

# Labor steps up pressure on Congress for union bill

By SAM HANANEL, Associated Press Writer  
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WASHINGTON – Labor groups on Wednesday stepped up the pressure on Congress to take up legislation that could give a major boost to union membership, organized labor's top priority.

Union leaders brought hundreds of their rank-and-file members and petitions that they said held 1.5 million signatures to Capitol Hill for a rally in support of the Employee Free Choice Act, escalating an already intense fight over the controversial bill.

The legislation, fiercely opposed by the business community, would make it easier for workers to organize unions. It is expected to be introduced soon in the House, but the real fight would take place in the Senate, where it's unclear whether the measure has enough backing to break an anticipated filibuster.

"We want to put an end to the illegal firing of workers, to the harassment of workers, to the intimidation of workers" who try to form unions, United Steelworkers president Leo Gerard told cheering union members gathered in a park across the street from the Capitol.

At the same time, more than 50 members of the National Association of Manufacturers met with lawmakers to express their concerns that the bill would "hinder manufacturers' economic competitiveness and our ability to create jobs," said NAM president John Engler.

President Barack Obama signaled strong support for the measure during the presidential campaign. But with Obama primarily focused on an economic stimulus package, the White House has not given a clear signal on when it wants Congress to consider the bill.

"This is a bill that will be nothing less than a firestorm on Capitol Hill," said Randy Johnson, a spokesman for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "The chamber will oppose any compromise on the issue."

Business groups have already spent millions attacking a key provision that would allow workers to organize a union by signing a card instead of holding secret-ballot elections. They say any change to the secret-ballot provision jeopardizes privacy rights and leaves workers open to union bullying.

Unions argue that under current rules, businesses can threaten or intimidate workers into voting against forming a union.

Besides the secret-ballot issue, Johnson said businesses are even more worried about a part of the bill that would force a new union and management into binding arbitration if they can't agree on a first contract within 120 days.

"This is nothing less than having two or three people who know very little about an employer's business actually tell that employer how to run (it)," Johnson said.

Labor officials, however, complain that even after a union is formed, employers can often use delaying tactics to prevent workers and management from reaching their first collective bargaining agreement. They argue that the legislation would reduce those delays and ensure that workers who succeed in forming a union actually get a contract.

At one point, unions hoped Obama would push the card-check legislation within his first 100 days in office, but the struggling economy and the wrangling over the stimulus package have forced labor into a holding pattern.

Vice President Joe Biden said in a CNBC interview last week that he expected the measure to come up this year. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said supporters of the bill would continue to press for passage "this year, not next year."

Anna Burger, chairwoman of the union federation Change to Win, said in an interview that while unions trust Obama and are not concerned about the delay, they won't stay on the sidelines.

"We want to be at the table to talk about the right time," Burger said. "We will keep the pressure to make sure that this is done at the right time."

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