



Obama Rule Change Favors Labor Unions

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By Sam Hananel, Associated Press

Washington (AP) - Labor unions will have an easier time organizing workers at U.S. airline and railroad companies after the Obama administration on Monday changed a 76-year-old rule on union elections.

The change is a major victory for unions that have struggled to reverse years of decline in membership. And it's the most significant so far in a string of White House moves designed to boost organized labor.

The new rule, announced by the three-member National Mediation Board, would recognize a union if a simple majority of workers who cast ballots approve organizing. The previous rule required a majority of the entire work force to favor unionizing. That meant workers choosing not to vote at all were effectively treated as "no" votes.

The most immediate impact of the change would be at Delta Air Lines, where unions are trying to organize about 20,000 flight attendants. Unions are also expected to target workers at smaller carriers, including Allegiant Air, JetBlue Airways, Republic Airways and SkyWest.

Airlines that fought the change say it will lead to more labor disputes that could disrupt commerce and increase delays in an industry already reeling from recession, higher fuel costs and stepped-up security hassles.

The Air Transport Association, which represents most major airlines, is expected to file a lawsuit challenging the new rule.

Proponents of the change say the old rule ran contrary to democratic standards where the outcome of an election is determined by the majority of those who vote. The change puts the airline and railroad industries under the same procedures as most other companies, which are overseen by the National Labor Relations Board.

The board proposed the rule change in October, after a request from the AFL-CIO. That request came soon after President Barack Obama named Linda Puchala -- the former head of a flight attendant union -- to a seat on the board, shifting the balance of power.

The final rule was approved 2-1, with chairwoman Elizabeth Dougherty issuing a fierce dissent. Dougherty, who was appointed by president George W. Bush, said the change is "an unprecedented departure for the NMB and represents the most dramatic policy shift in the history of the agency."

Airlines and railroads employ more than 500,000 workers, and about two-thirds of those are already in unions. That's much higher than the overall union membership rate of 12 percent.

But one exception to the higher rate is at Delta, where only about 15 percent of workers were union members before the carrier merged two years ago with heavily unionized Northwest Airlines. Unions representing flight attendants and ground workers who worked for Northwest want the new rules to cover elections at the combined carrier.

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