

# Big labor's political battering rams

## How union bosses spend forced dues to call the shots in Sacramento

by Sam Paredes

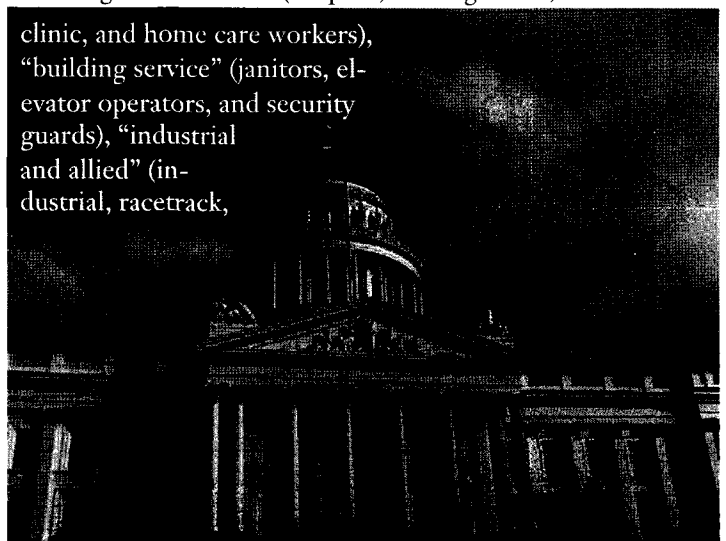
One might wonder who is in charge these days in Sacramento. Is it the governor? The Legislature? Or could it be all those people walking around in the purple shirts? .... Who *are* those people, anyway? Where do they come from and what do they want?

It seems they've moved in and established residence, because they are at the Capitol every day without fail. Even when the Legislature goes home, they remain — in session, out of session, on every sidewalk, at every entrance, on every floor, working every Capitol office and legislative staffer they can corner. Capitol insiders call them the "Purple Shirts," but evidently their goal is to be the "Purple Ocean."

Who *they* are is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU — and the union's na-

tional website actually says it "is organizing a virtual grassroots union called *PurpleOcean.org*," a venture intended "to challenge global corporations to clean up their act and provide living wages and benefits for all workers.") Nationally, SEIU member rolls boast 1.8 million employees in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico working in health care (hospital, nursing home,

clinic, and home care workers), "building service" (janitors, elevator operators, and security guards), "industrial and allied" (industrial, racetrack,



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and ballpark workers), and public employees: federal, state, county, municipal, and school employees. SEIU modestly reports that it is the largest union in the AFL-CIO. Its prevailing political slant may be gleaned from a feature at one of its websites titled: "Involvement in 2004 Progressive Political Organizations" which lists, among other items, a \$26 million contribution to "America Coming Together (ACT)," described as the "largest voter mobilization effort in history" with a note that SEIU's fat check to ACT even exceeded "individual contributions by George Soros and Peter Lewis." After that, such items as \$1 million to the Democratic National Committee, \$100,000 to the vehemently anti-Bush MTV operation "Rock the Vote," and \$50,000 to the "New Democratic Network" seem small potatoes.

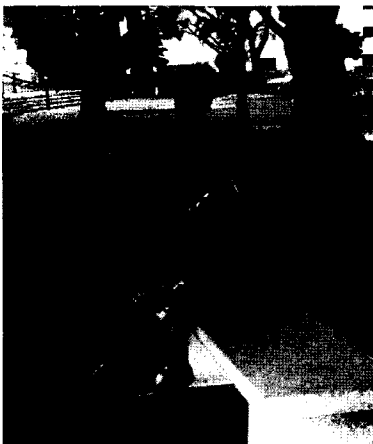
The Sacramento "Purple Shirts" come from virtually every corner of the state and in the past few years have become an especially effective Capitol presence, representing the spending lobby with a simple, straightforward, typically pugnacious, and never-varying message: every government program serves the vital needs of the poor, the children, and the elderly; all spending restraint serves "special interests" and "the wealthy." But despite their vocal and impressive political effectiveness at the Capitol, the colorful purple ocean is more like a purple puddle within the genuine ocean of California's nearly 36 million people. Total union membership — counting both public and private sectors — hovers between 10 and 15 percent of California's total workforce, hardly a ringing endorsement of the standard union claim to repre-

sent working California. And as we'll see a little later, even the actual members of the unions are by no means in lockstep agreement with the union bosses' down-the-line support of left-wing politics and politicians. Why, then, do the union bosses wield so much influence?

