

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Union Agenda

April 4, 2008; Page A12

By KIMBERLEY A. STRASSEL

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama visited the House of Labor this week, and Labor can't wait to invite one back. Which one? Who cares.

To read the press coverage, unions are as split as the rest of the country over a Democratic nominee. The giant AFL-CIO has yet to endorse, its member unions hopelessly divided. Locals fight it out state-to-state, squaring off into their candidates' corners. The upcoming Pennsylvania primary has devolved into a slugfest over a huge union vote, one reason why both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama planned their weeks around speeches to an AFL-CIO convention in Philly.

Republicans are gleeful about these divides, but the guys grinning widest are union bosses. They understood long ago what even today the GOP and the business community have yet to grasp. This election is their best shot in a half-century of making over Washington. Not everyone is thrilled with a Clinton or an Obama, but this matters little next to the big prize. As Gerald McEntee, the savvy head of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, succinctly put it, Big Labor is looking for a "trifecta" – the Oval Office, the House and a filibuster-proof Senate. And after that, the biggest rewrite of labor law in modern America.

"This is an all-in bet for them in 2008," says Mark Mix, president of the National Right to Work Committee, a group that fights down in the trenches against coercive union power. "As market cycles go, they're in their peak, we're in our trough, and they're looking for a clear two-year run" in an all-Democrat Washington.

How bad does Big Labor want this? Consider history. George W. Bush has been eight years of anticorruption probes and more union financial disclosure. Bill Clinton's tenure was defined by an antiunion GOP majority, with Nafta as a bitter pill. George H.W. Bush codified the Beck decision, allowing workers to withhold political dues. Ronald Reagan broke the air traffic controllers union. Even Jimmy Carter was tightfisted with gifts. The unions' last political heyday arguably ended with the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959, which regulated internal union affairs.

How bad does Big Labor want this? Consider the desperation. A global economy has meant higher-paying, more flexible jobs, and a U.S. workforce that sees little value in unions. Union membership has been in a free-fall for years, with private-sector membership now at just 7.4% of the labor force. Fights over how to stop this bleeding

have fractured the movement. Labor leaders worry that if they don't reverse the trend soon, they'll be out of a job.

This is their shot. Unions are confident the House will be Democratic and pliant. By holding off on big endorsements, they've forced both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama to pander to their demands, creating some of the most pro-union presidential candidates in recent history. In the Senate, labor bosses see a chance to add three to seven seats, enough, when combined with wobbly Republicans, to do away with filibusters. They're already out spending in New Hampshire, Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico, Virginia, Alaska and Maine.

How bad does Big Labor want this? Consider the money and manpower so far. The AFL-CIO has approved a record political budget of \$53 million to help fund 200,000 union workers on the street. Its affiliated national and international unions have pledged another \$200 million. The National Education Association will throw \$40 million to \$50 million at races. The Service Employees International Union has marked off \$100 million for politics, and intends to pay 2,000 union members the equivalent of their salaries to work on Democratic campaigns. Add in union money for federal or state political action committees, for 527s, and for local and state races, and some astute members of the business community – those who have seen this coming "tsunami" (as one puts it) – estimate union political spending may top *\$1 billion* in 2008.

How bad does Big Labor want this? Consider what it will get if that money pays off. Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama have already pledged a rewrite of Nafta and an end to more trade deals. Both promise to throw government money at new union-only jobs, to boost unemployment insurance, to penalize companies that hire overseas, and to take a run at "universal" health care.

To this, unions will add passage of "card check," which would outlaw secret ballots in union organizing elections. Alongside will be legislation to make union officials the exclusive bargaining agents of most police, fire and rescue personnel. Then there's the biggie – so big that most officials don't talk about it publicly. Tucked into the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act is a provision called 14(b), which allows for "right to work" states. Big Labor last took a run at deleting this section, and forcing more unionization, in the Johnson administration. With a filibuster-proof Senate, they'd have a far better shot.

Unions want a Department of Labor that will sit on corruption cases, water down financial disclosure rules, and turn a blind eye to the use of pension funds to influence boardroom decisions. The National Labor Relations Board has three vacancies, which Senate Democrats will refuse to fill this year. Big Labor's own slate would include people favorable to proposals to allow "mini-unions" within corporate workplaces, or to rework job definitions to bring more positions under the union umbrella.

The biggest obstacle to all this would normally be the business community. But with Democrats strongly positioned to win, companies are reluctant to upset the political masters. The corporate world's list of political problems has also grown so large – trade,

paid leave, healthcare, environmental issues – that it has barely been able to focus on the union threat.

To the extent companies have stepped up, it's been on single issues, like card check. And therein lies the unions' biggest risk: overreach. Good as the overall political environment is, most Americans don't agree with specific union proposals. A recent poll released by the Coalition for a Democratic Workplace, which is fighting against card check, found that two-thirds of voters in key Senate election states oppose getting rid of secret union ballots.

The tactic of pro-union Democrats in the past has been to avoid talking specifics. If Republicans want a shot at winning some political races, they'll need to. Painting the picture of a union-dominated America might help focus minds.