge of auditing the largest unions. Officials say there will be zero audits in 2012."

Indiana is the most recent [state](#) to take on the right-to-work battle. The Republican-dominated Senate voted 28-22 in favor of the right-to-work legislation, which prohibits companies and unions from agreeing to contracts that require workers who are not union members to pay union dues.

According to Republican Sen. Carlin Yoder, making Indiana a right-to-work state will significantly improve its economy by bringing in more jobs, and giving workers more freedom to decide what they want to do with their money.

As noted by *Reuters*, Indiana will be the "first right to work state in the area considered the country's traditional manufacturing belt" —dubbed the "rust belt" as a result of so many plant closures.

This is the second year in a row that Indiana brought up the right-to-work legislation. Last year, Democrats drew particularly negative attention to the battle when they exited the state and took refuge in Illinois to avoid there being a quorum for the vote.

"We passed an 'anti-bolting' bill last session, and polls show the people rejected what the other side did," said Senate President Pro Tem David Long (R-Fort Wayne), referring to Democrats' ultimately successful decision to hole up in Urbana's Comfort Suites hotel for five weeks.

In Michigan, the Republican-led House committee approved legislation that states employees would have to annually renew their written consent allowing the deduction of union dues from their paychecks.

Crain's Detroit Business reports, "Supporters of the bill say it wouldn't allow employees to avoid paying a 'fair share' contribution or fee related to operating a union. But it would give workers more control over whether money is collected for political activities or other functions."

But Michigan's Governor Rick Snyder told Congress that bringing right-to-work to his state is not on his agenda. "Right-to-work is an issue that may have its time and place, but I don't believe it's appropriate for Michigan in 2012," Snyder said.



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Republican lawmakers in Ohio and Minnesota have also floated the idea of such legislation.

On the federal level, Congress has worked on minimizing union power as well. The House passed a bill entitled "The Protecting Jobs from Government Interference Act," which would prohibit the labor board from "ordering any employer to close, relocate or transfer employment under any circumstances." That bill followed the clash between the National Labor Relations Board and Boeing, when the NLRB attempted to block Boeing's plan to open a production facility in South Carolina, a right-to-work state.

Still, what Congress sees as a battle for workers' rights, unions view as a Republican agenda to take out their leading opponents. Wednesday's hearing certainly sets the stage for what could turn out to be another big battle between Republicans and labor.



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