One reason is that they work very hard to convince people they are fighting for the "little guy" against power. This would constitute a legitimate cause, were it true. A lot of people lobbying state government are there to ask help in trying to protect their rights: crime victims, for instance; or individuals, families, sometimes whole communities or industries that have fallen afoul of a government bureaucracy mindlessly rolling forward like the giant stone ball in an Indiana Jones film, oblivious to the lives it pulverizes of the unfortunate people who get in its way. These are real people, like the farmers in the California-Oregon border area Klamath Basin who a few years ago found themselves and their generations-old way of life suddenly in the cross-hairs of the anti-people Endangered Species Act bureaucracy. Leading mostly self-reliant lives, such people lobby government in hopes it will perform its true function of defending ordinary people against tyrannical oppression.

"Public servants," however, whose personal financial wellbeing is mostly what the "Purple Shirt" brigades "fight" for, don't really fit the mold. And for the most part, in their campaigns, they don't try to. People employed (or whose livelihoods are largely subsidized) by government, after all, are called *public servants* because they are supposed, in a free country at least, to be *disinterested* in more than the minimum necessary recompense to permit them to serve the people. The *private* sector is the traditional arena for those devoted to self-seeking accumulation of wealth and comfort.

But one of big government's many drawbacks is that it unavoidably undermines and often destroys this distinction between public service and personal self-interest as it hires increasingly vast armies of "staff" to carry out its grandiose missions. The state workforce, as it grows by thousands of employees, largely comes to consist of ordinary people with ordinary, long-term interests in a steady job, reasonable opportunity for advancement, and financial security in old age. The problem is that the voters still cling to the illusion that all government employment remains "public service," as opposed to greedy self-interest. Also, as in all government activity, the provision of resources to keep this metastasizing army going is cut off from the normal



obligation that it actually produce something that the people who must pay for it consider valuable or go out of business. The first problem leads public employee organizations ever more into the fantasy business: continually creating and maintaining the illusion that everything they are and do reflects nothing but selfless concern for others, when, in fact, exactly the opposite is true — they are a union, after all, and unions exist to serve the material interests of their members, just as corporations exist, finally,

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to maximize profits of their shareholders.

And although inducing perpetual delusion, inflicted on oneself as much or even more than on other people, eventually leads to insanity, the second problem brings more immediate trouble. Freedom from having to give anything real in exchange for one's pay inevitably corrupts if allowed to go on long enough. As Ronald Reagan noted in 1973 after California voters defeated Proposition 1, a relatively early attempt to reign in big state government:

More than a century ago, the French philosopher Frédéric Bastiat wrote: 'The state, too, is subject to the Malthusian Law. It tends to expand in proportion to its means of existence and to live beyond its means, and these are, in the last analysis, nothing but the substance of the people. Woe to the people that cannot limit the sphere of action of the state: Freedom, private enterprise, wealth, happiness, independence, personal dignity, all vanish.' That is what will inevitably happen in America unless we act to curb the excessive spending of government.

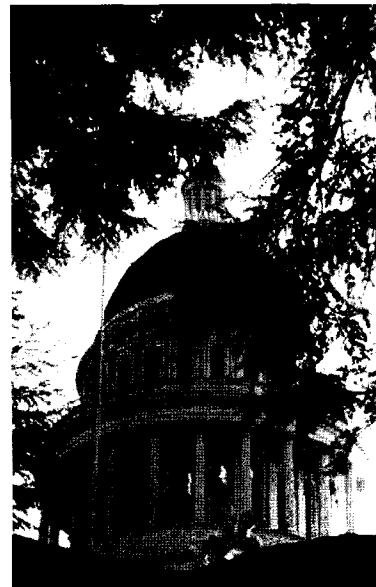
And bringing all that about, whether anyone in SEIU knows it or not, has become, essentially,

the union's *raison d'être*.

But again, the question is: how have the union bosses — given all the anti-social implications of the mission they have taken on — been able to achieve so much influence in a self-governing democracy, *i.e.*: where the rules are supposedly set by the *people* (who are, as Reagan noted, the union's main targets)?

The answer — pure and simple — is money. With the seemingly unlimited resources supplied by compulsory membership dues, SEIU is amply staffed

and well-enough organized to have made a small percentage of the population seem like a major block of voters and to portray virtually unlimited greed as selfless concern for the people. Capitol Democrats are positively gleeful given the chance to help create and maintain the illusion, because for the past few years the purple shirts have aimed their arrows at Arnold Schwarzenegger's Republican administration, even though it was the Gray Davis fiscal morass that left the in-home-support service workers feeling the bite of the recalled governor's budget axe.



In politics, it's always a smart idea to follow the money. Although determination and organization gets you into the party, the bucks get you the good table. Without the pot of gold, there simply aren't a lot of menu options. For example: the purple shirts. Of those who descend on Sacramento, the vast majority are low income earners, so how are they able to finance trips to the state Capitol? How do they pay for travel expenses and days off work? Who fills in for them on their jobs while they are away?

