

Labor's top priority

Employee Free Choice Act faces roadblocks

Passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, to help level the playing field between workers and employers in union organizing and in bargaining or first contracts, will be labor's top priority in the new Congress, top AFL-CIO officials said.

But roadblocks remain for the legislation.

One big problem will be the U.S. Senate, where Democrats did not get the filibuster-proof 60-vote majority they were shooting for.

Earlier this year, Senate Republicans, led by Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kent.), filibustered an Employee Free Choice Act bill that had passed by a wide margin in the House. It takes 60 votes in the Senate to end a filibuster.

Democrats picked up seven seats in the Senate on Nov. 4, including Oregon's Jeff Merkley, who campaigned in favor of EFCA. But McConnell, who is married to lame duck Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, was re-elected and will be back to lead another filibuster.

"Corporations are scared to death of this," Dave Gregory, western regional political director for the national AFL-CIO, told the Oregon

Act." Gregory said all you have to do is look at who is behind the attacks on EFCA. "It's the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Retail Industry Lead-

completed Step 1 "by electing people who support us and who support working people. He said Step 2 will entail passing a law that helps shore up the nation's working and middle class.

"Unions are the best route to the middle class and rebuilding America's economy," he said. "The Employee Free Choice Act is the way to make that happen."

The labor movement's goal is to pass a bill that establishes stronger penalties for violation of employee rights when workers seek to form a union and during first-contract negotiations; provides mediation and arbitration for first-contract disputes; and allows employees to form unions by signing cards authorizing union representation.

Big corporations have targeted their attacks on the card-check portion of the Act because that's what has resonated with focus groups. It's also an issue that can easily confuse workers. But card-check recognition has been part of labor law for the past 45 years. As it's written, however, such recognition only occurs if the employer agrees, and employers rarely do, thus opening the way for oftentimes nasty anti-union campaigns before a secret ballot vote ever takes place.

Government statistics found that companies violated the rights of 26,824 workers in 2006 alone (and those are just the documented cases). And even when workers win a union election, many companies make excuses to delay bargaining. According to a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 44 percent of workers who form a new union never reach a first contract.

Under the proposed Employee

Free Choice Act, workers can choose to hold a secret ballot election if they wish. But it will be their choice, not the employers.

There is no doubt that a majority of Congress supports the Employee Free Choice Act. So does President-elect Barack Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden.

National AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka said that every possible way to get the legislation through Congress will be on the table. "There are an infinite number of strategies to get it passed and each one of them will have our complete attention," he said.

Gregory reminded the Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board that "we still have a lot of work to do" to get EFCA passed.

The AFL-CIO is asking union members to call their U.S. Senators and representatives and encourage them to support and co-sponsor the Employee Free Choice Act.

(Editor's Note: Press Associates Inc. contributed to this report.)

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NATIONAL AFL-CIO

AFL-CIO Executive Board at its quarterly meeting last month. "During the election, corporations went after every Senate candidate that supported the Employee Free Choice

ers Association, the National Right to Work Committee, and Associated Builders and Contractors. That tells you something right there."

Business groups pooled an estimated \$60 million to attack politicians who supported EFCA. For the most part, they lost.

In a handout to Executive Board members, the AFL-CIO wrote:

"Do you think they did that (spent millions of dollars) because they want to preserve 'democracy' in the workplace? The idea that business groups think anybody will believe they're fighting for democracy in the workplace is laughable. Let's be very clear. They don't want workers to have a free choice to bargain for better wages and benefits and rebuild the middle class. They want to keep things the way they are, with corporations having all the power."

Gregory said that organized labor



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