

# Maule gives expert insight on the state of Okla. unions

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## Experts: Things could get tougher for Oklahoma unions

By M. Scott Carter | July 3, 2012

OKLAHOMA CITY – Twelve years after Oklahoma voters endorsed right-to-work legislation, labor unions remain active but smaller in the Sooner State.

But life could get more difficult.

With a little more than 120,000 members, state labor unions have never been the size of those in states such as Wisconsin, said Moore Association of Classroom Teachers President Jill Dudley. But Oklahoma unions, she said, continue to remain politically active.

“Unions are very active here,” she said. “But life is getting more difficult. The problem is the tea party and the extremists. They are trying to pick us off one by one.”

As an example, Dudley pointed to attempts by state lawmakers this year to eliminate the payroll deduction for teachers unions and public employee associations.

“That bill evolved during the year,” she said. “It was amended in committee to allow the deduction, but make the union pay for it. That would have cost our association, alone, more than \$9,000. We believe it’s political retribution; they are trying to shut down our right to free speech.”

State AFL-CIO President Jimmy Curry agrees – up to a point.

Labor unions, he said, are adapting and working to change with the time.

“No, by no means are unions dead,” Curry said. “In fact, in some sectors, such as building and trades, there’s a construction boom and union guys are working.”

And, in the public sector, Curry said some state unions have actually reversed the trend of anti-union legislation and policies.

“In Muskogee, the city didn’t want to recognize collective bargaining for nonuniformed employees,” he said. “But city workers there got organized and helped elect City Council members who were supportive of the employees. They changed things.”

However, for many public and private sector unions, challenges remain.

Because much of the country’s manufacturing is still outsourced overseas, union membership in many manufacturing plants has declined. In addition, unions face new difficulties in organizing some gaming facilities owned by Native American tribes, which have been recognized by the courts as sovereign nations.

“We have the Teamsters going to court in Thackerville,” Curry said. “But that will take another year or so.”

Legal experts say the trend is changing. Instead of increases in the number of decertification elections, Tulsa attorney Steve Hickman, who represents unions and labor organizations, said the state is seeing more organizational drives.

“There are more organizing drives that are successful than there are decertification drives that are successful,” he said.

Hickman, an attorney with Frasier, Frasier and Hickman, said

unions would remain strong if they stick to a three-pronged focus.

"It's all a matter of organizing, and politics and representing their members," he said.

And the political component, Hickman said, is vital.

"Unions and their members have to be engaged in the political process," he said.

Across the country, that message is being heard. In April, representatives of the Service Employees International Union said the union would target its massive field campaign on turning out voters in eight battleground states – about half the number it focused on in 2008.

At the same time, the union hopes to get 100,000 of its 2.1 million members to volunteer in its political program, twice as many as in the last presidential race.

Overall, the union is expected to spend at least \$85 million to help President Barack Obama win, similar to what it spent in 2008.

"It's a matter of figuring out where we can have the greatest impact," said Brandon Davis, SEIU's national political director, told the Associated Press. "You'll see an expansion of what we're able to do on the ground by being more efficient with our resources."

Oklahoma City attorney Byrona J. Maule, who represents employers, said unions have remained politically active, but she wasn't sure unions had been as successful in increasing their numbers as they have in the past.

"Here in Oklahoma, I think there has been a lot more organizing activity," she said. "When I get telephone calls, I know there's activity. I think the unions are trying hard to make inroads here. But that may be difficult because the

economy is very good.”

Maule, an attorney with Phillips Murrah, said the state’s high employment rate and strong economy make it more difficult to recruit union members.

“When the economy is good, unions don’t have as strong a position,” she said.

Maule also cautioned against big increases in anti-union legislation.

“That cuts both ways,” she said. “If too much of that type of legislation is passed, it may make it more difficult for the employer. The whole purpose of labor unions was to create an equal bargaining position for employer and employees. If the law rolls over the employees it would strengthen the labor unions.”

The most effective way to beat the unions, she said, was for employers to treat employees well.

“If you treat your employees fairly, then the bottom line is you don’t need a union,” she said.

Still, for union officials like Curry, state laws could change quicker than Oklahoma’s robust economy.

“We are still very active and I believe we’ll have the opportunity in the next few years to tweak and change some laws,” he said. “We’ve been successful, but it’s always one battle at a time. We’re changing and evolving with the times; that’s what we have to do. But the goal is the same – representing the working men and women of this state.”