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INTERNATIONAL UNION
CTW, CLC

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Testimony to the New York City Campaign Finance Board

Walter Cooper
Political Organizer & Member, SEIU 32BJ
March 10, 2011

Hello. My name is Walter Cooper and I am a proud member of SEIU 32BJ. I have been a member for 32 years, first as a janitor and then as a doorman in the Upper West Side where I live. Now I work with SEIU 32BJ to help communicate with our members about politics and how it impacts their lives.

When people think of our union they might think of our President Mike Fishman. But our union is not Mike Fishman. It is the poor and working class people that are members. We are doorpersons, porters, janitors, handypersons, and security officers. We are a union of people who struggle to get by working one or two or maybe three jobs. We are a union of immigrants and of low wage workers.

As a member of SEIU 32BJ and a citizen of New York City I support requirements for disclosure of independent expenditures. I want to know when corporations or other groups are spending large amounts of money to influence the public. I feel this is important information to have that will help me make better decisions about my own participation in the election process.

However, I am concerned about the idea that the Campaign Finance Board might regulate something so simple and so essential to the democratic culture of our union as one member's communication with another member. To me communication is fundamental to our union. It is also what helps make sure that our union is accountable to our members and that we as members have the means to influence the union. Communication ensures that our union IS our membership.

To me, the purpose of our union's political program is not to get certain elected officials elected. It is to educate members, to train them as leaders, and to give them the tools they need to participate in the public process during election season and throughout the year. This is something that has been a lifelong mission for me. It is the reason that about ten years ago I approached our President Mike Fishman and asked him to start a political program at 32BJ so that members could have the opportunity to participate in politics in the city, and so that we could do it together.

Our union is a democratic group of workers with shared interests. We are constantly communicating member to member about politics and about the positions of different elected officials on issues that impact working people. We communicate about elections, but we also communicate about voter registration and civic education, about laws that help working people, and about which elected officials support our fights to win contracts and improve our standards. This helps make sure that members have the information they need to participate in the political processes of our city and in the democratic process of our union.

For example, all of our political endorsements happen through a democratic process that includes our members. Our union's executive board, which is a majority rank-and-file members of our union, votes on every single political endorsement our union makes. Communication to and education of our members is a vital part of this process.

If disclosure requirements for independent expenditures include member to member communications, they will be burdensome and intrusive. Does this mean I will have to record any conversation I have with another member that mentions a politician? Does this mean that if I make 100 copies of a flyer to pass out at a worksite with the politicians who are supporting our fight for a fair contract, I will have to report this expense? These kinds of communications are fundamental to our organization. If the new requirements do anything to limit the ability of union members to participate in member to member communication, they will harm the ability of our union to spread information and the capacity of members to participate in the democratic processes of our union and our city.