

Organized Labor's Agenda Hits Roadblock; What Now?

Labor unions frustrated as top goals hit roadblocks despite union-friendly Obama White House

By SAM HANANEL Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON February 27, 2010 (AP)

Labor's high hopes for major gains under President Barack Obama and a Democratic Congress have dimmed, raising fresh doubts about union leverage even in the best of political times.



FILE - In this Sept. 15, 2009 file photo, President Barack Obama acknowledges AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka as he addresses the AFL-CIO in Pittsburgh. The high hopes organized labor had for dramatic gains under Obama and a Democratic Congress have turned sour, raising fresh doubts about how much muscle unions can wield even when they're in the best of times politically. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak, File) (AP)

Prospects for a health overhaul have faded. Even slimmer are the chances of achieving labor's chief goal, passage of a bill making it easier for unions to organize workers. A bipartisan jobs bill passed this week by the Senate drew tepid praise from the AFL-CIO president, Richard Trumka, who called it a "Band-Aid on an amputated limb" — far short of what unions wanted.

This wasn't what unions expected a year ago after spending more than \$400 million to help elect Obama and increase the size of Democratic majorities in the Senate and House.

Leaders of labor's largest federation will try to figure out how to refocus their political agenda when they begin their annual meeting in Orlando, Fla., on Monday.

Another setback came in January when two Senate Democrats joined Republicans in blocking the appointment of labor lawyer Craig Becker to the National Labor Relations Board. Becker has worked for the AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Republicans have said they fear Becker would push the board to require companies to recognize unions if they can get a simple majority of employees to sign union cards — the same "card check" measure that's stalled in Congress.

Labor leaders were counting on Obama put Becker in the post when Congress was out of session. They were disappointed when Obama said he wouldn't do it anytime soon.

"Enough is enough," Trumka said in an e-mail to labor activists. He urged union members to call the White House and "demand that President Obama fight Republican obstructionism" on Becker's nomination.

Some labor experts say unions have come up flat in mounting an effective liberal response to "tea party" activists who helped Republican Scott Brown win the special Senate election in Washington to succeed Democrat Edward M. Kennedy, who died last year. An AFL-CIO poll showed that 49 percent of union households supported Brown.



FILE - In this Sept. 15, 2009 file photo, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka applauds as President Barack Obama addresses the AFL-CIO convention in Pittsburgh. The high hopes organized labor had for dramatic gains under Obama and a Democratic Congress have turned

sour, raising fresh doubts about how much muscle unions can wield even when they're in the best of times politically. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak, File)
(AP)

"There's been no indication that there's muscle behind their money," said Leon Fink, a labor historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "There was no equivalent mobilization for public works or for a progressive health care measure."

Even more troubling for unions, their membership in the private sector fell 10 percent during Obama's first year in office to a historic low of 7.2 percent. A poll this past week from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 41 percent of those surveyed have a favorable view of unions, compared with 58 percent in a similar survey in 2007.

"I think that everyone is frustrated literally, but it's important to understand who we have to be frustrated with," said United Steelworkers president Leo Gerard.

Gerard said unions are angry about Republican tactics they view as obstructionist and a few conservative Senate Democrats who are making it tough for Obama to push through his agenda. Gerard said that Democrats may not count on the usual support they expect from union members in this fall's elections.

"If we don't have clear progress and clear attempts at progress, we're going to have a hard time motivating our folks," he said.

AFL-CIO spokesman Eddie Vale said union members have been more hopeful in recent days about Congress pushing some version of health care reform in the process known as reconciliation. They also believe Obama will direct more bailout money to community banks, infrastructure repair and development of green jobs. "One of the things we want to talk about is how we can build upon our existing grass roots structure to make it bigger, more effective and get more results moving forward," Vale said.

Unions have fared much better with Obama than under Republican President George W. Bush. Obama helped save thousands of union jobs through federal bailouts of General Motors and Chrysler and by propping up state governments through the stimulus bill. Also, SEIU's president, Andy Stern, is one of the most frequent White House guests.

But the window seems to have shut on labor's top goal — a vote on the card check bill before Democrats lost their 60-vote majority in the Senate that could help keep GOP stalling tactics at bay. Unions believe changing the law is the only way for them to "level the playing field" with companies that have had an easier time stifling union organizing drives.

"Obama said health care had to go first (before card check) and stuck to that," said Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. "We thought we were going to go bang right off the bat and it didn't happen that way."

Amy Dean, a former AFL-CIO organizer who has written a book about the future of the labor movement, said unions made the mistake of waiting for an agenda "and as a result, got rolled."

"The lesson from the Clinton years is you can't wait for the White House, you have to have your own political strategy," Dean said.

On the Net:

AFL-CIO: <http://www.aflcio.org/>

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