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Organized labor campaigns for immigration overhaul

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Few topics are as touchy and divisive as immigration, and opportunities to reform U.S. immigration policy are rare. That's why, with President Obama and a group of U.S. senators proposing a package of reforms with bipartisan appeal, U.S. labor leaders are campaigning to make sure the reforms benefit workers, not just employers.

In mid-February, the national AFL-CIO held events with local labor leaders in 14 cities to promote labor's standards for reform. On Feb. 19, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) announced a \$250,000 nationwide Spanish language radio ad — the first in what it said would be a multi-week media and field campaign to win congressional enactment of immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship. And on Feb. 21, the AFL-CIO and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce jointly announced agreement on a set of common



To promote a union movement campaign for immigration reform, Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain stages a Feb. 19 press conference outside Portland's immigration office, alongside Francisco Lopez of the immigrant rights group CAUSA (left), and Brenda Mendoza (right) of the farmworker advocacy group PCUN.

principles for immigration reform.

Immigration has sizable labor market impacts. Industries with lots of immigrant workers can see wages fall, and the downward pressure is worse in the case of illegal immigrants, since their tenuous status leaves them more open to exploitation. The latest U.S. Census Bureau estimate is 40 million foreign-born residents out of a total U.S. population of 312 million. And 28.5 percent of the immigrants — 11.1 million — were unauthorized, having either entered illegally or overstayed visas. While the foreign-born are 12.8 percent of the overall population, immigrants make up 42 percent of the 1.6 million workers in farming, fishing, and forestry; 31 percent of the 8 million in building and grounds cleaning and maintenance; 23 percent of the 9.6 million in construction; 22 percent of the 4 million in computer and math occupations; 22 percent of the 11.1 million in manufacturing; and 20 percent of the

11.3 million food preparation and serving.

Re-establishing control over immigration is key to the compromise package being discussed in Washington, D.C. The package would include further increases in border control, and increased enforcement against employers who hire undocumented workers (while also making it easier for them to verify eligibility for employment). It would also include a process whereby the estimated 11.1 million illegal immigrants now in the United States could become legal permanent residents and ultimately attain the full rights of U.S. citizenship. And it would include a more efficient and sensible system for bringing in future immigrants to work.

The union position on these details is spelled out in an August 2009 joint statement of principles by the AFL-CIO and Change To Win labor federations. That statement outlines five key pieces:

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SPEEA units reach split decision in Boeing contract votes

SEATTLE — Engineers and technical workers at The Boeing Co. returned a split decision in voting on new four-year contract offers. Engineers accepted their offer, and technical workers rejected theirs, while also giving their negotiation team authority to call a strike if necessary.

In votes tallied Feb. 19 by the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA) Local 2001, engineers in the Professional Unit accepted Boeing's offer 6,483 to 5,514. The Technical Unit rejected their offer 2,868 to 3,203 and granted strike authorization by a vote of 3,903 to 2,165.

The engineers (aerospace, electrical and other fields) and technical workers (designers, technical writers, planners and others) work on plans for new planes and solve problems that arise on the factory floor. The assembly of the planes is performed by members of the Machinists Union, which agreed to a four-year contract in 2011.

SPEEA, an affiliate of the International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers, represents 22,950 employees at Boeing (15,550 engineers). Most work in the Puget Sound

region of Washington state, but the contracts also cover 200 employees at the Gresham plant in Oregon, as well as workers in Utah and California.

The union bargains contracts for the Professional Unit and Technical Unit at the same time, but the agreements are separate and independent from each other.

Negotiating teams from both units had recommended that workers reject the offers and support strike authorization.

SPEEA last struck Boeing in 2000 when all workers walked off the job for 40 days. That strike slowed airplane production to a crawl and prevented Boeing from delivering aircraft.

A key sticking point in the most recent bargaining has been Boeing's demand to switch new hires to a defined contribution pension plan, i.e., a 401(k). Union officials say the new retirement plan slashes benefits by 41 percent. Boeing's analysis shows a 33 percent cut.

"Pick your favorite analysis, or do one of your own; it's a significant cut in the retirement contribution," said SPEEA Executive Director Ray Goforth in a website video to members.

Boeing also refused to ensure existing employees their benefits would not be affected by changes to the Social Security cap on taxable income (scrap the cap) or raising the Medicare eligibility age to 70. Both are being considered by Congress and, according to union officials, would dramatically impact existing retirement packages.

"Interestingly, The Boeing Com-

pany has amended the executives' pension so that it is protected from 'scrap the cap,'" Goforth said. "We asked for similar protections for (members) and their answer was, 'why are you worrying about it; you don't need to worry about this.'"

Boeing did agree to extend most elements of the previous contracts, including 5 percent annual wage pools

and no increases to employees for medical coverage. Union officials said it was members' activism and their overwhelming rejection of the company's first contract proposals in October 2012 that forced Boeing to improve its offer.

SPEEA contracts expired Nov. 25, 2012. Negotiations started in Novem-

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UFCW grocery workers ratify more contracts

Some 14,000 grocery workers, meatcutters and central checkout clerks at major supermarkets in Oregon and Southwest Washington have wrapped up voting on new three-year collective bargaining agreements.

Workers are represented by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555. A 45-member Unity Bargaining Committee has been in negotiations for more than 22 months with Allied Employers Inc., a Kirkland, Washington-based firm that represents Fred Meyer and QFC (Kroger), Albertsons, and Safeway at the bargaining table.

It is the first time in the union's history that contracts from each geographic region within its jurisdiction — from Klamath Falls, Oregon, to Longview, Washington — were bargained simultaneously.

Voting began in early February and wrapped up Feb. 20 with the ratification of contracts in Klamath Falls, Tillamook, and Longview.

The union had scheduled a series of strike vote meetings for the month of February because employers had moved very little on their demands to increase the minimum waiting time to receive full health care coverage; to double the maximum out-of-pocket costs for family health insurance to \$12,000; and to schedule workers seven days a week without any days off or having to pay overtime, effectively eliminating the five-day work week.

The possibility of strike pushed the employer group to engage in a four-day, 68-hour marathon bargaining session starting Jan. 29. Those talks resulted in an offer the union was willing to take to its membership for a vote.

Local 555 Secretary-Treasurer Jeff Anderson told the Labor Press month that "This was some of the toughest bargaining in bad times that I've ever seen." Anderson is a 36-

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