

Restoring Our Democracy

Two years ago, the Supreme Court seriously undermined our democracy when, continuing a trend of deregulatory campaign finance decisions, it ruled to allow unlimited independent campaign spending by business corporations and other groups.

The *Citizens United* ruling further tilted the playing field in favor of the 1% and against the 99%, whose voices are being drowned out by excessive spending and influence by corporations and the wealthy.

Since the *Citizens United* ruling came down, and particularly since the rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement, there has been growing momentum in support of public policy solutions aimed at curbing excessive corporate influence and restoring greater balance in our political process. From federal and state initiatives to bring about greater transparency and disclosure of spending by corporate interests and wealthy donors, to proposals for a constitutional amendment restoring Congress' ability to regulate campaign spending, to calls for abolishing corporate "personhood," people from coast to coast have sounded the alarm about the need for reforms to rein in excessive corporate influence in our democracy.

The AFL-CIO supports the overturning of the *Citizens United* decision and calls for immediate action to end the dominance of our political system by corporations and the 1%. The AFL-CIO has long advocated for measures to bring about greater fairness, openness and participation in elections—reforms that enfranchise voters and ensure that wealth does not wield disproportionate influence. We support public financing of campaigns, limitations on individual contributions to candidates and parties and public disclosure of political expenditures. We also support measures to enable citizens to vote more easily, and we oppose voter identification and similar measures that are aimed at seizing partisan advantage through disenfranchisement. And, we oppose misleadingly labeled "paycheck protection" measures that would exacerbate inequality by hampering union political activity while leaving corporate and rich individuals' political spending unimpeded.

The *Citizens United* ruling has opened the floodgates to massive spending by corporations and even more so by wealthy donors. They are pouring money into our electoral system and threaten to drown out the voices of hard-working Americans. Common-sense restrictions on their spending are needed, along with robust disclosure of their contributions and expenditures—including their contributions to organizations engaged in electoral activity.

The AFL-CIO also supports reforms aimed at restoring business corporations to their proper role as commercial institutions and limiting their influence in the political sphere. Business corporations are not people—they are manmade creatures of law that exist to generate economic activity and create jobs and income in communities. The

notion that they should enjoy the same rights and protections as natural persons is absurd and it is destructive to our democracy. At the same time, for more than a century, corporations have enjoyed certain constitutional protections, such as due process protections against unreasonable searches and seizures, which are consistent with basic American values. We support reforms, including changes to our tax laws and corporate laws, that address corporate dominance of our political system and that restore corporations to their proper role in our democracy.

Congress should pass and the Supreme Court should uphold the necessary reforms to protect our democracy from the power of money. As long as *Citizens United* remains the law of the land, constitutional change may be the only option. Amending the U.S. Constitution should be a rare act, done with the greatest of care. To earn our support, any such amendment must be carefully and narrowly crafted to protect our democracy from the economic power of the 1%, while at the same time protecting the public's right to organize politically through democratic organizations and movements.

Working people have a long and proud history of participating in our nation's public life through our unions. Unions are by tradition and law democratic organizations, run on the basis of one member, one vote. In a union, dollars do not vote—people do. Our unions bring us together in our union halls, our workplaces and our homes to discuss the issues facing our nation and to come together to make our voices heard in the political process. Unions are transparent organizations—all of our spending, including our political spending, is disclosed in great detail to the general public and union members, as required by statute since 1959. Any campaign finance reform needs to recognize the fundamental distinction between the democratically governed communications among working people through unions and the unaccountable spending by corporations and the rich.