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Unions spend millions for events, charities

Mike Wilkinson / The Detroit News

Michigan labor unions raise millions of dollars a year from their members, and it costs millions more to do everything from pay the legal bills to keep the lights on.

But unions also spend their money on other items as well -- conferences at swanky hotels and airfare to get there, golf outings at upscale courses as well as postage and charitable donations.

In 2005, the last year for which most complete records are available, Michigan unions spent more than \$6 million on lawyers and legal work, the highest single category.

They also spent nearly \$5 million getting to and attending conferences, regional meetings and training sessions, records show.

Typical is the trip made by officers of two locals of the Plumbers and Pipefitters union. They attended an officer training session meeting in Florida in 2005 and both spent more than \$7,000 on the event at the Westin Diplomat Hotel, a four-diamond rated resort on the Atlantic Ocean.



Mike Fuentes / Getty Images

Two locals from the Plumbers and Pipefitters union attended a training session at the Westin Diplomat Hotel, a resort in Florida.

Members from Local 333 in Lansing and 174 in Coopersville, northwest of Grand Rapids, attended the conference. Tim Haggart, Local 333's business manager, said the conference was for officer training and the site picked by national leaders of the union.

When asked to describe the hotel, Haggart said: "It's all right."

The Diplomat, according to its Web site, has its own marina, two pools with cabana service and a spa.

The plumbers aren't the only ones whose meetings take them out of the region.

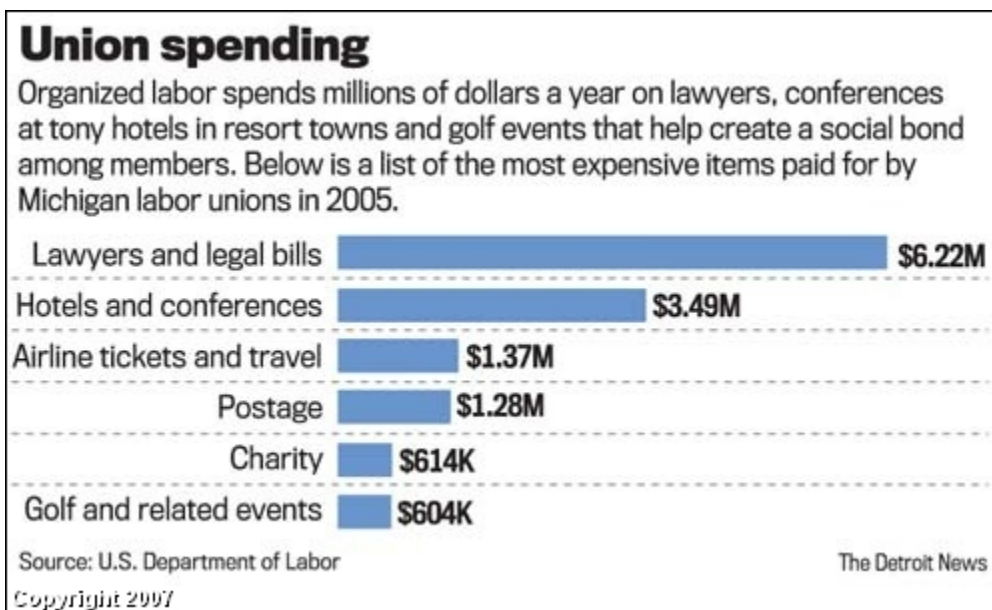
Postal workers from APWU Local 281 in Grand Rapids attended a conference at the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas, where they spent nearly \$9,200.

More often, Michigan unions stay close to home. The Soaring Eagle Resort and Casino in Mount Pleasant snared nearly \$170,000 in business from the UAW, the Michigan Education Association, the Plumbers and National Association of Letter Carriers.

Unions have a charitable side as well, and Michigan unions poured money into local and national causes, ranging from \$100,000 checks by the UAW to the Red Cross and Salvation Army to lesser amounts to other groups.

A number of union organizations sent money to Louisiana and Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, with the SEIU Local 79 in Detroit sending \$10,000 to the city of Monroe, La., and Electrical Workers Local 685 sending the same amount to their national fund for Katrina.

Local 223 of the Utility Workers sent nearly \$23,000 to The Heat and Warmth Fund, which helps Detroit area residents keep the heat on during the winter months.



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