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DEMOCRATS SHOULD LEAD ON LABOR REFORM

FOR A MORE JUST SOCIETY, STAND UP TO BIG BUSINESS AND MAKE IT EASIER FOR WORKERS TO ORGANIZE.

By KELLY CANDAELE, PETER DREIER. Los Angeles Times. Oct 11, 1996.

The sleeping giant of America's labor movement seems to be waking up. Numerous magazine and newspaper stories have commented on organized labor's "renewed political clout" a year after an insurgent movement ousted AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland and replaced him with the militant ex-janitor organizer John Sweeney. The minimum wage increase has been signed into law, and in key congressional districts throughout the country, labor has been flexing its political muscle.

Few labor experts expect to see the kind of mass organizing that ignited the country's passions during the 1930s. But if the Democrats take back Congress in November, a large part of the credit will go to a resurgent labor movement. Then, politicians and pundits will worry again about "what labor wants."

What labor should want can be found in the coffee houses of Vancouver, British Columbia. Just last month, the Canadian Auto Workers union completed a successful organizing drive among workers at Starbucks coffee outlets. These retail workers, whose working conditions during rush hour resemble those of an automobile assembly line, were brought into the union without what in the United States is called a "representation election."

Based on British Columbia labor law, all the organizers needed were signatures from 55% or more of the Starbucks employees stating their desire for CAW representation. A few weeks later, the provincial labor board certified the union without a vote of the employees and the union has moved toward bargaining.

It is no surprise that the percentage of Canadian workers who are organized stands at 35% while in the United States it is down to 15%.

In this country, National Labor Relations Board elections are the rule unless an employer voluntarily grants union recognition, a rare occurrence. Most organizers will tell you that the NLRB is an impediment to organizing. Any employer with a clever labor attorney can stall union elections, giving the boss enough time to scare the living daylights out of potential recruits. According to one study, one in 10 workers involved in an organizing drive is fired. In Los Angeles, unions like the Hotel and Restaurant Workers and the Service Employees' "Justice for Janitors" campaign have become so discouraged by the NLRB bureaucracy that they have abandoned the election process altogether.

American employers can require workers to attend meetings on work time where company managers and consultants give anti-union speeches, show anti-union films and distribute anti-union literature. But unions have no equivalent rights of access to employees. To reach employees, union organizers frequently must visit their homes or hold secret meetings.

If President Clinton wants to help America's hard-working families share in the nation's prosperity, he should make labor law reform a top priority in a second term. A British Columbia-style approach would be a good start.

Mobilizing a new wave of union organizing won't be easy. As economist Richard Rothstein noted in a recent issue of the American Prospect, unions will have to recruit more than 250,000 members a year merely to maintain the 15% level they now hold. Last year unions added fewer than 100,000 new members into the fold.

Labor law reform should be at the top of the Democratic Party's agenda. But the party is divided between its corporate benefactors and its low-income and working-class constituents. Party advisors who endorse "distancing" themselves from

organized labor should reconsider their position. All things being equal, union members vote far more Democratic than their nonunion counterparts.

Organized labor is in a honeymoon period, awash in media attention that is deserved but often superficial. Articles have emphasized labor's "photogenic young organizers," rather than what a renewed labor movement would mean for the country at large. These long-overdue stories contribute to a more positive image of labor's role in American life. But they ignore the need for structural change in the laws that determine labor's fate.

America faces new economic and social challenges. If our labor laws are changed to make it easier for employees to organize, a decade from now the United States will be a more prosperous and egalitarian society. If they remain unchanged, the union movement will erode even further, and the nation's workers will face even harsher economic circumstances.

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