The answer is: these are no ordinary citizens seeking redress before government. They get to Sacramento on large purple busses. Their meals

are paid for, as are their hotels. Tents and water are provided to them on the Capitol grounds on



the more publicized “lobby days.” Should they be unable to speak English, translators accompany them to each office. In blunt terms,

SEIU has been pounding the pavement more aggressively than any other special interest during the past several budget cycles and have largely succeeded in catching legislators’ attention.

This year is a whole new ballgame. Because the public employee unions are so rattled about the upcoming November special election with its several reform initiatives including paycheck protection, limits on state spending, restrictions on teacher tenure, and redistricting, these regimented public servants decided to combine their resources against the common “evils.” It’s smart tactics, and the unions’ political funding structure allows its virtually effortless implementation.

Wouldn’t it be great just to flip a switch and have a bank account flooded with millions of dollars? That’s pretty much how the public employee unions do it through compulsory dues charged to their members. (Although individuals can technically “opt out,” the process is complicated, cumbersome, and not without the potential of an “unpleasant backlash.”) It was front page news when the California Teachers Association (CTA) voted to increase each individual member’s dues by more than \$180 over the next three years, raising more than \$50 million exclusively to campaign against Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the special election initiatives. CTA President Barbara Kerr has indicated the increase will give CTA “leverage” to

borrow against the extra revenues and will spend whatever it takes to prevail in November.

The California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) also sharply upped their members’ automatic contributions to the unions’ political treasuries, specifically to oppose the November reforms. The CCPOA dues boost reportedly will bring in more than \$18 million this year alone. Do the rank and file support this commanding of their money? *Sacramento Bee* columnist Daniel Weintraub’s “Inside California” weblog, commenting on the CCPOA dues surcharge, wrote: “the most interesting fact in the story is that 43 percent of those voting in

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the election opposed the fee.” Of course, if rank and file union members *wanted* to support CCPOA politics financially, paycheck protection would not threaten union bosses’ clout anyway. It’s interesting to note that on the national level, 38 percent of union members voted for President Bush. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, however, 87 percent of all labor donations went to John Kerry or other Democrat candidates. The same statistics bear out in California’s most recent statewide election, where Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamante received vast support from public employee unions, yet 37 percent of union members voted for Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The unions’ involuntarily-donated money is an enormous political boon. It serves to elect such notable former labor activists as state Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez and Los Angeles Mayor (and former Speaker) Antonio Vil-

laraigosa. Have you ever wondered how the Democrats seem able to maintain near-perfect party discipline with all their members blending almost facelessly into a lock-stepping column while Republicans, such as those now in the U.S. senate, appear always to be wondering off in all directions, rarely able to forge a unified political fighting force? It's simply a matter of dancing with the one who brung ya'.

Republican political funding comes from more varied sources that must be persuaded to give voluntarily, permitting GOP office holders a degree of freedom their Democrat colleagues often lack. Once elected, Democrats usually carry union water without question and ultimately deliver Democrat votes on labor legislation. These friends in legislative high places give public employee unions vastly increased leverage in Sacramento.

Their vested interest in protecting this process — *i.e.*, in defeating the fall initiatives — is huge. They know, for example, that after a similar paycheck protection measure passed in Utah, the percentage of teachers contributing to the union's political fund dropped from 68 percent to an abysmal 6.8 percent. In Utah, union "leaders" actually have to ask their members' permission to use their dues money for politics. They no longer enjoy a blind, captive source of revenue. The playing field is leveling out.

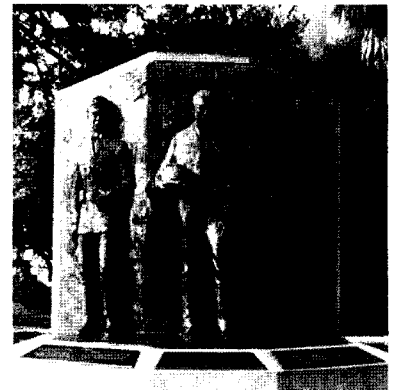
And recent surveys show that 45 percent of union households support California's paycheck protection initiative. Is that so astonishing? Who has better reason to want union members to decide for themselves how and when their political dollars are allocated than union members themselves? But would paycheck protection suddenly sweep Republicans into a majority? It is far more likely simply to free Democrat legislators to vote for their districts' real needs.

It becomes increasingly clear the only people who stand to lose if reform wins in November are those at the top of the union power structure whose livelihoods depend upon it remaining unchanged. The initiatives will require public employee unions to work as hard as the rest of us to raise money for politics. They will reform a sys-

tem that now permits poor teachers with multiple unsatisfactory evaluations iron-clad protection against being dismissed. The initiatives will allow the state's citizens to vote in districts that honestly represent their communities and their ideas instead of being carved up into partisan-predisposed political voting cells.

