A labor 'look back' over Obama's first year in office

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

One year into his four-year term, President Barack Obama's list of achievements looks a little thin when it comes to issues of primary importance to organized labor. The list consists of the stimulus act, several pro-labor appointments and executive orders, a tariff on Chinese tires, and a law that gives women workers more time to sue over wage discrimination.

"[When Obama was inaugurated], obviously everybody had very high hopes for change and it was almost building up to unrealistic proportions," said national AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler. "But we feel really good about some of the changes that have been made in the agencies and on the regulatory levels."

Sworn in Jan. 21, 2009, Obama reversed a number of anti-union positions from the previous Administration. In his first few weeks of taking office, Obama issued executive orders:

• Ending a ban on all-union project labor agreements on federal construction projects.

• Preventing contractors from being reimbursed for spending money to influence workers deciding whether to form a union and engage in collective bargaining.

• Ending a Bush Administration rule requiring federal contractors to post notice that workers can limit financial support for the unions that represent them.

• Requiring federal service contractors to offer jobs to current workers when contracts change.

Obama also signed a bill Bush had said he would veto — the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act — which overturned a 2007 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that denied a woman's right to sue in cases of pay discrimination if she waited more than 180 days after the first paycheck.

BARACK OBAMA

Obama appointed Hilda Solis, daughter of a Teamsters shop steward, to head the Department of Labor. Solis was a four-term Congresswoman and before that chairwoman of the California State Senate Labor Committee. Since her confirmation in February, the Department of Labor has added 250 investigators to the department's Wage and Hour Division.

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> **LIZ SHULER**

Obama had less success with appointments to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which adjudicates unfair labor practice cases. Since 2007, three of the five seats on Board have been vacant. Obama promoted eight-year NLRB member Wilma Liebman to chair the Board, and on July 9, made nominations to fill the vacancies: Mark Pearce, a union-side labor lawyer; Craig Becker, a lawyer for the Service Employees International Union and the AFL-CIO; and Brian Hayes, management-side labor lawyer and Senate Republican labor policy director. By law the NLRB can have no more than three members of the president's political party. But Becker's nomination was nixed after Sen. John McCain put a hold on it, and thus far none of the three have been confirmed.

Organized labor was less pleased with some of Obama's other appointments, including U.S. trade negotiator: Obama appointed NAFTA supporter and former Dallas mayor Ron Kirk.

The AFL-CIO did cheer in September, however, when Obama imposed import tariffs on Chinese tires. Responding to a complaint the United Steel Workers (USW) filed in 2008, the U.S. International Trade Commission (ITC) found that a surge of Chinese tires into the United States was harming the domestic tire industry. USW wanted import quotas, but the ITC recommended tariffs for three years, at 55, 45, and 35 percent. Obama opted for milder tariffs of 35 percent the first year, 30 percent the second year, and 25 percent the third.

By price tag, the biggest piece of legislation signed by Obama is the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, better known as the stimulus act. Tax cuts were two-fifths of the package, and another quarter took the form of additional benefits for the poor and unemployed. But aid to the states saved some jobs of teachers and public employees, and some building trades workers got extra work here and there on stimulus funded public works projects. Still, unemployment was 8.9 percent when Obama signed the in February 2009; at the end of 2009 it was 10 percent.

Union leaders also had hoped their top priority, the Employee Free Choice Act, would pass last year. The bill would crack down on employer lawlessness during union campaigns and make it easier for workers to unionize and get a first contract. Obama has said he would sign the bill, but has not pushed for its passage. It has been held up in the Senate, where Republicans are certain to filibuster. It takes 60 votes to overcome a filibuster.

For months, union leaders were waiting for Minnesota Senator Al Franken to become the 60th vote; he was sworn in July 7. But then Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy, diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor in May 2008, died Aug. 25. Organized labor waited for Kennedy's replacement, only to find Massachusetts voters elected a Republican, Scott Brown, in the Jan. 19, 2010, special election.

Much of the president's agenda in Year Two could come down to whether Democrats are able to unite and overcome the Senate filibuster.

...Imported windows

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this."

Housing Authority of Portland architect Leslie Crehan said Cascadia was selected because it uses a different technology in its glazing process and that the "heat mirror technology" is new for Serious Materials.

"We asked (Medallion) for other projects of more than five stories to use as examples," Crehan aid. "They couldn't provide any examples. That made us nervous."

The Medallion spokeswoman said the replacement windows it offered were 525 series windows (formerly sold under the brand name Alpen). Alpen, of Boulder, Colorado, also was acquired by Serious last year. Production for that particular brand of window recently moved from Boulder to Chicago.

Brad Begin, vice president of sales for Serious Materials, in an e-mail to the Labor Press wrote: "Alpen is the oldest and longest continuous fabricator of insulated glass units using heat mirror and has been producing heat mirror products for almost three decades, and has more large project experience than any company in the world."

Begin said Serious Materials is about to close a multi-million-dollar deal to provide suspended coated film glass units for the 6,500 windows in the Empire State Building.

Crehan said drawings and specs for the Hollywood East apartment weatherization project aren't completed yet, but at this point, "we will choose the window that we feel best about, a window with a track record."

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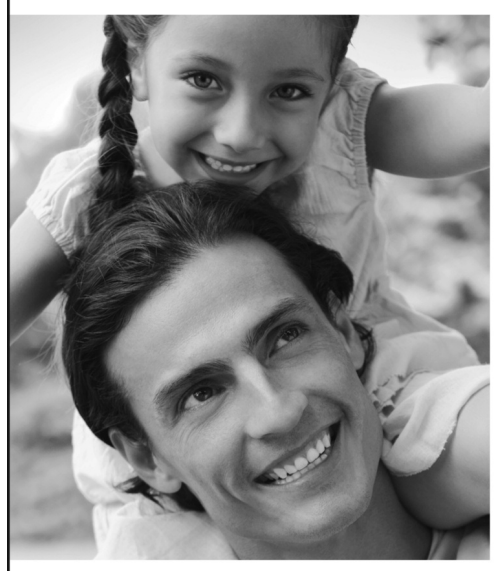

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