

Filibuster lives on in U.S. Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — A campaign backed by organized labor to curb the power of Senate minorities to halt virtually every piece of legislation by filibustering against it went down in flames Jan. 27.

After eight hours of debate on rules changes, reform proposals backed by unions failed not only to get the 67 votes Senate leaders decided they needed, but didn't even get a majority of lawmakers.

Instead, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky), promised to voluntarily limit filibusters on motions to debate bills and on presidential nominations.

Some Democrats voted to keep filibusters going, remembering when they were in the minority — or fearing they would be again. In 2012, Dems must defend 21 Senate seats, compared to 10 for the GOP. Democrats now hold a 51-47 seat advantage, plus two Demo-

cratic-leaning independents, who are also up for election in 2012.

The defeats on the filibuster means a 41-person minority in the 100-member chamber can still bring business to a halt, or prevent measures from being debated, even if those measures have majority support.

One proposal that was voted down was by Senate Labor Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), that would permit limited filibusters, but with smaller majorities needed to shut them off each time a vote was called. He lost, 84-12.

Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR), and Tom Udall (D-N.M.), argued for changing vote requirements and said a senator who wants to filibuster must actually stand and talk against it until 60 votes shut down debate. Right now, just the threat of 41 votes for the filibuster is enough to keep it going — even when no one is talking. Their plan lost 51-46.

Curbing the filibusters has been a particular cause of Communications Workers of America President Larry Cohen, chair of the AFL-CIO Legislative Committee. Cohen has seen filibusters and threats block everything from the Employee Free Choice Act to extensions of unemployment benefits. A minority bloc uses the threat of a filibuster to strong-arm majorities into agreeing to their demands. That's how McConnell combined the Bush tax cuts for the rich with the extension of unemployment benefits late last year.

"We commend Harkin, Merkley and Udall for their efforts, and we and the 60

other progressive groups who worked on these changes will continue our efforts to get real reform," CWA said.

In a statement, Merkley said: "We now have 46 senators on record supporting making the filibuster real. We will build on that support in the future

to restore deliberation to this chamber. Until the Senate returns to being a deliberative body where debate is encouraged and obstruction is rare, I'll continue waging the fight to make the institution serve the American people the way it ought to."

GREED AT A GLANCE

Corporations are beginning to release their CEO pay figures for 2010, and last month brought the official news that Walt Disney CEO Bob Iger pulled in \$28 million last year, a 30 percent boost over his 2009 take-home. The Disney board calls the generous boost for Iger a reward for his "exceptional performance" amid a tough economic environment. Disney, overall, netted \$4 billion in 2010 profits. Yet the company is still insisting that Disney workers making under \$9 an hour take on as much as another \$500 per month in added health care costs ...

Disney workers have been pushing, unsuccessfully, the last two years for an advisory shareholder vote on the company's executive pay. But that vote will now be coming anyway. The Dodd-Frank financial reform signed into law

last summer requires all publicly traded companies to give their shareholders a "say on pay," and last month the federal Securities and Exchange Commission okayed new regs that put that mandate into actual effect. The nation's top companies, under the new rules, will have to hold advisory shareholder votes on top exec pay at least once every three years and also disclose, in their SEC filings, "whether and how" they took the vote results into account. Some firms already let shareholders take advisory votes on top pay. Last year, at about one in every 10 of these firms, shareholders turned thumbs down on the pay plans presented.

(From Too Much, an online weekly publication of the Institute for Policy Studies; editor@toomuchonline.org.)

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