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What labor may like best about Brown: He's not Whitman

Unions are giving the candidate plenty of financial support, even though he has made no commitment to their causes.

By Michael J. Mishak, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Sacramento

The television ads seize on the millions of dollars organized labor is spending to help elect Democratic gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown, warning that if he's victorious, he would be "their governor."

Advertisement

Labor leaders watching the spots, which are funded by billionaire GOP nominee Meg Whitman, should be so lucky.

Unions are indeed reaching deep into their pockets to help Brown, whose campaign needs the cash to compete with Whitman's personal fortune. But how much return they will get on their investment under a Brown governorship is unclear.

The last governor labor helped elect, Democrat Gray Davis, was a reliable champion of its agenda. Under Davis, state worker retirement packages and paychecks were fattened and a labor-backed bill that forced large corporations to provide healthcare for employees was signed into law.

But Brown's main appeal for labor may be that he is not Whitman.

"Whitman would be an absolute disaster," said Steve Smith, a spokesman for the California

Labor Federation. "She would set an agenda that would be the antithesis of everything we believe in."

Whitman has declared her intention to eliminate 40,000 state jobs, reduce workplace regulations and trade pensions for 401(k) retirement plans for new hires, in addition to raising the retirement age for most state workers. And the former eBay chief could use her wealth to skirt the labor-friendly Legislature by putting her ideas into, and funding campaigns for, ballot measures that could resonate with voters.

Labor backs Brown to preserve the generous benefits packages the state can no longer afford, said Whitman spokeswoman Sarah Pompei.

"Meg will take the necessary steps to right-size the government," Pompei said. "This is about doing what's best for all Californians."

But like Whitman, Brown supports the givebacks that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants from public employee unions to help ease California's financial crisis, will also raise the retirement age and has proposed other changes. And Brown has expressed "deep reservations" about a labor-backed ballot initiative that would allow the Democrat-dominated Legislature to pass a budget with a simple majority, a measure critical to liberals' agenda.

Brown has pledged not to raise taxes without voter approval, a stance unpopular with labor leaders because tax revenue pays for programs that employ their members. He also has boasted in interviews about having vetoed raises for state workers and supported limits on public employee pensions when he was governor decades ago.

As mayor of Oakland, he fought the powerful California Teachers Assn. over a proposal to unionize charter schools. And he is married to Anne Gust, a former executive of the Gap, a nonunion clothing retailer.

"For the unions, he's a wild card," said Bruce Cain, a professor of political science at UC Berkeley. If he wins, Cain said, "I don't think they can count on the fact that, just because they elected him, he's going to give them everything they want. It's not going to be an easy relationship."

Brown's ties to labor span more than three decades. Union leaders fondly recall the governor who broke bread with Cesar Chavez, marched with farmworkers and granted collective-bargaining rights to state workers, giving rise to a politically potent public sector.

But times have changed. At 72, Brown, who was later mayor of Oakland and is now California's attorney general, bills himself as a maverick with the leadership skills to end the state's chronic budget crisis. He would do so partly, he says, by taking on special interests in the twilight of his political career.

"I've got the freedom and independence at my stage in life to make the tough calls, no matter

what the issue or what the case," Brown said in a recent interview with KSWB-TV Channel 5, a Fox affiliate in San Diego.

If elected, Brown says, he would continue Schwarzenegger's bargaining efforts to scale back the retirement packages signed into law by Davis, which have created an escalating financial burden that threatens to choke off funding for other programs. Schwarzenegger is demanding concessions that include raising both the retirement age for new hires and the amount current workers contribute to their own pension plans.

In addition, Brown would cap retirement payouts and establish independent oversight of pension funds.

And although he is sympathetic to workers whose pay has been cut, he told The Times on Thursday: "If I am the governor and chief executive, I'm going to be a hard bargainer for the public interest. And I'll very carefully weigh the needs of state and local workers with the available money."

Tony Quinn, a political analyst and former Republican legislative advisor, said public outrage over government workers' benefits would force Brown to distance himself from labor allies.

"Everyone is hurting in the recession, and it looks to a lot of people like the labor movement and public employee unions are refusing to participate in the pain that everyone else is going through," he said.

A reminder to labor that Brown could buck its agenda at any time occurred last month when his office issued an opinion that killed the political momentum behind an Assembly Democrats' budget plan, which labor is pressuring lawmakers to pass because it would fund agencies that employ its members. The opinion essentially said the plan had major legal flaws.

Unions and their allies acknowledge that they are playing defense, hoping to limit their losses as the state struggles to close a \$19.1-billion budget gap.

"He was not the best mayor for us in Oakland and not the best for us when he was governor, but you can't say he doesn't have California in his heart," said Lou Paulson, president of the California Professional Firefighters. "These are difficult times to govern. Anybody who thinks [they're] going to get everything they want is naive."

Roger Salazar, a spokesman for California Working Families 2010, a union-funded political committee that is spending millions of dollars in favor of Brown, said labor knows that.

"The unions may have fights with Jerry, but they'd rather have fights with someone who shares their philosophy," he said. "With Meg, there's no common ground, anywhere."

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