

Union members march on Koch billionaire secret meeting

by: John Wojcik

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Hundreds of union members joined environmentalists and community activists who marched Sunday Jan. 30 on a secretive gathering of billionaires near Palm Springs, Calif., that constitutes the core financial support for numerous right-wing causes.

The marchers, hoisting signs blasting "corporate greed," were met at the entrance to the Las Palmas Rancho Mirage by a line of helmeted police who arrested 25 of them. Inside billionaires Charles and David Koch were holding a "retreat" for prominent conservative elected officials and right-wing political donors and strategists, among them House Republican leader Eric Cantor of Virginia.

Among those participating in the march were unions including the California Nurses Association and the United Domestic Workers of America. Common Cause and MoveOn.org were the main initial organizers of the protest at what has become an annual "Billionaire's Caucus" put on by the Koch Brothers, other corporate entities and a variety of right-wing think tanks. The groups involved have been celebrating the recent Supreme Court decision allowing unlimited corporate campaign contributions.

The two brothers control Koch Industries, the nation's second-largest privately held company. They have funded groups pushing "limited government," "libertarianism," and have helped organize major tea party groups. Other recipients of their money include the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

The unions participated in a Sunday morning panel discussion that focused on the Supreme Court decision, Citizens United vs. Federal Elections Commission. That ruling permitted corporations to pour unlimited amounts of money into political campaigns.

President Obama himself has criticized the decision and Americans for Prosperity, a group that David Koch helped found. Obama has cited the group for spending \$40 billion in special interest money in the 2010 election campaigns.

Earlier this month Common Cause sent a letter to the Justice Department saying that Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas should have disqualified themselves from the Citizens United Case because they had attended a meeting the Kochs sponsored.

A Supreme Court spokesman has told the press that neither justice actually participated in the meeting but said Thomas "dropped by."

"This is a fight for the heart and soul of America," said Bob Edgar, president of Common Cause.

"We cannot have democracy unless everyone has a voice," Cathy Riddle, a website developer at the demonstration, told the L.A. Times. "Corporations are not people. Donors like the Koch brothers are drowning us out. Their voices are louder."

Nancy Pfothenauer, a spokesperson for Koch Industries, sent out a press advisory that described the closed-door meeting, whose list of attendees was kept secret, as a gathering that "brings together some of America's greatest philanthropists and job creators who share a common belief that the current level of government spending in our nation is simply unsustainable."

A printed invitation to the event that made its way to the press said the purpose was to "develop strategies to counter the most severe threats facing our free society and outline a vision of how we can foster a renewal of American free enterprise and prosperity and review strategies for combating the multitude of public policies that threaten to destroy America as we know it."

Those who attend the Koch gatherings, according to numerous sources, see themselves as 'doers,' as men and women willing to fight the Obama administration and its perceived attack on U.S free enterprise and unfettered wealth.

The Kochs bought out the entire Las Palmas resort for Saturday and Sunday. Some of the demonstrators who stayed at the resort Friday night and booked dinners at their restaurants on Saturday had their reservations canceled by the resort.