

Gambling with our future

Is supporting corporate casinos really in our interest?

Volume 113, No. 11
December, 2013

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If a referendum were put on the ballot to place a toxic waste dump in the middle of Manhattan, would the New York State AFL-CIO support it on the pretext that it would create union jobs? I doubt it. And yet the state AFL-CIO did support, lobby for and spend money on a referendum that will cause a myriad of social problems and distress for working class families in various areas of the state on that very pretext. I'm referring to Proposal #1, which New Yorkers voted in favor of on Nov. 5.

This new law will result in increased problem gambling, preying on citizens at the lower end of the economic scale, and will shift dollars in our economy from current enterprises to a completely unproductive and detrimental industry, namely casino gaming (the euphemism for legalized corporate-sponsored gambling).

Millions of dollars went into the campaign to pass the casino proposal, mostly out of the coffers of the gambling interests. These interests contributed a huge bounty to the governor and state representatives, after which "the governor and legislative leaders changed the wording of the referendum to an unusually rosy tone, promising ... lower taxes, more school aid and more jobs – all of which are disputed," according to an AP news story.

The state AFL-CIO should not have supported this campaign. It was, unequivocally, the wrong thing to do and unions should have had no part in it.

Casinos will serve the interests of only one group: businesses who make money from people who are prone to gamble at casinos. These people are overwhelmingly from the lower economic stratum. The rich don't gamble at casinos. They own the casinos, which have only one function: to rip off the working class.

What we, as union members, should be especially concerned about is how this makes unions look: short-sighted and only interested in their own members, to the detriment of the rest of society. I think most of us will agree that

we live in a time when unions need all the friends they can get. And this sort of business is not helping our image.

When I lived in the Pacific Northwest, the logging industry unions opposed many laudable environmental causes like banning clear-cutting in our forests and saving certain species from extinction. Again, the pretext was jobs. But clear-cutting forests actually led, in the long run, to a loss of jobs. Had the unions supported innovative logging practices, the result would have been sustainable logging and a healthier economy. The unions instead took the easy way out and alienated themselves from important potential allies.

This is the same sort of curious and troubling stance the New York State AFL-CIO took in respect to the casino referendum. There is no study that can be found that supports the assertion made by the proponents of state-sanctioned gambling that casinos will result in a net increase in jobs. Instead, anyone who has studied this issue has found that casinos lead to lower-paying jobs and draw money away from more productive enterprises. There is little reason to believe that won't happen in New York, despite the expected promises made by politicians who are notorious for not delivering on those promises.

But more importantly, it is morally suspect to support the expansion of casino gambling. Those that will be hurt by this expansion are the most vulnerable members of the working class. Unions should have vigorously opposed casino expansion on those grounds. Indeed, this would have been the perfect time for the labor unions to emphasize instead the need for sustainable green jobs that the economy so desperately needs.

For the past several decades, many in the union movement have been looking for new organizing and movement-building strategies that would require, among other things, countering the negative perception that many working people have toward unions. At its convention this past September, the AFL-CIO sought to broaden its reach among working people, both union and nonunion. In order to do this, unions need to look beyond their parochial interests and consider the broader interests of workers as a whole. It's a matter of our very survival. These broader interests are not served by projects that damage the social structure, such as the building of casinos.

The labor movement must work to overcome the view by many people that unions are only out for themselves and their members. When unions look at their immediate interests without examining how their actions might affect the broader community or even their own future interests, they cease being part of a movement. We can call ourselves a movement only when we mobilize around issues that are inclusive, rather than those that divide us or cause damage to those among us who are the most vulnerable.

It's always about jobs. Right now some unions are supporting the expansion of something known as the Keystone XL pipeline. Like the casino campaign, the call to support Keystone is led by unions in the construction trades. Some of our most respected and leading climate scientists have warned that this expansion will lead to further deterioration of our planet's eco-system. And yet for a relatively few jobs, these unions are willing to risk everyone's future. Is this how we as union advocates want to be viewed?

If we want the union movement to have any chance of rebuilding itself, this way of thinking has to change. We can't join with the new "99 percent" movement that grew out of Occupy Wall Street and march downtown on May

Day while continuing business as usual.

There was once a time during the Great Depression and the organizing of the CIO when labor unions were our moral compass. It was truly a mass movement. Now, with about 12 percent of working people in unions, casting ourselves in with the lot of corporate gambling interests is a really bad idea. It is becoming less credible to a great number of workers in this country that the AFL-CIO speaks for them.

Supporting the expansion of casinos and other projects that serve the rich will only make unions more irrelevant in the eyes of those we are trying to organize, and will contribute to our further decline.

The opinions expressed in this essay do not necessarily reflect those of Local 802, its staff, its members or its other officers.