

U.S. labor leaders will keep pushing for EFCA

U.S. union leaders got closer this year to reforming America's basic labor law than they have in at least three decades.

After generations of decline, hopes for a union comeback are pinned on the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) — a bill in Congress that would make it easier for workers to unionize and get a fair union contract.

That bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives March 1 by a vote of 241 to 185. It has majority support in the U.S. Senate, but Senate rules allow the minority to thwart the will of the majority, because it takes 60 of the Senate's 100 members to close off debate. The vote to close off debate was 51 to 48. Opponents of the bill voted not to end debate.

If EFCA had passed the Senate, President Bush was certain to veto it. So no one expected it to become law this year. But holding a vote made members of Congress declare which side they're on, said Steve Smith, spokesperson for the AFL-CIO.

"We have every single member of the House and Senate on record," Smith said. "Do they stand with working people or not?"

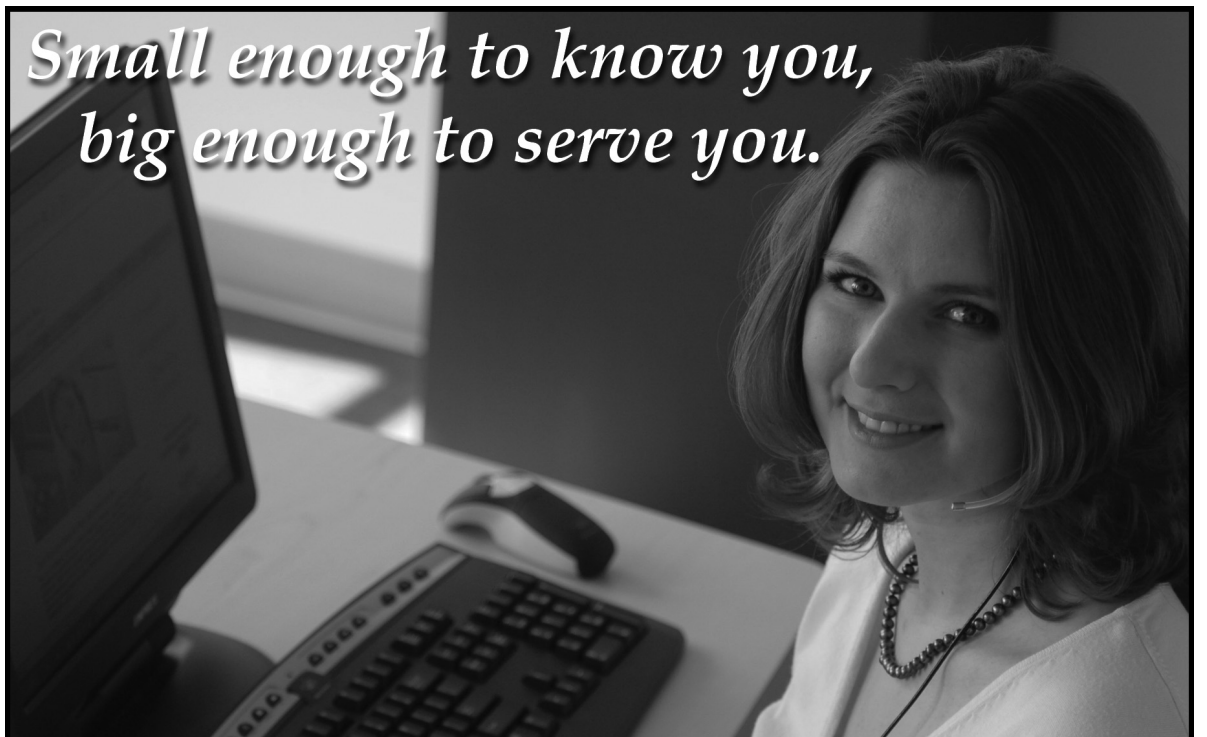
Under EFCA, if the majority of employees in a workplace want a union, they could unionize simply by signing authorization cards. Employers would have to begin bargaining a contract no more than 10 days after a request from the newly certified union. If no agreement has been reached 90 days later, either side could call in a federal mediator. If there's still no agreement 30 days after that, the mediator would refer the dispute to an arbitration panel, which would decide the details of a union contract, binding for two years. The contract could only be amended by agreement of union and management.

Finally, illegal anti-union conduct by management — such as firing union supporters, conducting surveillance, or interrogating workers about their views on the union — would get faster and heavier penalties.

Every part of EFCA is a response to the current labor law's failure to protect workers' right to unionize. Under the National Labor Relations Act, workers unionize via a government-administered election, but the law gives em-

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