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Initiative drive targets unions' political funds

Sticking point is automatic pay deductions

By Howard Fischer

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PHOENIX — The head of a group that promotes "limited government" and less regulation of business is taking aim at unions, or more specifically, some of their funding.

An initiative drive started Friday by Tom Jenney, executive director of the Arizona Federation of Taxpayers, would require specific, written approval from each worker for any deduction that ultimately would be used for political purposes.

Any public or private employer disobeying the law would be subject to a fine of at least \$10,000 per occurrence. He needs 153,365 signatures on petitions by July 3 to put the measure on the November ballot.

Several laws already prevent labor dues from going directly to finance candidate campaigns. This measure uses a broader definition of political purposes to include not just ballot measures but also any lobbying for or against bills at the Legislature.

Jenney said the measure is not specifically aimed at any one group, or even just at unions, whose members often pay their dues through payroll deductions.

But he did specifically mention the Arizona Education Association, which has been active in lobbying at the Capitol and whose positions on taxes and funds for private and parochial schools often differ from those of business groups.

AEA President John Wright said the initiative ignores the fact Arizona is a "right to work" state and no one can be forced to join a union. He said the nearly 34,000 AEA members all contribute their dues voluntarily.

And Wright said the positions AEA takes at the Legislature are decided by delegates elected by association members.

"Now, are those discussions and those positions always 100 percent? No," he said. "But we have a very deliberate and democratic process for our members to decide via votes and an approval process to decide this is . . . what they'd like their association to act on."

Jenney, however, said he thinks many teachers do not know they have options and the power to veto certain positions.

"We're just trying to make sure employers will not yank this money out of people's paychecks without them really knowing and really saying, 'OK, if this is going for political causes I really have opted in,' " he said.

The initiative is an extension of a perennial move at the Legislature to bar these kinds of payroll deductions for

At a glance

The proposed law: Each worker must give specific, written approval for any deduction that would ultimately be used for political purposes.

Penalty for violations: Any public or private employer disobeying the law would be subject to a fine of at least \$10,000 per occurrence.

Who is behind the initiative? Tom Jenney, right, executive director of the Arizona Federation of Taxpayers.

What is needed to get the initiative onto the November ballot? Jenney needs 153,365 petition signatures by July 3 to put the measure on the ballot. He also needs about \$500,000 to hire paid circulators to get enough signatures by the deadline.

public employees, including state and local workers and teachers.

This year's version was backed by groups that included the Home Builders Association of Central Arizona and the National Federation of Independent Business, both of which often find themselves at odds with unions on political issues.

But that bill failed again this year as even some Republican lawmakers questioned whether they should be interfering in the membership and dues policies of a voluntary organization.

Jenney's initiative not only bypasses the Legislature, but it goes even beyond the contemplated state action. It would affect not only public employers but also private ones.

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