

Unions see better days ahead under Obama's leadership

On Wednesday, the Labor Department reported that trade union membership rose 420,000 in 2008. New legislation could speed such growth.

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Happier days are here for the labor movement in the United States. The AFL-CIO spent \$53 million and its trade union affiliates \$250 million to help Barack Obama win the White House, relying mostly on "field mobilization" campaigns to turn out a favorable vote.

The excitement level already has risen at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington. "The most pro-working-family president in years," noted one staffer.

Some labor economists see a possible revival of the labor movement over the next few years leading to a more stable economy through a more balanced distribution of income. CEOs and Wall Street executives would get a smaller share of the nation's economic pie, and workers, with their regular spending needs, a bigger chunk.

President Obama's newly appointed National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) chair, Wilma Liebman, is seen as more sympathetic to labor than her recent predecessors.

"What a refreshing change it will be to have a labor board that aims to safeguard rather than blockade workers' rights," stated AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

On Wednesday, the Labor Department reported that trade union membership rose 420,000 in 2008, to 12.4 percent of the workforce, up from 12.1 percent in 2007.

Moreover, Obama has promised to push for and sign the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) should Congress pass the measure. Trade unionists see that bill as offering a major opportunity to enlarge their numbers by making it easier to organize more offices and more plants.

Though passed by the House in 2007, the bill got no further, and faced a veto by President Bush.

Senate majority leader Harry Reid says he will bring up that bill this summer. There promises to be a major political battle between trade unionists and their Democratic allies, and business management and its Republican supporters over EFCA. Millions probably will be spent on the campaign in the next several months.

Harry Holzer, an economist at Washington's Georgetown University, is skeptical that the EFCA will get the 60 votes necessary in the Senate to avoid a Republican filibuster.

John Schmitt, an economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a liberal Washington think tank, says that organized labor hopes for sufficient Republican senatorial defections, perhaps Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter and Maine's Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins.

At present 7.6 percent of the private sector labor force and 36.8 percent of the public sector are unionized. In 1955, more than a third of working Americans belonged to a union. If unions are able to boost membership decidedly over the next several years, Mr. Schmitt sees significant economic benefits:

- Trade-union workers would receive substantial wage and benefit increases. As it is, union workers earn 30 percent higher wages than comparative nonunion employees. Union workers also are 59 percent more likely to have employer-provided health insurance.

- Larger union membership would have political consequences. It could lead, Schmitt argues, to national health insurance for all Americans, paid parental leave to care for sick children, a limited number of paid sick days, and more attention to job safety and health and environmental issues.

"Unions have politically tended to back policies supportive of the middle class and lower-income families," says Schmitt.

Mr. Holzer doubts passage of EFCA would boost union membership enough to have a huge economic impact. But he welcomes the tougher penalties included in EFCA against abusive management techniques to discourage unionization.

The AFL-CIO estimates companies spend \$4 billion a year on consultants and other means to bust existing unions or block employees from organizing.

After 20 years studying unions, Kate Bronfenbrenner, a labor economist at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., says the present system regulating trade union organization is "broken." When organizers get enough sign-ups among workers in a plant or office to seek a vote held by the NLRB, there is "no such thing as a secret ballot," she says. Management uses interrogation (often one-on-one sessions), harassment, surveillance (secret cameras, listening devices), intimidation, punitive actions, and threats to find out in advance how individual employees will vote and discourage yes votes.

The AFL-CIO figures companies fire workers illegally for union activity in 25 percent of organizing campaigns. The penalty for a company if found guilty, perhaps after months or years, is back pay minus any earnings the worker has made since being fired. It also must post a notice in a break room saying it has behaved illegally.

EFCA would allow workers to unionize after a majority sign an authorization card – unless 30 percent request an NLRB vote. Illegally fired workers would get three times back pay and fines could reach \$20,000 per violation.

The AFL-CIO last week noted a new Hart Research poll finding 78 percent of Americans want legislation making it easier for workers to bargain with employers for better wages, benefits, and working conditions.

The poll also finds fewer than half of Americans know that employers generally oppose unions and fight against them. They may be educated in coming months.