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After Push for Obama, Unions Seek New Rules

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

WASHINGTON — After making millions of phone calls and knocking on millions of doors to elect [Barack Obama](#), the nation's labor unions have begun a new campaign: to get the new president and Congress to pass legislation that would make it easier for workers to unionize.

Unions, delighted that they will have a friend in the White House after eight years of fighting President Bush, also plan to push for universal health coverage and a huge stimulus program to create jobs and counter the downturn.

“Our major priority in the short and long term,” said Andy Stern, president of the [Service Employees International Union](#), “is to get the economy working for Americans who work.”

But corporate America has already declared war on labor's push for new legislation that would help unions organize.

“This will be Armageddon,” said Randel Johnson, vice president for labor policy at the United States Chamber of Commerce.

Labor's No. 1 priority is a piece of legislation called the Employee Free Choice Act, also known as the card-check bill. The bill would give workers the right to join a union as soon as a majority of employees at a workplace signed cards saying they wanted one. Business groups have attacked the legislation because it would take away employers' right to insist on holding a secret-ballot election to determine whether workers favored unionization.

With union membership sliding to 7.5 percent of the private-sector work force, one-third the rate in 1983, unions see enactment of the bill as the single most important step toward reversing their loss of membership and power. Some labor leaders predict that if the bill is passed, unions, which have 16 million members nationwide, would add at least five million workers to their rolls over the next few years.

“We really need fundamental change to counterbalance corporate power and reverse the decline of the middle class,” said [John J. Sweeney](#), the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#)’s president, “and that’s why we support the Employee Free Choice Act.”

Mr. Sweeney said labor unions were eager for a stimulus program to jump-start the economy and to help those hurt by the downturn. He called for extending unemployment benefits, increasing financing for food stamps, approving a rescue plan for Detroit’s automakers and immediately spending more on rebuilding roads, bridges and schools.

Thomas J. Donohue, the chamber’s president, criticized the card-check bill as “payback” that labor unions were expecting in return for their campaign efforts.

Bill Samuel, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s director of government affairs, disagreed, noting that President-elect Obama and Vice President-elect [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) had co-sponsored the act as senators.

“This is not about payback,” Mr. Samuel said. “We’re looking to work with the new administration on a shared set of priorities that focus on lifting workers and improving the economy.”

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. and Change to Win, the rival labor federation, campaigned all out for Mr. Obama, with labor leaders saying that unions and their political action committees spent nearly \$450 million during the race.

Mr. Sweeney said that in the last four days of the campaign, 250,000 volunteers from A.F.L.-C.I.O. unions made 5.5 million phone calls and visited 3.9 million union households. All told, he said, unions reached out to more than 13 million voters in 24 states, with some undecided union members being contacted more than 30 times through phone calls, household visits and workplace conversations.

Union leaders say they were pivotal in helping Mr. Obama win several battleground states, including Florida, Indiana, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. According to a voter poll by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 67 percent of members of A.F.L.-C.I.O. unions voted for Mr. Obama, a Democrat, and 30 percent for his Republican rival, Senator [John McCain](#).

One of labor’s main goals was to help the Democrats capture 60 Senate seats, with an eye to overcoming a Republican filibuster against the card-check bill, which the House approved last year. In the Senate, there were 51 votes for the bill, but it failed because supporters could not overcome a Republican filibuster.

Democrats gained at least six Senate seats on Tuesday, giving their caucus at least 57 seats, but they are likely to fall short of 60. (In

three races, the winner has not yet been determined.)

Even without 60 seats, many labor leaders want to press ahead with the Employee Free Choice Act. The service employees union has pledged to mobilize tens of thousands of members to urge Mr. Obama and Congress to enact that bill and universal health coverage in the 100 days after Inauguration Day, Jan. 20.

“I don’t think that just because we have 40 Republican senators or some higher number means we can’t get EFCA passed,” said Tom Woodruff, director of strategic organizing for Change to Win, a federation of seven unions that quit the A.F.L.-C.I.O. “There are a number of Republicans who, in order to save our economy, can be brought around to supporting the act.”

One Republican senator, [Arlen Specter](#) of Pennsylvania, has co-sponsored the bill.

While the Chamber of Commerce seems ready to cooperate with organized labor to back an economic [stimulus package](#), Mr. Donohue, the chamber’s president, said it would be unwise for Mr. Obama to embrace the Employee Free Choice Act when the economy was in such bad shape. He said the bill — along with other labor-backed bills that would raise business costs, including one that would guarantee most workers seven paid sick days a year — would hurt companies when many were struggling.

“The president has one barrel of challenges,” Mr. Donohue said, “and he should read the doctor’s oath to make sure in the first 100 days he does no harm.”

Chamber officials voiced confidence that they have the backing in the Senate to block the bill, a move that might cause business and labor to negotiate a version with compromises. Among the compromises floated would be keeping the secret ballot vote, but holding the vote just a few days after the union requests an election. Other ideas are to give union organizers access to workplace sites and to limit employers’ ability to campaign against the union.

But Mr. Stern of the service employees said today’s hard times for workers increased the urgency to enact the bill, without compromises. “We have to solve the problems of sliding wages and increased inequality, and you can’t compromise on solving those problems,” he said.

Businesses oppose another provision in the bill: if a newly recognized union and an employer fail to agree on a contract within 120 days, there would be binding arbitration to determine what should be in the contract.

“The card-check provisions and the arbitration provisions are a nonstarter with the employer community,” said Mr. Johnson of the

chamber. “The idea that government arbitrators can set every term is ludicrous and unacceptable.”

Union officials say they do not dislike the secret ballot, but rather the lengthy, expensive, adversarial campaign before the vote in which companies often fire union supporters and use videos, large meetings and one-on-one sessions to pressure employees to vote against unionizing.

“Their focus is maintaining their right to wage an aggressive campaign against the union,” said Mr. Samuel of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. “That’s what we’re trying to protect workers from.”

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