

Source: Labor Relations Week: All Issues > 2009 > 07/02/2009 > Trends & Views > Communications Workers: Biden, Harkin Tell CWA Convention Delegates Of Their Support for Union's Legislative Goals

23 LRW 1070

Communications Workers

Biden, Harkin Tell CWA Convention Delegates Of Their Support for Union's Legislative Goals

Delegates to the joint convention/legislative-political conference of the Communications Workers of America June 24 heard from Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) in support of passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (H.R. 1409, S. 560) and health care overhaul legislation.

"If workers want a union, they should have it. They are entitled to have it," Biden told convention delegates. EFCA would restore the balance and level the playing field, he said. As the situation stands, workers who want to organize have to climb over too many technicalities and through too many obstacles, he said. "The guys who are supposed to wear striped shirts have been wearing black shirts," the vice president said.

According to Biden, the need to pass EFCA is not ideological, liberal, or conservative, but about the major players—business and labor—having a say.

The controversial legislation, which is pitting unions and business groups against one another with dueling multimillion dollar campaigns, would, among other things, make it easier for workers to form unions by allowing a choice between a secret ballot election or majority sign-up through a check of union authorization cards. It also would allow for mediation and arbitration of first contracts if the parties fail to reach agreement within certain time periods and would increase penalties for labor law violations. Passage of the bill would represent the first major revision of federal labor law in 50 years.

Biden Stresses Union Role in Economic Recovery

Biden praised unions for helping to make it possible for hardworking people to live decently and for providing them a "fair shot."

"After eight years of workers being ignored or worse, our message is 'Welcome back to the table as equal partners with every other interest in America,'" Biden said to CWA convention delegates.

"There is no way to restore the economy without restoring the middle class. And there is no way of restoring the middle class without unions," Biden said.

Although productivity in the United States grew 20 percent between 2001 and 2008, those in the middle class lost \$2,000 in real annual income during that period, Biden said. "It is not sufficient for the gross domestic product to grow. The middle class must grow during the same period. If it does not we have failed," he said.

Biden also spoke of the need for health care legislation because U.S. business is disadvantaged globally by the high costs of employee health care adding to U.S. production costs. To compete internationally, business has to bring down the cost of health care and realize radical health care changes are needed, he said.

For the first time, the health care issue has reached the point of a fiscal, business, and moral necessity, Biden said. He noted that President Obama has made health care his top domestic priority.

Annie Hill, CWA executive vice president, identified four points the union wants included in health care legislation: all employers should provide health coverage or pay into a trust; a public option; no taxation of health care benefits; and a solution for early retirees to fill the gap between retirement and Medicare coverage.

'EFCA Is Alive and Kicking.'

Harkin, who has the task of shepherding EFCA through the Senate, said its passage is the single most important thing to get the country on the road to recovery.

Acknowledging the hardship workers often face in an organizing campaign, Harkin said, "Why should American citizens have to crawl through broken glass and go through boot camp hell to exercise their perfectly legal right to organize?" He also questioned why only employers and not workers should get to decide whether employees go through a secret ballot election or card check to form a union.

Currently the Senate has 51 votes in favor of EFCA while others express reservations about the present form of the bill. Harkin said he expects a compromise will lead to passage. "I'm here to tell you EFCA is alive and kicking," he told CWA delegates.

Any compromise would have to include three core principles: give workers the ability to choose between majority sign-up and secret ballot elections; require unionized workers to receive a first contract on a "date certain," and "meaningful" penalties for employer labor law violations, according to Harkin.

Even if a compromise is not reached, Harkin vowed to still bring EFCA to the Senate floor to demand an up or down vote, "so workers will know who your friends are."

By Susan R. Hobbs

