

Some unions lead the charge on abortion access while others stay silent

By Eleanor Mueller

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Organized labor is once again proving it's not a monolith of support for progressive causes as some unions take a highly public stance against abortion restrictions — while others continue to steer clear of the issue.

Two weeks out from news that the Supreme Court is considering overturning *Roe v. Wade*, a landmark ruling that enshrined abortion rights for women nationwide, union officials' splintering responses evidence how a faction often leaned upon by the left must also answer to members scattered across a wide political spectrum. While some labor leaders are out front on the battle to protect access to abortion, others who have historically not weighed in on the issue are carefully maintaining their silence.

“We’re going to make sure that everybody running for the U.S. Senate and the Congress makes a commitment to standing for pro-choice position, just as we insist on them being pro-union,” said Mary Kay Henry, president of the 2 million-strong Service Employees International Union. “We will use our members as a political muscle to do both things.”

SEIU, which represents workers in health care and the public sector, partnered directly with Planned Parenthood on the organization of hundreds of events across the country over the weekend protesting restrictions on abortion access. Long-term, the union plans to “integrate it into our organizing and bargaining and our mobilization for the November election,” Henry said.

American Federation of Teachers, which counts 1.7 million members, sent an email to its staff encouraging their participation in the recent D.C. rally: “Please come out in your AFT blue t-shirts,” the email, obtained by POLITICO, reads.

“Jettisoning decades of established law and precedent risks the safety and health of women and girls — especially low-income women, rural women and women of color,” AFT President Randi Weingarten said. “It also raises the question of what’s at risk next.”

But other union officials have been notably less outspoken.

Teamsters; United Auto Workers; United Steelworkers; North America’s Building Trades Unions; and Communications Workers of America are among those who have not issued formal statements in the two weeks since the news and either did not respond or declined to provide comment upon request.

“They're just calculating, right? They're calculating: 'Am I going to get more benefit from taking a stand on this versus keeping quiet and out of the fray?'" political consultant Carly Cooperman said. "I suspect the unions most of all care about keeping their members happy, and so if they don't necessarily feel pressure to take a stand on this issue, they won't, because inevitably they're going to offend and upset people that are in their membership."

It's not the first time that organized labor has grappled with a disconnect between the progressive causes it advocates for nationally — and the often more conservative views of its rank-and-file. Ahead of the 2020 election, [there was much consternation](#) over union leaders' support for then-candidate Joe Biden and their members' continued favoring of former President Donald Trump.

Abortion is "the sort of issue that no business leader wants to get dragged into, right? If they could possibly avoid it, they would, because it is something people feel passionate about," Columbia Business School Professor Rita McGrath said. “That would apply to unions as well.”

AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler [tweeted the night of the leak](#) that “access to health care without fear and intimidation is every person’s right.” But the federation has since been silent on what, if anything, comes next.

The contrast in approaches could foreshadow fracture lines down the road.

Association of Flight Attendants-CWA President Sara Nelson, who is reportedly mulling challenging Shuler at the federation’s upcoming convention, put out a much more forceful statement the same day.

“This is not just a radical assault on our rights and settled law, it is an attack against the majority of this country and the ideals upon which it was founded,” Nelson said.

Anti-abortion groups say unions like AFA, SEIU and AFT are overstepping by weighing in on the issue, particularly given the number of workers who may pay unions dues despite not opting in to their union. Though unions represented some 15.8 million workers in 2021, [only 14 million of those were union members](#).

“The union was not formed to promote abortion,” National Right to Life Committee Executive Director David O’Steen said. “You got rank-and-file union members who had their dues being taken, and their leadership is speaking out for abortion.”

“It’s particularly egregious in non-right-to-work states, where they are compelled into a union to hold a certain job in a closed shop, and their dues are being taken from them, and half or better of the members would disagree with the leadership promoting abortion,” he added.

NewsGuild-CWA, which represents workers at media outlets including POLITICO, made the decision to speak out against the *Roe v. Wade* news given that it has weighed in on abortion in the past — even though its parent union, CWA, remains on the sidelines.

“It’s essential for workers and labor unions to lead on this because we have to protect the most vulnerable,” NewsGuild-CWA President Jon Schleuss said. “Abortion access is a health care right, and labor unions and workers fight really hard to have really good health care, so that should be included in that.”

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, for its part, has not put out a statement — but only because it signed onto [an amicus brief last year](#) with SEIU, which a spokesperson said made its position clear. That document argued that overturning *Roe v. Wade* “would create serious inequities for those who relied on” it and that “the real-world effects ... on women with low incomes and Black women would be devastating.”

Experts like McGrath say employers can expect abortion access to become a potential recruiting tool for unions down the road.

“Unions could use this issue as a way of saying, ‘We’re here for you, we’ve got your back,’ in a way that other entities would have more difficulty articulating,” McGrath said. “Especially if your employer is being squirrely about it, then the union has a really good opening to say, ‘The man does not care about you, we do. Come join the union.’ So it’s another place where corporate leaders are going to have to be super careful.”