

Unions benefit from Obama decisions 05/05/2009 Washington Times

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President Obama has moved quickly to demonstrate his solidarity with the labor movement, making a series of policy and personnel moves dramatically reshaping the landscape to give unions a better foothold.

Even though labor's top legislative priority — the so-called "card-check" bill to make it easier to organize workplaces — has stalled on Capitol Hill, Mr. Obama has made up for it in a number of ways, often breaking sharply with policies instituted during the Bush administration.

One of Mr. Obama's first acts the day he was inaugurated was to elevate National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) member Wilma B. Liebman, a former International Brotherhood of [Teamsters](#) lawyer, to chair the board.

The president has since appointed a succession of union loyalists to top spots in the Labor Department and on the NLRB. He signed four pro-union executive orders, most notably one requiring federal construction projects to favor "project labor agreements" that set aside jobs for union workers.

Last month, Mr. Obama appointed Service Employees International Union ([SEIU](#)) lawyer Craig Becker and pro-union labor lawyer Mark Gaston Pearce to fill vacancies on the five-member NLRB, which oversees laws governing relations between unions and employers. The [AFL-CIO](#) and other top labor groups complained that the NLRB under Mr. Bush had become toothless.

Mr. Obama also tapped as a top Labor Department adviser Mary Beth Maxwell, executive director of the American Rights at Work, a union-backed public-relations campaign that advocates for labor issues, including passage of the card-check bill.

Some of the new clout for unions comes from Mr. Obama's executive orders that reversed rules issued by the Bush administration.

Mr. Obama approved a rule requiring federal contractors to post notices that workers have the right to form a union and a second rule that bars contractors from seeking reimbursement from the government for expenses incurred in lobbying employees not to unionize.

A third executive order rescinded a Bush administration rule requiring federal contractors to post notices that workers can limit their financial support to unions.

It's a symbiotic relationship. As Mr. Obama strives to expand union power in the marketplace, unions build support for the president's agenda, including an overhaul of the nation's health care system.

"President Obama has made it clear from Day One that we will not be able to rebuild our economy stronger than it was without a greater voice, and greater prosperity, for American workers," said [SEIU](#) Secretary-Treasurer Anna Burger, marking the president's 100th day in office last week.

The first bill Mr. Obama signed was a union-backed measure that makes it easier for workers to sue employers for wage discrimination. He also signed a bill that nixed a pilot program opposed by the [Teamsters](#) that allowed Mexican trucks into the United States for cross-border commerce, despite complaints that the restriction violated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Mr. Obama's labor secretary, longtime union ally and former California Rep. Hilda Solis, is the

daughter of a **Teamsters** shop steward. She recently moved to quash a Bush administration regulation that would have increased scrutiny of union finances to root out corruption.

"I do not view the labor movement as part of the problem. To me, and to my administration, labor unions are a big part of the solution," Mr. Obama said in a video address to the **AFL-CIO** Executive Council's March meeting in Miami, Fla.

So far, however, Mr. Obama has been unable to deliver the union's most coveted prize: the card-check bill, officially titled the Employee Free Choice Act, fiercely opposed by nearly every major business lobby.

The administration has continued to work behind the scenes to broker a deal that will get the bill passed in the Senate, where it simply doesn't have enough Democratic support to survive a Republican filibuster.

The decision last week by Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, a key swing vote in the card-check debate, to switch from the Republican to the Democratic Party gave unions new hope that a breakthrough was near.

But Mr. Specter said he would remain opposed to the legislation, which would allow unions to begin organizing a work site if more than half the workers sign a card in support — a "card-check" method that is significantly easier than the traditional secret ballot.

Labor leaders hope the change will help reverse the long-term trend of dwindling union membership. However, a compromise that sacrifices the card-check provision but preserves other parts of the bill still would be a boon for the labor movement.

Even without card-check, the bill would stiffen penalties against employers that illegally fire or discriminate against workers for union activity and, more importantly for unions, impose binding arbitration if unions and management cannot agree on a first contract.

"Binding arbitration is where the money is," said Geoffrey Burr, vice president of government affairs for the Associated Builders and Contractors, which represents 25,000 nonunion construction businesses.

"Unions are just as willing to drop 'card-check' if they get binding arbitration," he said.

Business leaders say they already are encountering an emboldened union presence, including the more visible presence of organizers at workplaces.

"We've certainly seen an uptick in that," said Brett McMahon, vice president of business development for Miller & Long Co. Inc., the country's largest concrete subcontractor and the largest employer of construction workers in the mid-Atlantic region.

"There are more guys showing up at job sites to hand out [union flyers] than we've seen in a long time," he said. "It is a far larger presence than ever in my lifetime."

Shortly after taking office, Mr. Obama met at the White House with labor leaders, including **AFL-CIO** President John Sweeney. The president has promised to have them back frequently.