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The Labor Movement Finally Takes A Stand

The firefighters union freezes campaign contributions to federal Democratic candidates -- it's about time

BY DAVID SIROTA



AP/Mel Evans

Elizabeth Fire Department firefighters Rick Maliniak, center left, and Andy Socha have American Flags stuck in their helmets as they stand with other firefighters and police officers and their supporters in a large gathering outside the Statehouse Thursday, March 3, 2011, in Trenton, N.J.

It's no secret that union leaders in Washington have been loyal, unquestioning servants of the Democratic Party for decades. But on Tuesday, that relationship may have started to change -- and that's probably good news for rank and file union members.

First, some history: Since 1990, organized labor has taken a half-billion dollars worth of workers' dues and has given it to national Democrats in the form of campaign contributions. In return, those national Democrats have aggressively pushed corporate-written trade pacts that undermine unions; worked with Republicans to defund uniformed unionized public employees; failed to use their 60 Senate votes to pass the Employee Free Choice Act; embraced school "reform" rhetoric crafted by corporate foundations that deliberately demonizes teachers unions; and refused to robustly support worker protests against the new GOP assault on collective bargaining -- despite explicit promises about putting on comfortable shoes and walking the picket line.

This has happened, in part, because key union leaders in Washington have assured national Democrats that no matter how many times they undermine the labor movement, the labor movement will be there to underwrite national Democrats' campaigns. And these assurances haven't been subtle -- they've been overt, as evidenced by the behavior Gerry McEntee, the longtime president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (i.e., the union that has been among the top individual funders of federal Democratic candidates).

In 2007, for example, McEntee attacked a group of rank-and-file liberal activists (including union members) for trying to replace anti-labor Democrats with pro-labor candidates, delivering a speech to House Democrats saying, "I'm the sheriff of the incumbent-protection program, and if you need help, let me know. In Blue America, there's no room for PACs to chase vulnerable members they have differences with." He later endorsed NAFTA architect Rahm Emanuel for Chicago mayor over other pro-labor candidates and told union members critical of Emanuel to "suck it up." All this in order to back the same Rahm Emanuel whose new administration seems poised to privatize public sector jobs.

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McEntee epitomizes the behavior of most of the union leadership in Washington -- currying cocktail party invitations and Christmas cards from Democratic friends in the Beltway, these leaders have made union dues to Democrats what the TARP was to Wall Street: a no-strings-attached bailout to transgressors, regardless of what those transgressors have done or what they will do. In the process, these union leaders have created a moral hazard that effectively encourages Democrats to defy labor, knowing they will then be able to raise corporate money and yet still retain the financial support of labor.

That is, until now.

In a ***letter to his membership Tuesday***, the president of the International Association of Firefighters announced that a unanimous vote of the union's executive board had frozen all campaign contributions to all federal candidates. Citing both the "extremist" Republican agenda and the refusal of Democrats to "stand up and fight for us," Harold Schaitberger said the resources now denied to federal candidates would be spent in states, where local Democrats have been much more willing to defend the labor movement.

It's hard to say if this will begin a larger trend -- after all, organized labor loyally financed national Democrats after every boot to workers' faces, whether that boot was NAFTA , China PNTR or a stalled EFCA. But with President Obama now aggressively triangulating against unions with a push for the anti-labor South Korea and Colombia free trade agreements (the latter of which he promised to oppose), the firefighters' move will finally spotlight the downside of labor leaders union leaders putting their personal partisan affinities above their responsibility to jealously advocate for their members. In short, it will force other union leaders to at least fully explain their decisions to keep pumping workers dues into a national Democratic Party that seems increasingly hostile toward labor's agenda.

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IAFF Freezes Federal FIREPAC Contributions

April 26, 2011 – Message from IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger:

Brothers and Sisters,

The International Association of Fire Fighters has grown into a political powerhouse in the Nation's Capitol and in state houses, county and city halls across the country.

Over the past decade, the symbolism of our profession and the image of our fire fighters and paramedics decked out in this union's trademark gold and black have become one of the most sought after endorsements in politics at every level. We have grown what was a modest federal Political Action Committee (PAC) into one of the top federal PACs in the nation.

Last election cycle, FIREPAC was in the top 1.1 percent of the more than 7,100 federally registered PACs in terms of dollars raised and was the 10th largest PAC in candidate contributions. It was also one of the most bi-partisan PACs.

In total, we spent close to \$15 million in the last election cycle on behalf of federal candidates and both political parties, helping to elect those who support us and defeat those who oppose us.

But the attacks launched at our members since the November 2010 elections have changed the landscape.

Extreme right-wing conservative and so-called Tea Party politicians are coming after fire fighters, paramedics and all public workers with a vengeance across the United States. They are attempting to take away basic American rights like collective bargaining and your right to negotiate for a good quality of life for your families. They are working to eliminate your pensions and retirement security. They want to silence your voice by gagging you with legislation they call Paycheck Protection. They are taking away the long-held right of dues deductions from paychecks to try to weaken the finances of our union. They want to hurt all unions and drive down wages and benefits with Right-to-Work laws.

Not only are extremist Republicans trying to destroy us -- too few Democrats are standing up and fighting for us.

Over the past two years, politicians from both parties have failed to address our issues in Washington, DC. Now, anti-labor members of Congress and their allies are championing measures that would undermine pension security, tax employer-sponsored health benefits, force newly hired fire fighters into Social Security and attack federal fire fighters. And with no pro-fire fighter legislation likely to be advanced in the 112th Congress – it's time to take a stand.

With the survival of our union and the ability to preserve and protect the rights, wages and benefits our members deserve in jeopardy in the states, we have re-evaluated how to get the best results for our political dollars.

With the full support of our union's Executive Board, we are turning off the spigot to federal candidates and federal parties, party committees and the super PACs that are created to support them.

Historically, FIREPAC has made most of its contributions to federal candidates. But it's time to send a clear message to all politicians at every level that the support of this IAFF is not automatic. It must be earned.

The reputation of our members and our profession in the political arena must not be taken for granted. Our support comes with consequences for those who are working to kill this union, and we will hold accountable those supposed friends who don't stand up for us.

Now more than ever, as our adversaries speak and act with a concerted, focused message, we need our friends to respond with similar strength and leadership to beat back the multi-faceted, well-organized assaults the right has launched at us – funded by anti-labor extremists like the multi-billionaire Koch brothers. And while we are fighting for our very survival, our friends aren't doing enough to fight back -- they don't have our backs.

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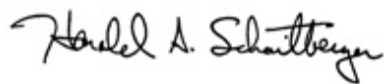
Re-focusing our work on the states will serve to bolster the "Fighting Back" campaign we have initiated. "Fighting Back" is a coordinated effort with our state and local affiliates involving various IAFF Divisions: Communications and Media, Government and Political Affairs, Safety and Health, Technical Assistance, GIS, EMS and Education.

Through this campaign, we have engaged in an internal and external effort to educate our members and the public on these misguided attacks – through television, newspaper, Internet and social media -- to literally fight back with everything we have. For a complete explanation of the "Fighting Back" campaign, [click here](#).

We know we have legislative fights, ballot measures and re-call elections that will require us to be on the offensive at the state and local level through this fall. I expect this strategic decision to focus our resources on state and local efforts, and the freezing of federal contributions, to last as long as the fights in the states remain at such a high level and until we see some real results and leadership from those in Washington, DC on our members' behalf.

Sticking together and having each other's backs is part of this great profession we call "the job." It's the core principle of our political work. And sticking to it is what will ensure that we ultimately prevail in the fights we face across America today.

In Solidarity,



Harold Schaitberger



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