

## Labor unions look to cash in with Dems

By: Lisa Lerer  
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Organized labor spent tens of millions of dollars putting Democrats in Congress and the White House. Now, as the new Democratic majority gets ready to take office, unions are ready to cash — or, rather, check — in.

The Employee Free Choice Act, widely dubbed the Card Check Bill, has long been a top legislative priority for labor. Although Democrats may fall short of a filibuster-resistant majority of 60 votes in the new Senate, unions feel confident about their chances to push the legislation through Congress next year.

“You can go on our website and look at how many times Sen. Obama told us he was in favor of the Employee Free Choice Act,” said Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union. “We don’t have any question where he is on this issue.”

But industry groups are warning the new administration that if Barack Obama pushes the legislation, the new president will face a major fight that could permanently hurt his relationships with the business community — an enemy he may not want to make early in his term.

**“It could be a defining battle,” said business lobbyist Jade West, who sits on the management committee of the Coalition for a Democratic Workplace, an anti-card-check group. “This could be a very big defining issue right out of the box for the president-elect.”**

Unions are transforming their election-year ground troops into a national lobbying force that will push for the bill. Last week, the AFL-CIO’s executive council decided to shift its 2008 field structure, with hundreds of staff in key states, from electoral politics to a card-check mobilization campaign.

On Friday, American Rights at Work, a coalition of labor and workers’ rights advocates, launched a national advertising campaign to build support for the Card Check Bill. The group’s chairman, former Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.), is one of Obama’s economic advisers.

For its part, the business community plans to continue pouring resources into opposing the bill.

The Coalition for a Democratic Workplace, which ran ads opposing the bill before the elections, plans a major outreach drive to state and local industry

associations and is considering running print ads next week.

“We are well-prepared throughout the country to address [the Card Check Bill] and participate in that debate, and it’s not going to be a walk in the park,” said Tom Donohue, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. “We’re going to win this thing.”

The bill would give workers the right to unionize if a majority of employees publicly sign cards in favor of forming a union. Labor groups argue that months-long intimidation campaigns run by employers make unionizing almost impossible. The legislation, they say, would give employees a clear and fair path to form a union.

Card check has become critical to organized labor, which believes the new process would help boost its rolls. Union membership has fallen to just 12 percent of the entire work force; in 1983, it was 20 percent.

But business groups say the legislation would take away the rights of companies to insist on a secret ballot election. A public ballot, business lobbyists argue, would open employees up to coercion or manipulation.

The bill passed the House in March 2007, with help from 13 Republicans, but failed to get a filibuster-proof margin in the Senate. Only one Senate Republican, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, broke party ranks to support it.

Now the question facing both sides is how quickly the issue comes up again.

Unions are pushing the Obama administration to include the legislation in a broader economic package, likely one of the first issues the president-elect will tackle after taking office in January. Unions, they argue, are a necessary part of bolstering the middle class and helping the economy recover.

“I would not say this is a wedge issue,” said AFL-CIO legislative director Bill Samuel. “This is a basic issue of economic security and fairness.”

But business officials argue that the Card Check Bill would further hurt the struggling economy.

“I don’t think that you can make a very rational argument for dropping the Employee Free Choice deal on top of a stimulus program in a way that clearly, both in real terms and perceptions, would have serious implications on the creation of jobs and the stability of the economy,” Donohue said. “It clearly should wait until after we get these economies stabilized.”

Even if Obama doesn’t include the legislation among his early top priorities, unions feel confident that they can win in Congress — particularly if Democrats win Senate seats in outstanding races in Georgia, Minnesota and Alaska.

Obama is “going to have to decide if this is part of his economic program,” Stern said. “On the other hand, there are still two other branches of government, two other houses of decision making here, that can act on their own.”

**If Democrats fail to win all three Senate seats, the issue would turn on a handful of key Republican votes — a political dynamic that gives some business lobbyists hope.**

**“We have no reason to presume that any of the Republicans who voted against cloture would vote for it today,” West said.**

Unions realize that they must win Republican support but see the recent election as a mandate.

Stern said that, according to SEIU polling, ads run by the business community against candidates who supported the Card Check Bill had no effect on voters. Every House member who voted for the measure was reelected, he said, and all of the Democratic senators whose opponents had run card check ads against them kept their seats.

“In voters’ minds, this is very simple,” Stern said. “They want to make their own decisions. They don’t want the union to decide. They don’t want the employer to decide. They want to decide if they have an organization.”