

# THE TENNESSEAN

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**CONTRIBUTORS | Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

## Corporations in Tennessee must stop supporting politicians who harm communities | Opinion

*Big companies in Tennessee have donated to politicians who have supported policies to disrupt democracy or not to act at all on behalf of citizens.*

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Guest Columnists

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### Key Points

Tennessee for All is a statewide coalition of faith, labor, and community organizations representing hundreds of thousands of people from Memphis to Mountain City.

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As a special session on gun safety continues, we feel it is necessary to point out a hard truth Tennesseans must confront: behind every bad law and bad lawmaker is a silent coalition of corporations and trade associations who have decided their profits are more important than our rights, our safety, and our democracy.

We tend to think about politics as a battle between two political parties, but that ignores the influence of money in politics and elections. Take the now famous Speaker Cameron Sexton, known worldwide for leading the expulsion of democratically elected lawmakers.

According to campaign finance reports for 2021-2022, his top corporate contributors were PACs affiliated with the Tennessee Realtors, Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of Tennessee, Charter Communications, HCA, and Amazon. Each gave more than \$30,000 to his campaign or affiliated PAC.

Aside from the expulsions, Speaker Sexton championed a direct attack on Nashville's local democracy, seeking to cut the number of Metro Council members in half against the will of

their residents. Should Tennesseans assume when they buy something on Amazon or go to an HCA hospital the profits will be used to attack our democracy?

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## **Why are companies supporting harmful policies?**

FedEx is celebrating 50 years of success in the Volunteer State and is an institution in Memphis, a majority Black city with a deep history in the civil rights movement.

Despite that, in the three years since George Floyd's murder, FedEx's TN political action committee spent more than \$170,000 supporting the supermajority that refused to take action to stop police violence.

The only legislation passed this year around policing in Tennessee was a direct attack on democracy, attempting to eliminate community oversight boards of police created by local governments or citizen referendums. Is FedEx delivering systemic racism to our doorsteps?

Why do these companies seem so committed to policies that harm our communities? Well for starters, a recent report showed that more than 60% of corporations pay zero in the state's corporate income tax. Notably, FedEx has seen a tremendous benefit from changes to the airline fuel tax. Before a cap on airline fuel tax was enacted in 2015, FedEx paid \$32 million per year. The first cap dropped their bill to \$21 million. The cap was then lowered to \$5 million, and just last session a bill passed that will drop it to \$1 million by 2025. That's at least \$31 million reasons to explain FedEx political investments.

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## **Corporate entities need to act on behalf of citizens**

Governor Lee raked in corporate contributions while driving extreme attacks on teachers, students, and public schools, including supporting the controversial standardized testing scheme causing havoc in the lives of thousands of 3rd graders and their families.

Despite the widespread opposition to the 3rd grade law, testing corporation NCS Pearson received a contract increase to \$132 million this year.

Private prison operator Core Civic has been a top Lee funder, which can seem unrelated until one considers that children who don't graduate high school are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested in their lifetime, and some research has shown holding kids back can increase dropout rates.

Following the killing of three children and three adults in The Covenant School shooting, the same corporate funded lawmakers have again refused to act and the chatter ahead of the special session suggests nothing meaningful will be done.

For too long, corporations like Amazon, HCA, and FedEx, and trade associations like the TN Realtors have avoided consequences for the actions or inaction of the legislators they support; that ends now.

We are demanding these corporations stop funding politicians who harm our communities!

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### ***Representing Tennessee For All***

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*Tennessee for All is a statewide coalition of faith, labor, and community organizations representing hundreds of thousands of people from Memphis to Mountain City. We stand united in a long-term mission to eliminate systemic inequalities, hold corporations accountable, and build a better Tennessee.*