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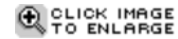
Unions plan organization push in Texas

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By **DAVE MICHAELS** / The Dallas Morning News
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WASHINGTON – Emboldened by their role in electing Barack Obama, labor unions are pushing to make it easier to organize workers in states with historically low levels of union penetration, including Texas.

The unions, which include the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win coalition, enhanced their political muscle by campaigning heavily for Mr. Obama, who sponsored several labor-friendly bills during his brief career in the Senate. The unions want the next Congress to quickly pass a bill at the top of their shopping list: legislation that would allow unions to form as soon as a majority of workers sign cards saying they want one.



**J. SCOTT
APPLEWHITE**/The Associated Press
Unions heavily backed
Barack Obama and expect favorable legislation in return.

The legislation wouldn't overwrite "right to work" laws in states such as Texas, where workers can opt out of a union even after one forms. But the Employee Free Choice Act would make it easier to organize in the state, where unions see the potential to recruit thousands of members in the health care, service and transportation industries.

"We know it would incredibly strengthen the hand of workers," said Bruce Raynor, general president of Unite Here, which represents about 2,200 Texas workers.

Union leaders say the changes are needed to help offset a long history of employer hostility to unions in states such as Texas, where fewer than 5 percent of workers belong to unions. They're advertising the legislation as a complement to an economic stimulus package aimed at creating thousands of jobs.

But unions would have to overcome what appears to be unified opposition from business groups to changing union-organizing laws.

Groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce say the legislation would raise costs at a time when companies are shedding thousands of jobs and can't get loans. They want to preserve the need for a secret ballot to create a union, saying the card-signing process would let union organizers bully workers into joining.

Glenn Spencer, executive director of the chamber's Workforce Freedom Initiative, said unions would aim to recruit members in the South and Southwest, where wages are lower but more jobs have been created.

"It arguably will have more effect in the Sun Belt than it will in the Rust Belt, because in the Rust Belt, the level of unionization has reached its limit," said Harry Jones, a Dallas labor attorney whose practice represents employers. "It's all green fields down here."

Most businesses expect Mr. Obama, the president-elect, to favor labor. In the Senate, he co-sponsored the free choice act and a bill that proposed binding arbitration to solve an impasse between the Federal Aviation

Administration and air traffic controllers.

The free choice act passed the House in March 2007, but it failed to win enough support in the Senate.

Mr. Obama expressed support for the free choice act during his campaign. His team has since deleted references to the bill from his Web site. An Obama spokesman declined this week to comment about the bill.

Union leaders intend to push congressional Democrats to advance the legislation during Mr. Obama's first 100 days, said Anna Burger, chairwoman of Change to Win, whose seven affiliated unions include Unite Here.

Mr. Raynor said Unite Here's get-out-the-vote effort focused on the battleground states of Virginia, Nevada and Wisconsin. Its volunteers contacted 350,000 voters in those states, he said. The union later stumped for Mr. Obama in Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

"This is a reward from the Obama administration to labor for their support of his election," said Massey Villarreal, a Houston businessman who has advised Gov. Rick Perry and Sen. John McCain on economic policy.

Yet success in the Senate is uncertain. Democrats haven't won the 60 seats that are needed to block a Republican filibuster of the free choice act.

"This is a battle that will be fought in the U.S. Senate," said Mr. Villarreal, who sits on the board of directors of the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

In its current form, the bill includes two changes that are especially important to unions. First, the card-check process would replace the need to conduct a secret-ballot election. Labor leaders complain that management uses the elections to coerce and threaten workers to reject unions.

Second, an arbitrator would impose a contract if a union and management can't agree on terms within 120 days of the union's creation. There is no such deadline under current law.

"This is absolutely a game-changer," said Robert Chiaravalli, a West Bloomfield, Mich., labor attorney and consultant. "The lions' share of employers aren't going to be prepared for it."

The most heavily unionized sectors in Texas are the government and the airlines. But unions see potential members in the state's growing rolls in health care and hospitality.

"These are young workers between the ages of 18 and 35, predominantly women, predominantly Latino immigrant workers," said Jean Hervey, Southwest region director for Unite Here. "We can make these good middle-class jobs for a massive number of folks and particularly in North Texas."

Even without the legislation, the region's growing role as a transportation hub presents opportunities for unions to become more involved, Mr. Jones said.

"Dallas is becoming an inland port, and Houston is maturing as a real harbor town," Mr. Jones said. "It'll lend itself to protectionism and some union being able to put its arm around that whole group of workers and say, 'I'll get you what you need.'"

Nonetheless, increases in union membership will be incremental, according to union leaders and labor attorneys. No one expects union membership to grow to the levels of the early 1970s, when the national rate was around 24 percent.

"Even with making the balance of power more in favor of unions, it still takes a lot of work to get your

organizers out to places that are having problems," Mr. Jones said. "It's still fighting off what will be some pretty strong defenses by the companies."