

# Obama seen as labour's saviour

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Published: Tuesday, September 02, 2008

Against a 40-year decline in union membership across many major economies -- including Canada -- a 311,000 rise in U. S. card carriers last year appears a mere blip.

It was, however, the biggest rise in U. S. union membership since 1983, nudging the membership rate up a hair to 12.1% but still a fraction of the 20% rate that prevailed then.



SAUL LOEB/AFP/Getty Images

But what is really setting the U. S. labour movement's heart aflutter is the prospect Barack Obama will clinch the U. S. presidency. The hope is a Democratic president will grease the passage for a radical change to decades-old labour laws, bringing the unions back in from the cold.

But like tough talk on trade, it remains to be seen whether rhetorical flourishes can be translated into policy in an economy that long ago jettisoned union constraints in favour of flexibility, foreign shores and employee share plans.

Mr. Obama is saying all the right things to U. S. labour.

"We're ready to play offense for organized labour," he told the AFL-CIO, a federation of 56 unions in April, according to news reports. "It's time we had a president who didn't choke saying the word 'union.' A president who strengthens our unions by letting them do what they do best: organize our workers."

"Unions will have influence that they don't have now on everything this government does," says

Ross Eisenbrey, vice-president of the Economic Policy Institute, a think-tank devoted to supporting the labour movement.

From getting pro-union appointments into the Department of Labor, to a national health-care system that would take health benefits off the bargaining table, to tax cuts for the middle class, Obama's program is music to the unions' ears.

But by far the biggest boost to unions fortunes would come from passage of the Employee Free Choice Act. Co-sponsored by Obama, and his vice-presidential running mate Joe Biden, the bill passed the House of Representatives last year but fell nine votes short of breaking a Republican filibuster in the Senate.

In a nutshell, it would allow a union to be certified once a simple majority have signed union cards -- no secret ballot would be required to verify the majority as is needed under current law. The bill would require outside mediators to impose a first contract if disputes drag on.

As labour sees it, the Act would help reverse decades of labour law inequity brought about by the 1947 Taft-Hartly Act that banned a slew of union practices such as wildcat strikes, jurisdictional strikes, closed union shops and secondary boycotts, greatly reducing union power.

With one-third of the Senate also up for election and an arm-twisting president in place, labour believes the Employee Free Choice Act has a chance. A new national campaign to push it through was launched in Denver last week.

"I think it would make a tremendous difference," said Mr. Eisenbrey, who spoke from the Democrat convention in Denver. "In something close to half the elections there are now the employers are using all the different tactics that are available to it and are managing to beat unions who have started off with 70% or 80% support."

The tactics he cites include calling employees in for one-on-one meetings, organizing "captive audience" speeches to dissuade their employees, letting elections drag on, and getting other businesses leaders to speak out against unionization, or otherwise "coercing" employees.

Business, rightly so, sees this as fair play against unions which themselves have been known to do their fair share of strong-arming in the past, and could easily do so in the future if the age-old democratic right to a secret ballot is removed.

Randy Johnson, vice-president for labour, immigration and employee benefits at the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, called the Democrats labour agenda "frightening" during the group's Labor Day briefing last week.

The group has promised to defeat the Employee Free Choice Act, calling it instead the "Card Check Act," seeing nothing free about it.

"It's totally unprecedented in the private sector," Mr. Johnson said. "The national Labor Relations Act has long recognized that employers need not and are not forced to come to an agreement. There is a process of negotiation. If it does not work, the union's strike and the employers lock out. That's called economic warfare. But to have the government step in and impose a contract is ... a radical departure from anything ever recognized in employment law."

Clearly, the rhetoric is flying on both sides and the real question is how much of agenda will make it through--if Obama wins.

Gary Burtless, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in New York, believes reversing the unions declines will be an uphill battle.

"The fact is the declining union success rate has now stretched over four decades and that includes periods in which governments were run by Democratic presidents and Republican presidents and the Congress was controlled by Republicans, when it was controlled by Democrats and when control of the legislature was divided between the two parties," he said. Indeed the industries that unions have got their hands on in recent decades have seen no end of trouble -- airlines, steel, autos. Unions must shoulder their share of the blame for the devastation, having demanded contracts that priced their labour into the stratosphere and giving back little of the flexibility in a global market place.

The bottom line is, while these industries struggled, the rest of U.S. business moved on and so did their employees, preferring to accept workplaces that allowed them to advance at their own pace, to think creatively and reap the rewards --no matter how rough and tumble the environment.

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