

US Senate Republicans block union-sponsored bill

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In a near party-line vote Tuesday, the Senate rejected a proposal to take up the Employee Free Choice Act, an AFL-CIO-sponsored bill that would have removed some of the procedural obstacles used by corporations to thwart union organizing drives. The 51-48 vote fell nine short of the 60 required to end debate and force a vote on the legislation. Only one of 49 Senate Republicans, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, voted for cloture, along with 48 Democrats and two independents.

The roll-call vote drew an unusual 99 out of 100 senators, all but Democrat Tim Johnson of South Dakota who is still recuperating from a near-fatal stroke. With tens of million of dollars in campaign contributions at stake for senators on both sides, from business interests and the trade union bureaucracy, even the senators currently running for president set aside campaign fundraising to make their appearance and cast their votes.

In terms of legislative action, Tuesday's vote only confirmed the obvious fact that the bill will not be enacted this year. The House of Representatives passed the Employee Free Choice Act March 1 by vote of 241-185, a margin far below the two thirds required to overturn the certain Bush veto. Even if the Senate had decided to take up the bill, there are not 66 votes to override a veto.

The vote was scheduled by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid for political reasons, to demonstrate that a Senate majority, however narrow, favored passage of the bill, and to provide a basis for the Democratic Party to appeal for union campaign contributions and organizational support in the 2008 elections. It was an exercise which allowed this big business party to proclaim its rhetorical support for the rights of workers, at least for one day.

The legislation is the top of the wish list for the AFL-CIO and other unions, whose membership has declined steadily in numbers for nearly 40 years. The bill has three major provisions: increasing the penalties against employers for violations of labor laws during union organization campaigns, such as discriminatory firings; providing for mediation and mandatory binding arbitration in cases where employers fail to negotiate a first contract with a newly formed union; and providing for immediate recognition of a new union if a majority of workers sign authorization cards ("card check"), without a secret ballot election.

The campaign against the bill, spearheaded by the US Chamber of Commerce and other business lobbies, has focused entirely on misrepresentation of the card check provision, which corporate spokesmen invariably describe as taking away the right of workers to vote. This posturing as defenders of democracy is entirely

spurious. In practice, union organization efforts generally confront thoroughly anti-democratic attacks by the employers, including systematic intimidation of workers to pressure them into voting against the union even after they've signed cards. Half of all union organization drives fail even after winning majority support from the workers in a card check, in part because employer threats sway the outcome of the subsequent balloting.

The *World Socialist Web Site* defends the democratic right of workers, on the basis of free and open methods, to decide for themselves whether or not to obtain union representation.

However, no one should believe the claims by the trade union bureaucracy and its Democratic Party allies that a purely card check process would lead to a revival of the American labor movement and an improvement in the conditions of life for working people. There are numerous examples, in auto and other industries, of unions obtaining the agreement of companies to recognize them as bargaining agents for the work force on the basis of assurances from union leaders that they will hold down wages and enforce onerous working conditions.

The collapse of the AFL-CIO cannot be explained by employer hostility or the provisions of current labor law—otherwise, how was it possible for workers to build mass industrial unions in the 1930s, under conditions of widespread employer and state violence that turned many labor struggles into pitched battles?

The vast majority of working people see the AFL-CIO and the other bureaucratized trade unions as irrelevant, impotent, or downright reactionary, and for good reason. The last half century has seen an almost uninterrupted decay of the labor movement, to the point where an entire generation of the working class has grown to maturity without ever witnessing a serious and militant national strike by a major union—something which is true of no other period in US history since the American Civil War.

Over the past three decades, in particular, the official unions have carried out one betrayal of the working class after another. They have abandoned any, even defensive, policy of class struggle, and instead sought to integrate themselves into the structure of corporate management, functioning to suppress resistance to plant closures, mass layoffs, speedup and wage-cutting, and boost the international competitiveness of American corporations. On the basis of corporatism and nationalism, the unions have become instruments for the defense of the privileges and perks of the trade union bureaucracy, at the direct expense of union members and the working class as a whole.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has analyzed the objective cause of the American financial oligarchy, who are equally committed to corporate interests. It is rooted in the globalization of the world economy, which has rendered unviable all of the nationally-based traditional organizations of the working class (see “Marxism and the Trade Unions”).

