

Casino vote is a blow to labor

Weakened role in politics seen

By Lisa Wangsness
Globe Staff / March 24, 2008

Democrat Ruth Balser of Newton gave the final speech on the House floor before last week's casino vote, warning of the dangers of gambling addiction. She said she was raised never to cross a picket line and considered herself a good friend of labor.

"But, I have to say to the president of the AFL-CIO," she said, "Mr. President, on this you are dead wrong."

From his seat in the gallery overlooking the House chamber, Robert Haynes, head of the state's largest labor organization, leaned forward in his seat and pointed toward Balser.

"No," he said quietly. "She's dead wrong."

It was a dramatic moment that captured the anger Haynes and other union leaders felt about the House position on casinos - and their inability to affect it. When the House voted a few minutes later, just 46 members supported the bill, a top union priority for the thousands of jobs casinos would bring. Afterward, House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi crowed over labor's defeat, praising House members for withstanding "incredible pressure" from unions.

"It was a very disappointing showing for labor," said Jeffrey M. Berry, a political scientist at Tufts University.

It would be a mistake to suggest that labor unions have lost their power in Massachusetts politics - just ask Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who has been fighting for months with firefighters over drug and alcohol testing, or any school committee struggling with its latest teachers contract.

But the casino vote highlights the extent to which the labor community is smaller, more fractured, and less influential in electoral politics than it once was. It also highlights the limits union power has on Beacon Hill.

When faced with the decision of whether to side with unions or the powerful speaker, who controls virtually every word of every bill that comes to the House floor, the contest was not even close.

"I think labor still has clout in general in primaries and in general elections, and I think legislators take organized labor very seriously, but the power of legislative leadership trumps the power of organized labor and virtually everyone else," said Philip Johnston, former chairman of the state Democratic Party.

And many lawmakers viewed the casino vote as a complicated issue that could not be cast as a simple vote on jobs, despite labor's attempts to frame it that way.

"It's one of these issues where there are lots of different considerations - one of them is economic, but there are others as well," said former governor Michael S. Dukakis, pointing to concerns about the impact of gambling addiction.

Undeniably, however, labor unions' political power in Massachusetts has been diminished by declining union membership.

Only about 13 percent of the state's residents were union members in 2007, compared with about 25 percent in the late 1970s - reflecting a national trend created by the loss of manufacturing jobs, the deregulation of unionized industries, and the rise of antiunion companies like Wal-Mart, said Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

And while union power remains most concentrated in working-class cities, most Massachusetts legislators represent suburban districts, said Johnston.

"I think organized labor generally is not as influential, or their presence isn't felt as strongly, in suburban districts as it is in urban districts," he said.

Teachers unions are an important exception to that rule, but they did not go all out in the casino fight.

Other powerful unions like Service Employees International Union 1199, a large and wealthy organization that represents many healthcare workers, did not take a position. Casinos were simply not a top priority for their members.

The unions pushing for casinos were those whose members need the kind of jobs casinos would provide - the AFL-CIO and its building trade affiliates, the Teamsters; and UNITE HERE, a relatively young union that represents hotel and restaurant workers, who have little experience lobbying legislators.

Haynes and his fellow union leaders made it clear that the vote was a critical issue for them. At a rally on Boston Common last week, Haynes gave an expletive-laden address ordering workers to lobby their legislators.

The day of the vote, he sent hand-delivered letters to lawmakers warning that opposing casinos would have "a drastic impact on your Labor Voting Record upon which endorsements are based." Hotel and restaurant workers crowded the all-day hearing.

"I've never seen labor go to that extent before," said Representative Brian Wallace, a Democrat from South Boston.

Rob Gray, a Republican consultant who advised several GOP governors, sees the casino vote as another example of the AFL-CIO's declining power, pointing to the Democratic Party's weak showing in several recent gubernatorial elections (though not in 2006), its failure to advance a ballot initiative to give workers paid family leave, and its inability to win the legalization of slot machines at racetracks.

"They don't have the oomph they used to have," he said.

But Tim Sullivan, a spokesman for the AFL-CIO, counters that his organization has helped win important victories in recent years, including the highest minimum wage in the nation, some of the best laws protecting construction workers, and subsidies for healthcare for low-wage workers in the state's health reform law.

Representative Martin J. Walsh, a Democrat from Dorchester, argues that members were reluctant to rebel against House leadership during budget season.

"A lot of people have things at stake for their district," he said.

After the vote, Haynes fumed that the speaker had subverted the democratic process by strong-arming members and promised that the AFL-CIO would look more closely at the totality of members' voting records before offering endorsements. ■