



## Conservatives Want What Socialists Got: Anonymous Political Cash

By Peter Overby

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Even conservatives who once championed disclosure of political spending are now arguing that contributions should be able to be made secretly, and they point to the long-standing exemption from disclosure for the Socialist Workers Party.

From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Audie Cornish.

The Socialist Workers Party has never elected a candidate to federal office. In the last election cycle, it raised a total of \$16,500. Everyone who gave \$200 or more would fit into two stretch limos with room to spare. But the Socialist Workers have something that some conservatives want badly, an exemption from the law requiring public identification of party donors. NPR's Peter Overby explains.

PETER OVERBY, BYLINE: The Federal Election Commission exempted the Socialist Workers Party in 1979. Since then, the party has been able to ignore the legal mandate to disclose donors who give \$200 or more. The FEC hasn't offered that exemption to anyone else. But now, there's more interest in shielding donors from public scrutiny, especially on the right. Conservative donors say they're often targeted by liberal activists, Democratic elected officials, even President Obama and his administration.

A political action committee called the Tea Party Leadership Fund was at the FEC a few weeks ago, asking for a Socialist Workers Party type exemption. Exhibit A was the alleged IRS targeting of Tea Party groups. Congressional Republicans have sought to link that to the Obama White House. Dan Backer, the lawyer for the Tea Party Leadership Fund, told the FEC that all Tea Party groups suffered from the targeting.

DAN BACKER: I just think that the pervasiveness of this conduct is such that it really is beyond the pale.

OVERBY: Up in New York, Michael Krinsky is the long-time lawyer for the Socialist Workers Party. He says it's possible the Tea Party Leadership Fund has a viable case.

MICHAEL KRINSKY: If they could sustain the claim that there was deliberate IRS targeting of the Tea Party and its supporters, you know, that would be an important factor to consider, a very powerful factor to consider.

OVERBY: Still, Krinsky notes that the Socialist Workers' allegations of harassment and intimidation go deeper and reach back much further.

KRINSKY: Decades, decades, decades of very, very serious harassment by the United States government.

OVERBY: The FBI led the effort.

KRINSKY: This was a level of harassment which is intense. It was, you know, a program within the FBI, and the object of the program was stated to be to disrupt and destroy the Socialist Workers Party.

OVERBY: Other factors, too, may set the Socialist Workers' case apart from today's Tea Party groups. Take political clout. The Socialist Workers Party has a long record of political - well, political failure. Since its birth before World War II, it has never managed to elect anyone to federal office. Its fundraising base could be described as microscopic. In campaign finance law, that raises the question what would voters lose if they never knew about the party's financial backers?

At the hearing on the Tea Party Leadership Fund, FEC chairwoman Ellen Weintraub framed it this way.

ELLEN WEINTRAUB: That's what the Supreme Court has told us. We need to balance the need for information, the right of the electorate to be informed about who is supporting candidates and political groups.

OVERBY: And to answer her own question, what's lost with secrecy for the Socialist Workers, Weintraub said, not much.

WEINTRAUB: The names of those 11 donors to a party that had never supported a winning candidate.

OVERBY: By comparison, the Tea Party movement writ large operates with millions upon millions of dollars and has shown it can shape events on Capitol Hill. The FEC deadlocked on exemption for the Tea Party Leadership Fund. The group still has the option of suing the agency. But that might actually be the wrong course to take. John Samples is a constitutional scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute. He says that in the age of electronic disclosure reports and Internet access to them, the issues might be somewhat different.

JOHN SAMPLES: It's not that someone is going to come and beat you up.

OVERBY: He says donors nowadays face different problems, like personal abuse or boycotts of businesses.

SAMPLES: It's that you might find yourself in arguments you really don't want to be in, or there's reputational issues, particularly for larger donors.

OVERBY: Those would include superPAC donors of a million dollars or more, the kind the Socialist Workers Party has never seen. Peter Overby, NPR News, Washington.