

Shouldn't have to work OT at avoiding union

By David Harsanyi

Denver Post Staff Columnist

Article Last Updated: 09/05/2007 12:41:00 AM MDT

Imagine being forced to support a group against your will.

Imagine then, the group uses part of your dues to help elect candidates you find ideologically disagreeable.

Who could support such policies? You'd be surprised.

The scenario plays out in Colorado every day. And as unions continue to purchase political power, despite diminishing membership, a new initiative hopes to protect the worker's right to choose.

Nationwide, more than 22 states - almost every neighbor of Colorado - are right-to-work states. And in 2008, voters might see "The Colorado Right To Work Amendment" on the ballot, which would allow an individual worker to choose whether to become part of a union.

"This is an issue that I've been interested in for a long time, and it's always made me shake my head," said Aurora City Councilman Ryan Frazier, who is heading the push. "It seems like workers deserve the right to make that choice for themselves. And since labor issues have become part of the discussion recently in Colorado, I thought it was time to bring this debate back to the forefront."

We've been hearing a lot of selective talk about "special interests" lately. According to the National Institute for Labor Relations Research, a nonprofit research group critical of unions, the estimated political expenditure by Big Labor for the 2004 election cycle was \$925 million.

Whether that number is somewhat inflated or not, it illustrates a great deal of political influence. It is built, in part, on funds collected from members who either have no idea where their dues go or don't realize they have a choice in the matter.

Union workers can choose to pay only fees for collective bargaining and other employment issues.

As you can imagine, a lot of money and legal maneuvering will be brandished to prevent this proposed amendment from appearing on the ballot. It would mean a loss of funding and thus political influence.

Union lawyers already have claimed that the language violates state law. The Colorado Title Board, fortunately, disagreed.

To ensure its place on the ballot, Frazier went back and simplified the language even more. The amendment now states, unambiguously, "that no person shall, as a condition of employment, be required to be a member" of a labor union "or pay any dues, fees, assessments, or other charges of any kind to a labor union or any charity or other third party in lieu of such payments."

It's difficult to believe anyone could disagree.

Right now, Colorado laws governing union membership dictate workers first vote by majority to form a union. Then a second secret ballot is held and a supermajority must approve whether to become a union shop.

Though it varies from place to place, many who want no part of unions are now forced to support them.

If you happen to vote no, well, tough luck. Unions are good for you, so live with it.

Earlier this year, local Democrats, many heavily funded by unions, made it one of their first orders of business to cram through legislation that would have repealed a second election. It was vetoed by Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter.

"Right now we're mobilizing voters and those who agree with the direction we're going in," Frazier said. "A lot of local folks believe that it's a basic choice that every worker should have ... but they don't."

Union officials often talk about the working man. Well, why not give the working man the freedom to choose?

Wishful thinking, I guess.

If the ballot is approved and the signatures are collected, we're going to hear a lot of talk about what's good for workers. We're going to hear a lot about the benefits of unionization. We're going to hear plenty about how the amendment would benefit "big business."

Perhaps all of it is true. If so, unions should have little trouble attracting members voluntarily. Because whether you believe unions are a necessary protection or an economic roadblock - or perhaps a little of both - is beside the point.

"I expect to hear a lot of rhetoric about how this makes it harder for workers, and it's a bunch of baloney," Frazier said. "The reality is that this does not hurt workers, it gives them a choice to be a part of a union - if they want to be part of it."

The political reality, though, is quite different.

It's about money and power. Nothing inherently wrong with those things, I suppose, unless you take them without asking.

David Harsanyi's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday. You can reach him at 303-954-1255 or dharsanyi@denverpost.com.