

Union political money at stake with Prop. 32

By Jon Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

Labor unions argue that a campaign-finance measure on California's November ballot would unfairly hobble their political pull, but behind that lies a tacit admission: If given an easy choice, many of their members would keep the dues money that helps power union clout.



By banning payroll-deducted money from California politics, Proposition 32 would undoubtedly boost the number of political "free riders" in employee unions.

Although labor leaders universally oppose the measure, some union members support it as a way to make their representatives more responsive. Some, pressed by wage and benefit cuts, wonder what they're getting for their money. And some just want to hang on to a little more cash.

"Certainly getting the money back would be a help," said Tobin Brinker, a furloughed teacher and former San Bernardino city councilman who works at Frisbie Middle School in Rialto. "But this is also about representation. I'm a conservative, and I wish our union represented conservatives better."

Proposition 32 expressly forbids "unions and corporations" from making direct contributions to state and local candidates or causes, although they could still fund independent political campaigns and contribute to candidates for federal office.

Especially loathsome to labor is the proposed ban on using

payroll-deducted money to fund political efforts. Any money collected via that method would have to go to such activities as communicating with members, bargaining and other job-related representation.

Business interests are less likely to notice the impact of that provision because they receive most of their political funds through executive contributions or by tapping company treasuries. But the set-it-and-forget-it payroll collection method has been a union fundraising staple for decades.

Unions aren't required to publicly disclose their collections or budgets, but public payroll figures provide a window into the hundreds of millions of dollars at stake in the Proposition 32 battle.

State payroll data show that 75 percent of unionized state workers paid full dues in December 2011, the latest monthly information available. All but a handful of the rest opted to pay "fair share" fees that fund the nonpolitical benefits of union representation, such as contract negotiations. The figures don't include California's university system employees.

Between dues and fees in December, unions representing roughly 170,000 state workers received \$10.5 million for the month. Annually, that could amount to \$126 million. About half went to the state's largest labor group, Service Employees International Union Local 1000.

It's not clear how much of that money was earmarked for politics, but if voters pass Proposition 32, all of it would be out of bounds for political activities.

Labor groups would have to find new ways to raise political cash – or perhaps return to old methods.

Early in the organized labor movement, unions used shop stewards as "walking delegates" who collected dues, sometimes

by coaxing and occasionally by confronting members.

“They walked right up to you, every pay period,” said Bob Bruno, who studies labor relations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “It was incredibly time-consuming and expensive for the unions. Sometimes you’d have fights.”

Manufacturing unions started collecting dues through voluntary payroll deductions in the 1940s, which cut costs and curbed the face-to-face squabbles that damaged solidarity.

“If you had to hand the money over, it seemed like a loss,” Bruno said. “But if it came out of a paycheck, you didn’t feel it.”

Automating collections also curbed the number of free riders, workers who didn’t pay dues but received the benefits of union coverage, Bruno said. Union revenues stabilized and helped fuel the growth of organized labor for 30 years.

Beyond making political collections a hassle, public- and private-sector labor leaders contend that Proposition 32 is the tip of a political ax hacking away at the political influence of the middle class.

“It’s an attack on unions and working people,” said Teamsters Joint Council 42 President Randy Cammack in an interview with the *Bee* last month.

Some state workers, however, say a change might make unions more accountable.

Ken Hamidi, a state employee and vocal critic of his union, SEIU Local 1000, argues that payroll deductions for political activities distance labor leaders from the rank and file. Ending the practice, he said, would close the gap.

“It would keep the unions more honest and responsive, at least,” said Hamidi, who for five years has led a dissident

group seeking to split from Local 1000. "They couldn't take the money for granted."

Local 1000 leaders declined to comment.

Only full dues-paying members can vote on contracts and officers, so fair-share fee payers can't fully engage in their union's internal politics.

That's coercive, said Ernest Feliciano, a tax auditor who has worked for the state for more than 20 years: "It's like forcing someone to belong to Costco."

Still, 94 percent of California workers covered by a union contract identify themselves as full members. The 2011 federal data sifted by researchers Barry Hirsch of Georgia State University and Trinity University's David Macpherson on their website unionstats.com show the percentage was essentially the same for public- and private-sector employees.

With so much money at stake, unions have made defeating Proposition 32 a priority. They've poured nearly \$36.5 million into campaign efforts to defeat the measure, with more expected in the run-up to the Nov. 6 vote.

Nearly half the money, \$16.3 million, has come from the California Teachers Association. SEIU has put up another \$6.1 million.

The measure's supporters have raised about \$8 million, half of it from a single donation last week by an organization with ties to billionaire conservative activists Charles and David Koch.

Pepperdine political scientist Michael Shires said he expects the Yes on 32 campaign will continue to pick up speed between now and November, but he stopped short of predicting the outcome.

"I think," Shires said, "this thing is going to be close all

the way to the end.”