Governor elected in recall now the target of one

By Kevin Yamamura - kyamamura@sacbee.com
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The correctional officers union announced plans Monday to recall Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and it was difficult to avoid comparisons to the historic election that swept him into office nearly five years ago.

Still, California appears a long way from ousting another governor.

Interest groups and frustrated citizens for nearly a century have threatened California governors with removal, but their efforts ended in a special election only once, in 2003. Schwarzenegger is the seventh consecutive California governor to face a recall threat, and this marks the fourth one against him.

It is, however, the first from a group as well-financed as the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, which has spent more than $17 million on political campaigns since 2005.

"If you spend enough money, you could probably find enough people to sign petitions for a recall," said Sal Russo, a GOP consultant who worked on the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis and dismissed the latest attempt.

"But what we've found is that to recall a governor, people need a reason beyond just disagreeing or being unhappy with his performance in office."

He said voters distrusted and disliked Davis in a way that differs from how they feel about Schwarzenegger.

The guards union has fought with Schwarzenegger over prison policies, and it has worked without a long-term contract since 2006. Lance Corcoran, a union spokesman, said Monday that his group is collecting 65 valid signatures to serve Schwarzenegger a notice-of-intent-to-recall. That would set off procedures culminating in a 160-day statewide signature-gathering drive. During that time, CCPOA would have to obtain 1,041,530 valid signatures to qualify the recall.

Political strategists said the recall effort is only as serious as the amount of money the union pumps into it. The leading 2003 signature-gathering committee, Rescue California, spent more than $3.6 million.

"We are 100 percent committed, and we've never been shy about investing in our
commitments," Corcoran said.

California will set a record this year for the longest budget impasse; the state is now in the 71st day of its 2008-09 fiscal year without a spending plan.

Schwarzenegger faces the lowest approval ratings of his second term. A Public Policy Institute of California poll last month showed 52 percent of likely voters disapprove of his performance, compared with 43 percent who approve.

Those numbers are not as dismal as Davis' in early 2003, when the Democrat faced a record budget deficit. A Field Poll in April of that year found that 65 percent of voters disapproved of Davis, compared with only 24 percent who approved.

Jaime Regalado, executive director of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles, questioned the union's chances of pulling off a successful recall.

"Davis was far more vulnerable," Regalado said. "It seemed like he was blamed for every bad thing: the budgetary impasses, the record deficits and the paralytic style of government in Sacramento."

Corcoran's union has a history of attacking Schwarzenegger, most notably when it drove a billboard around the Capitol with an unflattering picture of the governor in a thong. "In the history of bad governors," Corcoran said, "this is the worst governor we've ever had."

Schwarzenegger immediately brushed aside the recall talk.

"I will not be intimidated by anybody that is demanding more money than the state can afford and that demands deals more than the state is wanting to give," Schwarzenegger said. "So the prison guard union is not going to intimidate me with their kind of action."

"This is a different governor sitting here," he added. "I will not get intimidated."

Davis' biggest political problem five years ago was the energy crisis, said former adviser Garry South. Voters know little about the budget process and feel few effects of a late agreement. But they do notice when the lights go off.

"The foundational rationale for the Davis recall was the electricity crisis in 2000 and 2001," South said. "The budget deficit and the immigrant driver's license bill added fuel to the fire, but absent the 2000-2001 electricity crisis, he never would have been recalled. Arnold's history over the last five years is missing that piece."

Strategists also pointed out that Schwarzenegger starts off with a base of good will among voters because of his popularity as an actor. "To be honest, Schwarzenegger's force of personality allows him to wiggle his way out of a lot of predicaments that mere mortals can't escape," South said.

Yet disparate interests could join forces over their collective distrust of the governor, as was the case in 1991 when state employees, gay and lesbian groups and right-wing Republicans unsuccessfully tried to recall Gov. Pete Wilson.

Ted Costa, the fiscally conservative leader of People's Advocate who launched the 2003 recall of Davis, said he contacted Corcoran to discuss recalling Schwarzenegger. He dislikes
Schwarzenegger's sales tax proposal and believes the governor has continued in Davis' budgetary footsteps.

Outside the Capitol, Don Corgiat, an equipment mechanic for Modesto City Schools and a union member, said he’d consider supporting a recall drive as well.

"I doubt it would be successful," Corgiat said, "but that doesn't mean it's not worth bringing issues to light to the people of California."

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Prison guards union tries to recall governor

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Unwilling or unable to return to the bargaining table to negotiate a contract, the leadership of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association has taken up swords in a desperate crusade.

Union leaders can't buy Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger -- they've tried, but don't have the purchasing power with him that they have with Democratic and Republican legislators -- so now they want to recall him.

Clearly, the guards union doesn't know how to deal with a politician who won't accept its contributions.

This is a public employee union that gets its way by giving hefty donations to the people in charge. But there's been some pushback because of the union's aggressive style.

First, the guards tried to get legislators to restore a deeply flawed 2001-2006 contract. They dumped $477,000 into Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata's Leadership California committee, yet that effort died.

Now, union leaders look with nostalgia at Gov. Gray Davis and believe the 2003 recall was a mistake. No wonder.

Davis accepted $3.4 million in CCPOA contributions and gave the union unsustainable pay increases while taking away management's ability to operate the prisons day-to-day.