Since union bosses believe the stakes are even higher than normal, the "purple shirt" demonstrations and protests have been ratcheted up, becoming even more unpleasant. Heeding the old adage "out of sight, out of mind," they repeatedly, and more raucously than ever, let elected officials know they are there, are organized, and will not go away. Although the governor is their chief target, the message is plain for anyone who casts a vote: "pay us now or we'll pay you back later ...." The voice of the protests is narrowly ideological, repeating over-used lingo from ages-old, tired-out, left-wing propaganda wars. Interestingly enough, many of the people sent to lobby show a measure of common sense when asked individually about budgeting. Most agree the state is a lousy steward of our tax dollars. But the logical connection escapes them that *their* agenda is the main source of food feeding the bloated beast.

But it is. The ultimate source of this endless union pot of gold is your pocketbook and mine. Tax dollars, after all, pay their salaries. First, the Legislature passes the budget — the funding stream to pay the teachers, prison guards, and home care workers. Their paychecks — some of which barely hit the "meager" mark on the pay scale — are squeezed to pay the union dues that sustain the political activity — activity devoted, as Bastiat predicted it would be, to the proposition that government spending trumps everything: the family, the economy, the Constitution. And it's all paid for with our tax dollars. Like the union members themselves, we haven't the luxury of choosing how our money is spent, except at the ballot box.







# The moral case for reform

by John Kurzweil

PETER SCHWEIZER, in his book *Reagan's War*, says Ronald Reagan's guiding insight was that for all its bluster and destructiveness, communism was not a tower of strength to be feared, but a quivering mass of weakness ripe for defeat. Reagan knew its very reliance on lies and violence betrayed its weakness, and so was able to proceed against it with a confidence in final victory shared by few other men.

Visits to websites run by a major opponent of the state's November reform initiatives — the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) — conveyed a similar impression of weakness, and reminded me of a comment from Albert Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*:

It remains one of the oddities of this war that Hitler demanded far less from his people than Churchill and Roosevelt did from their respective nations. The discrepancy between the total mobilization of labor forces in democratic England and the casual treatment of this question in authoritarian Germany is proof of the regime's anxiety not to risk any shift in the popular mood .... Whereas Churchill promised his people only blood, sweat, and tears, all we heard during the various phases and various crises of the war was Hitler's slogan: "The final victory is certain." This was a confession of political weakness. It betrayed great concern over a loss of popularity that might develop into an insurrectionary mood.

This, of course, is the weakness of materialism: by definition unable to draw upon the virtually limitless reservoirs of strength in the human spirit, it must make do with the shallowest of appeals, those of worldly self-interest and the tawdry emotions that accompany it — anger at one's enemies, real or perceived; festering resentment over life's difficulties and disappointments; continuous fear of "running out" of life's necessities; shallow lust after the appearances of personal success — and envy for anyone who seems to have found it — but

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without the seriousness of purpose that motivates genuine striving for greatness. As Midge Decter says of left-wing feminists in another part of this issue, they appeared on the scene "militant, angry, and in the grip of a curious but lethal combination of galloping self-pity and driving ambition."

No doubt I will be accused of saying California's labor unions are run by Nazis and communists. No, I am not saying that. I do say the role those controlling California's public employee unions have chosen to play in this election betrays weakness, showing the same *signs* of weakness — reliance on empty slogans and stimulation of low emotions — that tyrannies do.

In "Winning Big, Going Global," for instance, a short pep talk signed by SEIU President Andrew L. Stern at [http://www.seiu.org/who/2003\\_annual\\_report/stern\\_letter.cfm](http://www.seiu.org/who/2003_annual_report/stern_letter.cfm), Stern asks: "Who could have imagined that this union of working people *who often feel individually powerless* could become recognized by public officials and corporate executives as one of the most powerful organizations in the country?" (*emphasis added*)

I know this is standard liberal rhetoric, but why should that excuse it? Where, after all, is this load of stuffing coming from? Stern makes 21st century America sound like feudal England, with peasants and serfs and lords of the manor. In worldly terms — the terms Mr. Stern is concerned with here — the American middle class workers that make up his union are among the most "powerful" people ever to walk the earth. They dispose of income qualifying them as rich in almost any society in other parts of the world today and anywhere at all throughout history up to the most recent past. They have fewer worries about disease, accidental injury, war, famine, crime, poverty, ignorance, repression, racism — you name it — even boredom, than at least nine-tenths of all the men who ever lived. They enjoy technological advancements and the freedom of choice they bring that make the greatest holders of wealth and