



COMMUNIQUE

UNIONS & POLITICS WHY BE INVOLVED

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

When most people think of politics and the political process, images are conjured up of smoke-filled rooms, unscrupulous elected officials, and in the case of New York State, corruption. By definition, politics are the activities associated with the governance of a country, state, city, or other municipality. So why do unions get involved in politics?

The answer is simple; there is no other choice.

A more indepth look into the definition of politics reveals why. Politics are the activities related to influencing the actions and policies of a government, or getting and keeping power in a government; the work of people who are a part of government; the opinions that someone has about what should be done by governments. Every action, or inaction, of elected leaders sets off a domino effect. Decisions made by elected politicians impact union members in their workplaces, their homes, and in their communities.

Unions need to be involved to influence, opine, make a difference, and protect members. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, meaning that every decision, every law, every change that political leaders make at some point comes back to impact unions.

Labor needs a permanent presence in communities across the country to beat back the constant and ever-escalating barrage of attacks the likes of what's taking place in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, and many other states. Changing political tactics and a weakened labor movement are not a good combination for the future. That's why unions have upped their ante by increasing their presence in the political game.

"Unions have always played a part in elections and government," said Gerald Brown, Local 1180 Second Vice President and Political Director. "We have organized volunteers from within our ranks to make calls, hand out fliers, and work the polls. We have a presence in Albany, the City Council, and even in Washington, DC. Fully mobilized, our Local is a game changer and that's the position we want to be in."

Politics runs the gamut. "There is nothing that is not political. Everything is politics," wrote German novelist Thomas Mann. While people would

like to think that if they ignore politics it will go away, that is far from reality.

"If we choose to stay out of politics and remain uninvolved as a labor movement, we will get exactly what we deserve — nothing," Brown said. "If we don't voice our opinion, if we don't stand up for ourselves and our brothers and sisters throughout the labor movement, then those we disagree with will win and we will be the victims of our own inaction. If we are involved, we are taking control of our own lives."

Unions do not exist in a vacuum and are becoming steadily more involved in politics for reasons that just didn't exist in prior decades: Right-to-Work laws, anti-union media campaigns, the Employee Free Choice Act, and international trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Area (TAFTA).

During the past few years, union-curbing legislation has been introduced in many states, mainly in the midwest. One of the best-known examples is in Wisconsin, where Governor Walker signed a law ending collective bargaining for public-sector workers. Indiana and Michigan followed by passing right-to-work legislation, which prevents unions from forcing workers to be members, and keeps dues out of politics. Here's the domino effect in action again.

Combine these political attacks with an escalation of aggressive employer campaigns against union representation and you've got a one-two punch sure to knock labor out of the ring unless labor remains a force in the political movement.

Hence the need to put more labor-friendly politicians into office. With the proportion of American workers belonging to unions falling from about one in three in the 1950s to only one in nine today, it's vital to increase labor-friendly prominence in government, and labor can help.

Wage stagnation and income equality are on today's political agenda. When labor got involved in the fight to increase the minimum wage for fast food workers to \$15 an hour, politicians saw the strength of millions of voters and reacted.

Even though it's only about 11 percent of all workers who are currently union members, Americans — whether unionized or not — should take note because unions give workers a bigger say in our political system. A number of academic studies have found that unions strengthen the

middle class and significantly reduce economic inequality. Therefore, 11 percent of all workers are in essence helping the 99 percent.

According to an article on americanprogressaction.org, "Unions help boost political participation among ordinary citizens — especially among members, but also among nonunion members — and convert this participation into an effective voice for pro-middle-class policies. This explains why states with a greater percentage of union members have significantly higher voter turnout rates, as well as higher minimum wages, a greater percentage of residents covered by health insurance, stronger social safety nets..."

In a nutshell, unions play a critical role in making the political system work for the middle class by increasing voter participation and advocating for policies that help the middle class.

Here's an interesting fact and yet another reason why labor needs to stay involved in the political and election processes: A 1 percentage point increase in union density in a state increases voter turnout rates by 0.2 to 0.25 percentage points according to analysis by two political scientists. In

other words, if unionization were 10 percentage points higher during the 2008 presidential election, for example, 2.6 million to 3.2 million more Americans would have voted.

A similar pattern holds for communities of color. Voters of color are just as likely to vote as white voters in districts with union campaigns, but are 9.3 percent less likely to vote in districts without campaigns.

Bottom line? Unions play an extremely important role in getting ordinary citizens involved, getting them out to vote, translating workers' interests to elected officials, and ensuring that government serves the economic needs of the middle class. It is impossible to live and work in New York, in America, without being involved in the political process when it is embedded in our everyday lives. By staying involved, we protect ourselves and the gains we have won throughout the years, and we make an impact on electing politicians who understand and support our causes.

Unions know how to make the domino effect work to their advantage.