

Unions Seek Help From Abroad

**Global Labor Event
Looks at Bolstering
U.S. Organizing**

By KRIS MAHER

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International labor leaders are meeting in Washington as part of a global push to make it easier for unions to organize U.S. workers.

But their efforts face hurdles in the face of opposition from the White House and some lawmakers. Efforts at concerted global action to change the labor landscape in the U.S. are also nascent, and unions have seen limited gains from international cooperation.

More than 200 union officials from 63 countries have convened for a summit this week hosted by the AFL-CIO to discuss ways to reverse the decline in union ranks in the U.S. and other industrialized countries. Several top labor officials plan to meet with Democratic leaders today to press for passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, which would allow workers to sign cards in favor of unions off company grounds and require the companies to remain publicly neutral. The practice is more common in many industrialized countries.

Labor leaders argue that under the current U.S. practice involving a secret ballot election, it is easier for U.S. companies to intimidate pro-union workers who aren't adequately protected under U.S. labor laws. They blame such tactics on unions' inability to organize more workers.

"The current state of affairs in the United States involves very heavy restrictions of the right to organize and bargain collectively, and that restriction has spillover effects in other countries," said Guy Ryder, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation. The Brussels-based group represents labor federations in 153 countries representing 168 million workers.

Mr. Ryder said foreign employees of U.S.-based multinationals are affected by changes in U.S. labor law because companies follow the same labor practices overseas. He said non-U.S. based multinational companies often look to U.S. labor law as a standard for how they treat their workers.

Business groups, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, oppose the Employee Free Choice Act and say union membership is declining around the world because companies, needing to remain competitive, have shed unionized jobs to lower labor costs. They also say workers are less interested in joining unions because labor conditions have improved in many countries.

"Unions have failed to organize workers here in the private sector, so to distract from that failure they fall back on these global conferences which frankly will likely wind up with nothing practical getting done," said Randel Johnson, vice president of labor policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Earlier this year, the bill passed in the House but couldn't overcome the threat of a Senate filibuster and also drew a veto threat from the White House. Some experts say the summit won't likely change the chances for the act passing. "[Labor leaders] are not going to be able to move much on this political-legislative front," says Marick Masters, a professor of business administration at the University of Pittsburgh.

Unions have struggled for years to respond to the effects of globalization. Recently, multinational unions have coordinated some strikes and other protests, often targeting companies in countries where they have more-generous labor agreements. Unions also have worked together on organizing retail workers and security guards in different countries, for example.

Union efforts haven't stemmed membership declines in most countries. In Australia, the unionization rate was 20% in 2006, down from 46% in 1986, while in the United Kingdom union representation fell to 29% in 2004, from 54% in 1979, according to John Logan, an associate professor of industrial relations at the London School of Economics. The drop has been most severe in the U.S., where 7.8% of private sector workers currently belong to unions, down from about 20% in the early 1980s.

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