Keep partisan politics out of paycheck deductions

JOHN R. CANNON, FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS: MAY 15, 2015

By statute, public employees in Texas have enjoyed the right to choose automatic deductions from their paychecks to hundreds of organizations, regardless of political viewpoint. Accordingly, hundreds of thousands of public employee Texans voluntarily contribute to organizations as varied as The United Way, the State Employee Charitable Campaign, labor unions, and professional associations.

Automatic payroll deduction to all of these organizations is voluntary, convenient, safe and secure.

Employees do not have to worry about writing checks, using bank drafts, providing credit or debit card information to third parties, or subjecting themselves to potential Identity Theft. Nor do they have to exert extra time and money out of their busy schedules, or be away from their families, to visit a financial institution to make such arrangements.

But this would all change if supporters of Senate Bill 1968 have their way. SB 1968 would inject partisan politics into public employees’ paychecks by having legislative majorities, instead of the individual public employee, determine which organizations can receive automatic voluntary deductions. SB 1968 would prohibit most labor unions and professional organizations from automatic payroll deduction, but not others.

For example, teachers and other public-school employees would no longer be able to automatically deduct their dues to their chosen representative organization. Yet, some police, firefighters, and emergency worker unions would be exempt. Indeed, the various police and firefighter unions remain opposed to this divide-and-conquer manipulation. They surely know who would be next.

In addition, the bill would even prohibit local government bodies from developing, or maintaining, automatic deductions to proscribed organizations.

SB 1968, sponsored by Sen. Joan Huffman (R-Houston), passed in the Texas Senate on May 7 by a vote of 20 to 11 with all Republicans voting for and all Democrats opposed. Sen. Huffman made clear in hearings held on the bill that she was excluding those unions who tend to support Democrats from automatic dues deduction.

Now that the bill has passed the Senate, it heads to the House of Representatives for a vote in the coming days. Major national voices are weighing in. In its May 9-10 Weekend Edition, the Wall Street Journal editorialized that House Speaker Joe Straus (R-San Antonio) “derailed an earlier version of this bill by sending it to a committee chaired by a Democrat, and the eyes of free-market Texans will be on him to see if he again sides with unions over workers.” Thus, Republicans and their pro-business supporters tend to
I view this bill as part of their national strategy to weaken or destroy unions, including in “right to work” states like Texas.

I think this is a mistaken notion with regard to SB 1968. While excluding some unions and including others from automatic voluntary deductions would inconvenience the discriminated organizations, it will not destroy them. In fact, it could backfire as public employees learn of how Texas Republican politicians are removing choices from their hands and politicizing their paychecks.

I urge House Speaker Joe Straus, who has always been more thoughtful and collaborative in his leadership, and other House Republicans to rethink support of this bill. It would set a bad precedent for public policy.

Lastly, and most importantly, SB 1968 should be opposed because it sends the wrong message to Texans that the way to lead our state is through legislative force and majority bullying as opposed to consensus, collaboration, and respecting others’ differences and allegiances.

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http://txlege.texastribune.org/84/bills/SB1968/


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