

Partisan battle lines drawn over Employee Free Choice

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — Partisan battle lines were sharply drawn Feb. 8 in the first congressional hearing on the labor-backed Employee Free Choice Act.

Led by House Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee Chairman Rob Andrews (D-N.J.), Democrats lined up solidly behind EFCA, which would help level the playing field for working people by fixing a badly broken system in which workers are routinely denied their freedom to form or join a union.

EFCA, House Resolution (HR) 800 was introduced Feb. 7 following a press conference that included officials from the AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations, congressional leaders, civil rights activists and workers.

The bill has a majority 232 co-sponsors in the House, including Oregon Democrats Earl Blumenauer, David

Wu, Darlene Hooley and Peter DeFazio, and Washington Democrats Brian Baird, Jay Inslee, Rick Larsen, Norm Dicks, Jim McDermott and Adam Smith. Seven Republicans also support the bill.

But the legislation faces an uphill battle in the the Senate, and will certainly be vetoed by President George W. Bush if it gets that far. It is unlikely the Senate will garner enough votes to override a presidential veto.

Union officials believe the Employee Free Choice Act will be a major topic in the 2008 presidential election.

At the first committee hearing, Republicans, led by Rep. John Kline (R-Minn.), held to the line pushed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Right to Work Committee. The panel's Republicans declared the only way to put unions in workplaces is by National Labor Relations Board-run

secret ballot elections.

Proponents of the bill, however, maintain that under the current process for joining a union, employers routinely harass, intimidate and even fire workers for trying — and current labor law doesn't have the teeth to stop them.

Gordon Lafer, a professor at the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon, pointed to federal election laws, and how employers cannot coerce employees over their vote. Those same economic protections applied to voters do not apply to workers in union elections.

Lafer said management is free to express its views on the union at any time, supervisors are urged to hold one-on-one meetings with employees, making their pro-management views known, but at the same time, pro-union supporters are banned from discussing the union or posting pro-union literature anywhere in the workplace.

He pointed out how employers can force employees to attend mass meetings where pro-union employees are told that if they speak they can be fired on the spot.

"If during the 2004 election, the Bush Administration could have forced every voter in America to watch the Swiftboat Veterans for Truth movie, with no opportunity for response from the other side — or if the Democrats could have forced everyone to watch Fahrenheit 9/11 — they might well have seized the opportunity — but no one would have called it democracy," Lafer said.

HR 800 would outlaw mandatory

closed-door meetings and impose stiff penalties on companies that coerce or intimidate employees with threats of closure or firings. It also establishes a third-party mediation process when

employers and employees can't agree on a first contract. And it enables employees to form unions when a majority express their decision to join the union by signing authorization cards.

Increasing majority support unions

A December 2006 survey by Peter D. Hart Research Associates shows that the public support of unions is at a 25-year high — 65 percent approve of unions while only 25 percent disapprove. Some 57 percent of all prime-age workers — roughly 60 million in all — say they would join a union today if given the chance.

Yet, according to a recent Department of Labor report, the overall unionization rate in the U.S. continues to decline. Just 12 percent of wage and salary workers were union members in 2006, down from 12.5 percent in 2005 and down from more than 20 percent in 1980.

According to the Hart poll, 69 percent said they were supportive of the Employee Free Choice Act as a means to help workers level the playing field. Only 23 percent of Americans expect the next generation's standard of living to be better than today's.

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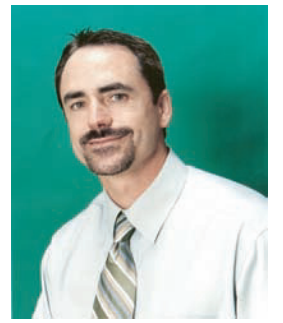
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