While this is a worldwide phenomenon, affecting “labor,” social-democratic and Stalinist parties, as well as trade unions of every stripe, it must be said that nowhere have the intrinsic limitations of trade unionism been revealed with such pernicious effect as in the United States.

The very formation of the AFL-CIO in 1955 definitively prefigured the decline of the industrial labor movement, as the CIO unions, formed in response to the militant upsurge of the working class during the Great Depression, made their peace with the conservative establishment of the AFL. The CIO and AFL bureaucracies merged on the basis of a common political orientation: purging all socialist and radical elements from their ranks, subordinating themselves to the Democratic Party, and aligning themselves with the State Department and CIA in Cold War provocations against the international working class.

Despite this proven record of collaboration, there remains a powerful section of big business that regards the services of the union bureaucracy as unnecessary overhead, and declines to pay the price. Incapable of any struggle, except against its own members, the union leadership has pinned its hopes entirely on the Democratic Party and the federal and state governments, seeking new sources of funding under conditions of plummeting membership rolls and falling income from union dues, for the salaries of the tens of thousands of functionaries who make up the bureaucratic apparatus. Hence the “Employee Free Choice Act,” which amounts to appealing to Congress to bail out the AFL-CIO for its own inability to mobilize the working class.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney sought to bolster illusions that the Democratic-controlled Congress would ultimately take “pro-labor” action, declaring, “Today’s vote shows that a majority of the United States Senate supports changing the law to restore working people’s freedom to make their own choice to join a union and bargain for a better life.” The president of the US Chamber of Commerce, Thomas Donahue, countered, “Secret ballots protect the rights of the individual and prevent coercion, and that’s worth fighting to preserve.”

This debate between representatives of the trade union bureaucracy and the corporate hierarchy is something of a farce. Both institutions are thoroughly anti-democratic.

For all the paeans from big business about the Senate upholding the right to vote, every major corporation functions as an absolute dictatorship, in which the employees give up all democratic rights in return for a paycheck. They have no say over pay, benefits or working conditions, let alone decisions about hiring, promotion, production methods, business organization or long-term strategy, all of which are reserved entirely for top executives.

The business lobbyists and congressional Republicans who solemnly invoked the right of workers to vote on union representation would be horrified at a proposal that workers should elect their own workplace managers or vote on corporate policy—so, for that matter, would the Democrats, the second party

of the American financial oligarchy, who are equally committed to corporate interests.

As for the American trade unions, they are thoroughly bureaucratized institutions that suppress both rank-and-file dissent and socialist criticism with equal ferocity, in order to play their role as adjuncts of corporate management. Contract votes, particularly in the large, established unions, can be re-run again and again until the rank-and-file “gets it right,” i.e., votes to approve what the union bureaucracy dictates.

Only a handful of unions allow their rank-and-file to vote on their leadership. Most hold conventions in which delegates are hand-picked by top officials and resolutions are rubber-stamped. Union members who challenge the bureaucracy’s collaboration with management face systematic harassment and the danger of being fired from their jobs with employer collusion, or physically assaulted.

These realities of working-class life are concealed, not only by big business politicians and most of the corporate-controlled media, but also by the liberal and “left” organizations which cluster around and defend the trade union bureaucracy. These groups have hailed the Employee Free Choice Act as an indication of rising labor militancy and a signal of the union leaders’ determination to fight.

Nation contributor David Sirota wrote last month, “I am optimistic that we are about to see a major resurgence of organized labor, and thus a reversal of the hostile takeover of our government. As I travel the country meeting with union organizers and union leaders, I see all sorts of signs that the labor movement is experiencing a resurgence.” Sirota cited as an example “my good friend Leo Gerard, president of the Steelworkers,” a pillar of the conservative AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

An on-line contributor to the *Nation*, Peter Rothberg, wrote that despite the bill’s defeat, it was one of many “encouraging signs of civic engagement,” adding that “the labor movement is seeming more vibrant of late.”

There is no doubt that the American working class is moving into historic struggles, driven by mounting attacks on jobs and living standards and political catastrophes like the war in Iraq. But the attitude of the trade union bureaucracy to an upsurge from below will be entirely hostile. The strategy of the bureaucracy is to win the favor of the corporate oligarchy by demonstrating its usefulness at keeping the working class under control, in the workplace, but even more importantly, in the field of politics.



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