



Your Career: Obama sides with workers

President has already set labor-friendly proposals in motion

By Eve Tahmincioglu

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President Barack Obama might as well be wearing a cape and have a big "W" on his chest that stands for worker.

He swept into office with a host of ambitious labor-friendly proposals and has already begun to set many in motion. Labor advocates believe he'll do more for worker rights than any president in the past few decades.

"Workers finally have a friend in the White House," says Robert Trumble, professor of management and director of Virginia Commonwealth University's labor studies center. Under the Bush administration, he adds, "we saw a regression of worker rights."

"Obama cares about working families in this country," says Anna Burger, secretary-treasurer of the Service Employees International Union. "He ran on a campaign of reclaiming the American dream."

The question is how far can Obama take his pro-worker promises — everything from federally mandating paid sick time to making it easier for workers to unionize — during bleak economic times and facing a highly partisan Congress.

The new president has a tough battle ahead, but bad economies tend to engender "sympathy and empathy" for the working stiffs, Trumble says, and that will go a long way in swaying public opinion to support Obama's agenda.

Signing worker-friendly bills

It's been less than two months, but Obama has wasted little worker superhero time.

- The first bill Obama signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, countering the Supreme Court's decision in 2007 to put time limits on how long an employee has to claim they were paid less because of gender, race, religion, etc.

That's what happened to Lilly Ledbetter, for whom the bill is named. She was a longtime supervisor at Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.'s plant in Gadsden, Ala., and she came to suspect she was underpaid compared to her male counterparts. No one disputed her claims, but the company made a case that she had waited too long to report the discrimination.

Upon signing the bill, Obama said: "It is upholding one of this nation's founding principles: that we are all created equal, and each deserve a chance to pursue our own version of happiness."

- One day after signing the Ledbetter bill, Obama signed several executive orders reversing Bush administration policies that were seen to be anti-worker and anti-union when it comes to federal contracting.

The first order reversed a Bush administration rule that only informed workers on federal jobs of their rights not to join a union, sort of like a union abstinence-only rule. Now employees will be told about their rights not to join but also their rights as they relate to joining a union.

The second order would require that rank-and-file employees who worked on a government-contracted job be offered a position when a new contractor comes in.

And the final measure would prohibit contractors from being reimbursed for money they spent trying to squash union or collective-bargaining activity among their workers.

- The stimulus bill, even though watered down, has a host of benefits for working people, beyond the most direct boon of creating jobs through infrastructure projects.

1. It offers a 60 percent subsidy for nine months to help unemployed individuals pay health insurance premiums under the COBRA program.

2. It provides an additional 20 weeks of unemployment payments for the jobless and an additional \$25 in each paycheck.

3. The first \$2,400 of jobless benefits will be exempted from federal taxes.

4. There's also a \$400-per-worker tax credit, for workers making less than \$75,000.

- Obama's choice for labor secretary has received a big round of applause from labor advocates — and a big thumbs down from business.

Hilda Solis, a Democratic congresswoman from California, is well known for her pro-labor fervor.

"She has worked for the rights of poor and disenfranchised workers; to increase minimum wages; for workers' rights to unionize and expect fair treatment, benefits and wages; and for green jobs," says Myrtle Bell, associate professor of management at the University of Texas at Arlington.

A committee voted Wednesday to send Solis' nomination to the full Senate for confirmation.

Republican members of Congress have been dragging their feet on her nomination, citing her pro-union stance and tax issues related to her husband.

This type of partisan bickering will be on stage big time as Obama tries to hoist many of his other labor-friendly initiatives onto the business community, says Trumble.

Key legislation for unions

And the biggest battle, many experts believe, will be the one over the Employee Free Choice Act, which could speed up the process by giving workers the option of bypassing a formal vote and imposing hefty fines on employers that violate employee rights. Obama has been a longtime supporter of the Act.

Unions believe the Act, or EFCA, will speed up the process of unionization by certifying a union if the majority of workers sign union cards. Employers believe it will be a death knell to their efforts to remain union-free.

"The problem is workers are only going to hear one side of the story, the union's side," says Robert Battista, attorney at employment law firm Littler Mendelson and former chairman of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), because the Act eliminates the secret-ballot vote, and many employers may be unaware that an organizing campaign is in progress.

Thea Lee, policy director for the AFL-CIO, says EFCA is a key piece of legislation for unions and for workers.

"We have no doubts President Obama and Vice President (Joe) Biden will be strongly supportive," she adds.

Improving worker safety

Another long-anticipated positive for workers will be the beefing up of the nation's labor law and worker-safety enforcement, labor experts say.

"In some cases, you don't have to change existing laws, you just have to enforce them," says Virginia Commonwealth's Trumble, pointing to what he describes as an inadequate number of inspectors at agencies that oversee worker safety.

Once Obama makes appointments to the NLRB, which oversees organizing rights for workers, the board will

be more sympathetic to workers, says Hanan Kolko, a pro-labor attorney with New York-based Meyer, Suozzi, English & Klein. "It's a pendulum. During the Republican administration it swung toward the employer."

Some additional Obama worker initiatives he's thrown his support behind in the past include:

- Boosting the minimum wage to \$9.50 by 2011. He's also talked about tying the minimum wage to inflation, something labor advocates say is long overdue.
- Requiring employers to give workers paid sick leave. The United States is one of only a handful of industrialized nations that does not federally mandate sick leave for employees.

Getting employers to pony up more money in a bad economy is going to be a tough battle for the new president, says Jim Sokolove, a pro-labor attorney in Newton, Mass.

But he believes Obama is setting the stage for what hopefully will be a worker renaissance in the United States.

"The opportunity is there," he says. "You're always going to have greed. But the president can bring a sense of values to our country, and he's already doing that. We can't function in a society that does not have rungs in the ladder for the people on the lower parts."

Eve Tahmincioglu writes the weekly "Your Career" column for msnbc.com and chronicles workplace issues in her blog, CareerDiva.net.

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