

The New York Times

March 2, 2009

In Obama, Labor Finds the Support It Expected

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

[John J. Sweeney](#), the nation's top union official, often complains that he was invited just once to the White House during [George W. Bush](#)'s eight years in office — and even that was at the [Vatican](#)'s behest during a visit by [Pope Benedict](#).



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Campaigning in Detroit last fall, Barack Obama met with, from left, Ron Gettelfinger of the U.A.W., James Hoffa of the Teamsters and John Sweeney of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Mr. Sweeney has visited the White House at least once a week since Inauguration Day.

If an index is needed for how much closer organized labor is to [President Obama](#) than to his predecessor, it might be the number of times Mr. Sweeney, the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#)'s president, has visited the White House since Inauguration Day — at least once a week for receptions, bill signings and a meeting on fiscal responsibility.

Mr. Obama has delighted labor by issuing four pro-labor executive orders that reversed Bush policies. He has also appointed a union-friendly chairwoman to the [National Labor Relations Board](#) and named a labor secretary whose parents were both union members.

But those changes worry corporate America, especially as Mr. Obama has signaled he will push for legislation that would expand labor's thinned ranks by making it far easier to unionize workers. Labor leaders expect Vice President [Joseph Biden](#) to spell out the administration's battle plans for the bill on Thursday, when he is scheduled to speak at the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s winter meeting in Miami Beach.

Any doubts that union leaders might have had about Mr. Obama dissolved several weeks ago when, in announcing a new Task Force on the Middle Class, he said: "I do not view the labor movement as part of the problem. To me, it's part of the solution. You cannot have a strong middle class without a strong labor movement."

Mr. Sweeney and many other labor leaders were thrilled. "It's like night and day having a president who believes in helping working people build power," Mr. Sweeney said. "I look upon Obama as the most pro-union president since John Kennedy, and I have even compared him to [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#)."

But Republicans and business leaders are not so happy. They complain that Mr. Obama is simply paying back labor for all the money and volunteers that unions invested in his victory.

“This last election the labor bosses spent \$400 million to \$500 million getting the other side elected, and they just didn’t do that for their good health,” [John Boehner](#), the House Republican leader, said at a conference in Washington last Thursday. “They’ve been making investments in the other side so they can control the policy-making side.”

Randel Johnson, vice president for labor policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, also voiced concern. “The jury is still out on the degree to which the Obama administration will be controlled by organized labor,” he said. “Whether he will triangulate organized labor like Clinton or become their handmaiden, we’re not sure.”

Nate Tamarin, an associate White House political director who is in charge of outreach to labor, said Mr. Obama’s pro-worker policies reflected what he promised during his campaign.

“Everything he has done is consistent with what he thinks is right for American working people and is consistent with what he viewed throughout his career as the important place unions have in building the American middle class,” Mr. Tamarin said.

Union leaders are certainly pleased with Mr. Obama’s \$787 billion recovery package, as well as his plans for universal health coverage and increasing taxes on the rich.

The president of the [Communications Workers of America](#) praised the \$7.2 billion earmarked in the recovery package to expand broadband service. The steelworkers' president hailed Buy America provisions. And the president of the [American Federation of Teachers](#) lauded billions set aside for spending on education.

Unions also applauded the four executive orders, including one that makes it more likely that construction projects receiving federal dollars will be unionized. Unions also played a role in persuading the president to delay revamping [Social Security](#) and possibly making benefits less generous.

Most of all, they are looking to President Obama to help unions reverse their decades-long slide in power and membership. With 16 million members, unions represent just 7.6 percent of private-sector workers today, down from more than 25 percent in the early 1980s.

Labor is pinning its biggest hopes on the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, a bill that unions hope will add millions of new members by giving workers the right to union recognition as soon as a majority of employees at a workplace sign pro-union cards. The bill would take away management's ability to insist on a secret ballot election.

Business leaders have warned of Armageddon in their fight to kill the bill, which Democratic leaders say will come up for a vote in May, June or July. Union leaders voice confidence that they will muster the 60 Senate votes needed to overcome a [filibuster](#), while Republicans expect to defeat the bill in the Senate.

Republican and business strategists say they are focusing on lobbying several Democratic senators, especially Mark Pryor and [Blanche Lincoln](#) of Arkansas, [Mark Warner](#) of Virginia, Ben Nelson of Nebraska and [Mary Landrieu](#) of

Louisiana, to help deny the 60 Senate votes needed for passage.

Mr. Johnson, of the Chamber of Commerce, denounced the bill, saying, “The idea of radically changing employment law when companies are trying to dig themselves out of a hole is ludicrous.”

But Mr. Obama disagreed, telling regional newspaper reporters last month: “I don’t buy the argument that providing workers with collective-bargaining rights somehow weakens the economy or worsens the business environment. If you’ve got workers who have decent pay and benefits, they’re also customers for business.” If there is one area where labor remains uneasy with Mr. Obama, it is trade policy.

Leo Gerard, president of the [United Steelworkers](#), said he was worried that the trade representative, Ron Kirk, and commerce secretary-designate, [Gary Locke](#), were too much in favor of free trade and would not do enough to preserve America’s manufacturing jobs.

“We cannot work our way out of this economic mess unless we refocus on making things in America,” Mr. Gerard said.