

So you think it's easy to form a union? Better think again

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Have you seen the ads? Center for Union Facts, a business-funded anti-union group, has been running a pair of television ads in Oregon and several other states. One uses humor, the other sarcasm, but their key message is that "union bosses" are trying to change federal law to force people to join unions without a secret ballot election.

The ads are running in states that have competitive U.S. Senate races this year, because the fate of the bill the group opposes is in the hands of the Senate. It's called the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). It's a labor law reform that would make it easier for workers to join a union and get a union contract. It passed the U.S. House by a wide margin last year, and a majority of U.S. senators support the bill. But President Bush says he will veto it if it ever reaches his desk. Republicans led a filibuster when EFCA came to the floor of the Senate. It takes 60 votes to end a filibuster, and there weren't enough votes to do it. Oregon Republican Gordon Smith voted on the side to kill the Employee Free Choice Act.

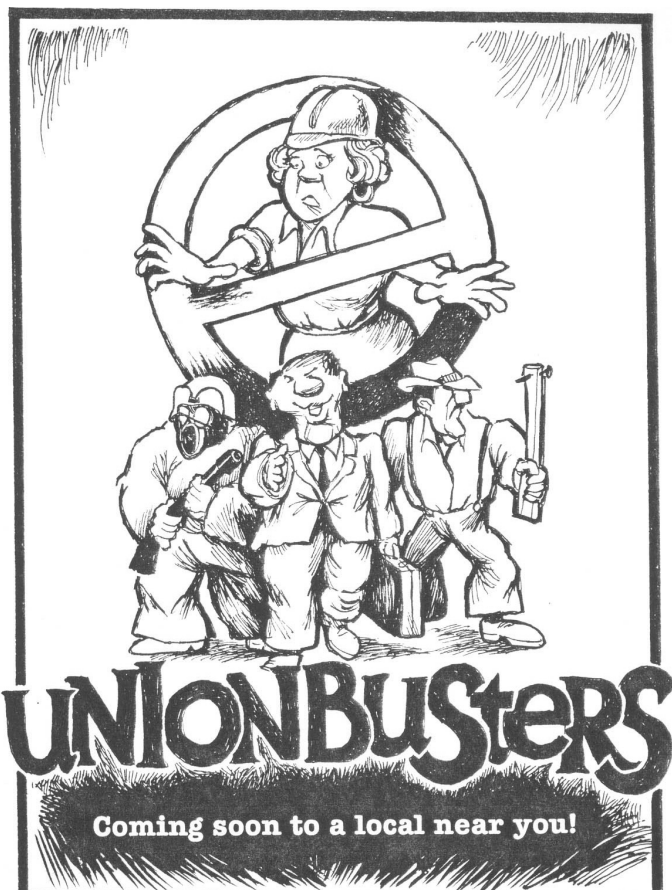
Federal law gives workers the right to join a union. If you think workers have an easy time exercising that right, you'd be wrong.

Some employers voluntarily sign union contracts in order to get skilled union trades workers. But in most workplaces, employers turn workplaces into war zones when union organizers appear.

Consider the case of Rogue Valley Door, in Grants Pass. It is a privately-owned maker of wooden doors, with around 250 production employees.

Ken Smith is a laborer there. When he saw his wife, who works at Safeway, defended by her union, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555, he decided he wanted a union too, and in October asked his wife's union rep for advice. He was given a number for the United Steelworkers (USW), and he talked to organizer Pete Passarelli, based out of Auburn, Washington.

Passarelli and Albany Steelworkers leader Ron Rodgers met with Smith and other Rogue Valley Door workers



to tell them what it would take to get a union. They'd have to form a committee, and get a majority of their co-workers to sign union authorization cards, then request a government-run election, and get a majority vote in the election.

In late November, Passarelli, Rodgers and several others stood outside the plant gate during the afternoon shift change and handed out fliers announcing a union meeting that night. About 25 workers showed up at a nearby pizza joint. The next night, about 30 came. Pro-union workers formed an organizing committee.

But company owner John Dunkin was also handed the union flier that first day. And he didn't want employees to have a union. Right away, management hit back hard to stop the campaign.

The union had no contact list of workers. Union staff weren't allowed on the property. Only Rogue Valley workers themselves would be able to talk to other workers about joining the union. And managers put a chill on that.

In front of workers, managers removed pro-union materials from the break room. The employee bulletin

boards were covered in glass and locked.

Several company-wide meetings were held at which employees were shown anti-union videos.

Managers announced a new work rule: Employees were forbidden to talk about the union. They could speak against the union, and they could speak about other things unrelated to work, but pro-union talk to co-workers was prohibited or limited to lunch breaks. Two employees were given written warnings for breaking the rule.

Rogue Valley Door, like most non-union employers, lacks a formal pay scale. Pay, work assignments, promotions, even continued employment, depend on managers' good will. Open support of the union campaign would not endear workers to management. So the union campaign depended on workers' willingness to risk their own future in the company. And the union didn't exactly look powerful; union staff couldn't even come onto the property.

A handful of pro-union workers wore union T-shirts that said "United we bargain, divided we beg."

Rogue Valley Door managers approached workers individually and asked them if they supported the union, and whether they knew which of their co-workers supported the union. Pro-union workers swallowed their pride and played dumb. Anti-union workers took the chance to get ahead and named names. It became harder for workers to trust each other. It became scarier for pro-union workers to appeal to co-workers to sign union cards.

Known pro-union workers were watched closely while they worked, followed when they left their work areas, even watched on their way to the bathroom to see if they talked with anyone. Managers monitored their conversations with co-workers.

With the housing downturn, support for the union looked even riskier. Fewer doors were being sold. Rogue Valley Door began laying workers off.

(Turn to Page 9)



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