The 2001-2006 contract jettisoned the idea of balance between union and management needs - and the union leadership is doing everything it can to make that imbalance permanent.

This is a critical time for the union, which has elections next week. Rank-and-file members should remember that the 2001-2006 contract expired in July 2006, yet union leaders have failed to bargain in good faith for a new, realistic contract. That was a huge miscalculation on the part of union leadership.

No impulsive, expensive, last-ditch attempts to buy legislative action or recall the governor can hide that basic fact.

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Schwarzenegger's recall gamble

By agreeing to such a vote, he could win back the political capital he needs for his reforms.

By Joe Mathews

September 9, 2008

California's prison guards union, angry about years of contract and other battles with the state government, announced a petition drive Monday to recall Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The governor's initial response was to denounce the effort as a threat designed to secure the guards an unreasonable pay increase. "The state should not spend more money than we take in, and their intimidation tactics will not make me change my mind whatsoever, because I happen to not represent the [guards union]," he said. "I represent the people of California."

But, if the union's recall drive proves to be serious, the wiser course for Schwarzenegger would be not to fight but to embrace a recall vote. He might even help pay for the signatures needed to qualify it for the ballot.

Yes, in normal times, it hardly makes sense for a governor to call for a vote on his own removal from office. But very little about California and its government makes much sense right now.

The governor is stuck, unable to build the consensus necessary for government to function.

The budget is nearly three months overdue -- a record -- and there seem to be few signs that the Legislature's hyperpartisan Democrats and Republicans can reach a compromise. The state's prison system is effectively being supervised by the federal courts because the governor and Legislature have been unable to address problems with overcrowding and medical services. And despite a dangerous drought and a broad agreement on the need to rebuild the water infrastructure, California's elected leaders have been unable to reach an accord on a water bond.

In his second term, the governor has been politically toothless. The pattern is well established: Schwarzenegger says it is time to act on a difficult problem, he negotiates with stakeholders, listens to experts on all sides, fashions a bipartisan compromise and receives praise from commentators for his work.

And then nothing happens. The Legislature ignores him or becomes consumed in its internal partisan battles. His compromises die quietly.

The lame-duck governor has tried nearly every conceivable strategy to get his proposals through.
He's made nice with legislators. And he's threatened them. He's raised the possibility of taking disputes outside the Capitol, with ballot measures and special elections. And he's demanded that lawmakers remain in the capital to work out their differences.

He's railed against raising taxes. And he's now proposed a temporary sales tax increase to help solve the budget impasse.

He's tried to keep his nose out of the legislators' talks, removing himself from direct budget negotiations in particular. And he's tried to ram his compromises (on the budget and on water -- the latter a bond he fashioned with Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein) down the throats of lawmakers.

Nothing has worked.

Schwarzenegger desperately needs new momentum, but that requires a victory, and no one in Sacramento is willing to give him one. He had political capital from his 2006 reelection, but he spent it last year pursuing major reform aimed at providing health insurance for all Californians. He got widespread agreement from interest groups and from the Assembly, but it died in the Senate, felled by liberal Democrats (who held fast to pipe dreams of a single-payer system) and conservative Republicans (who thought the compromise was too liberal). It was the second time in his governorship -- the first came in the disastrous 2005 special election -- that he spent his supply of political capital without getting anything in return.

This year, his popularity has declined further. Only 38% of state residents approve of his job performance in the most recent poll from the Public Policy Institute of California. Schwarzenegger has more than two years left before term limits force him to leave office at the end of 2010. But his governorship is effectively over if he doesn't find a dramatic new way to escape his predicament.

That's why a recall vote would be good for him. Schwarzenegger, because of how he entered the office in 2003 -- elected after Gov. Gray Davis was recalled -- would be in a good position to tap another recall vote to get back some of the mandate he showed up with that year.

To gain from this recall, he would have to welcome it. European presidents, working in parliamentary democracies, often call new elections when their programs are blocked and they want a new mandate. California's European-born leader could do the same thing.

Schwarzenegger would have to level with the public. "You elected me in 2003 because the state government was a mess, the budget was out of control and the Legislature and governor weren't solving big problems," he could say. "Well, I've tried every tactic I can think of to address these problems. I've compromised again and again. But we're not delivering the big changes we need."

Schwarzenegger could pivot from there and say: "If you think I'm the problem, that a new governor could find a way that I haven't found, then kick me out of office. I'll be fine. My wife and kids will be delighted to have me home.

"But if you think I'm moving in the right direction, then vote down this recall -- and send a message that the Legislature needs to take action. I'll go back to Sacramento, and we won't do anything until they pass the compromises I've offered."

Such a campaign, for all its considerable risks, might well have advantages. It would focus public
attention on the state's problems. It also would draw out -- and into the public spotlight -- some of the interests and politicians and interests who are sabotaging compromise in the dark corners of the Capitol.

If he defeated a recall, Schwarzenegger would get one last chance at becoming the kind of history-making, reformist governor he has long promised to be. The union's threat is a gift in disguise. Schwarzenegger ought to unwrap it and make it his own.

Joe Mathews, a contributing writer for Opinion, is an Irvine senior fellow at the New America Foundation.