

New 'D' majority in House gets busy passing labor bills

As promised by Democratic Party leaders, the party's newly sworn-in majority in Congress got busy in its first 100 "legislative" hours. Democrats in the House of Representatives passed long-blocked legislation, including several bills of particular importance to organized labor.

House Resolution 1, the first order of business in the House, would implement the terrorism prevention recommendations of the bipartisan 9-11 Commission. Some of the Commission's suggestions were rejected by Republican leaders in the previous Congress as too burdensome to businesses. Along with better screening of incoming air and sea cargo and better protection of nuclear facilities, the 280-page bill also repeals the clause in the 2001 Aviation and Transportation Security Act that let the Bush Administration nullify the union rights of airport screeners on the pretext of na-

tional security.

The Administration went to the mat to prevent the newly federalized airport screeners from unionizing in 2002.

At stake are the rights of 56,000 airport screeners to form a union and bargain for improved wages and benefits. HR 1 passed the House Jan. 9 by a veto-proof 299 to 128 margin and now goes to the Senate, where it's expected to pass. It will be politically difficult for Bush to veto the legislation, given that he's made terrorism the primary issue of his presidency. All five Oregon representatives voted for the bill, including Republican Greg Walden. Washington Congressman Brian Baird of Vancouver also voted in favor.

House Resolution 2, the second bill to pass the new House, is a defining issue for Democrats: a raise in the minimum wage. Under Republican leadership, the federal minimum wage hasn't

been increased since 1997, when it went up to \$5.15. That's the longest period without an increase since the federal minimum wage began under President Franklin Roosevelt. On Jan. 10, every Democrat in the House, plus just over one third of Republicans, voted for HR 2, which increases the federal minimum to \$5.85 an hour 60 days after enactment, then to \$6.55 a year after that; and \$7.25 an hour the following year.

Again all five Oregon House members voted for it, with Walden breaking ranks with the majority in his party to give low-wage workers a raise. The bill won't affect workers in Oregon or Washington because they're among the 29 states with state-passed minimum wages higher than the federal minimum.

The only votes against the minimum wage increase were from Republicans, some of whom argued that it would cause businesses to lay off the poorest workers.

Congressman Earl Blumenauer called that "hogwash" during the Congressional debate on the bill.

"I come from one of the states that increased its minimum wage and has indexed it automatically for inflation. Since we have done that, our economy is stronger, and our business leadership will tell you that what we have done is fair; it is good for all of us, not just the poor."

Increasing the federal minimum has been a top issue for unions, even

though very few union members earn the minimum. The minimum is a wage floor for all workers, and increases tend to trickle up to workers earning up to several dollars more, since their employers are paying a certain premium above minimum to attract better workers. A low minimum wage puts downward pressure on the wages of workers earning above, and can make it hard for unions in some industries to bargain wage increases, when nonunion competitors pay substantially less.

The 325 to 116 vote in the House is more than the two-thirds needed to override a presidential veto, but the bill will have a more complicated time in the Senate, where some senators say they are willing to compromise with the president, who has indicated he won't sign a bill increasing the minimum wage unless it also includes new tax breaks for business.

Two other bills of interest to unions would undo the most controversial parts of the 2003 Medicare Modernization Act, which created a prescription drug benefit for seniors. One bill, passed Jan. 12 by 255 to 170, would lift the ban on Medicare using its bargaining power to negotiate with drug companies for lower prescription drug prices.

All Oregon representatives except Walden voted for this bill.

Another change expected to pass would lift the ban on mail-order imports of lower-cost prescription drugs from Canada and other countries.

After these and other "100-hours" items are dealt with, Democrats could move to pass the law that is without a

doubt labor's Number One priority in Congress — the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). EFCA would make it easier for workers to unionize and get a union contract. Passage of EFCA, labor leaders say, would assure a union comeback after decades of decline. As of press time, the bill hadn't yet been introduced in the 110th Congress, but an outright majority of

Renaming the Committee on Education and Workforce to the Committee on Education and Labor reflects the new tenor of the Democratically-controlled Congress

House members are on record in support of it. And the Congressman who sponsored the bill last session, Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), now chairs the committee that will hold hearings on it. The name of his committee reflects the new tenor of the times.

For decades it was known as the Committee on Education and Labor, but in 1995, when Republicans took control of the House, it was renamed the Committee on Education and Economic Opportunities — a symbolic move that was considered a slap at organized labor. Two years later it was renamed again, the Committee on Education and the Workforce. Now it will return to being the Committee on Education and Labor.

EFCA may face a Republican filibuster in the Senate, and would almost certainly be vetoed by President Bush. So realistically, it won't pass until a Democratic president takes office. But union leaders want Congress to pass it anyway as a test of strength.

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