

# Unions: Employees should have free choice

by **Gordon Lafer, Guest opinion**  
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If you listen to America's workers, one of the keys to digging ourselves out of the economic hole we're in is employees' ability to join a union. Polls show between 25 and 60 million Americans who are not now union members say they wish they had a union in their workplace.

This desire is understandable - on average, people with a union make 30 percent more than those in the same jobs who don't have one, are 62 percent more likely to have employer-provided health coverage, and have greater job security. We've been living through a period where companies make record profits, overly-paid CEOs demand contracts of their own, but the majority of employees are falling further and further behind in this struggling economy. A union is the only way most employees have of getting a fairer share of the pie.

If so many people want a union, why don't they get one? The answer is simple. Under federal law, people who want to form a union have to go through a Labor Board "election" process that looks more like elections in the old Soviet Union than like anything we would call American.

There is no free speech, no equal access to media, none of the basic things that make an election "free and fair." Get this: employees are forced to attend mass anti-union presentations. Not only are pro-union employees not given equal time, but they can be forced to attend on condition that they keep their mouths shut. If they ask a question anyway, they can be fired on the spot. Employers can plaster the workplace with anti-union leaflets, banners, and bulletin board notices while banning pro-union employees from doing the same. Supervisors take the people under them aside for intimidating one-on-one "meetings" where they're told that a union could harm an employee's "personal relations" with the company.

All of these things are illegal in elections to Congress or the Presidency. Under federal election law, a private corporation can't put up partisan posters in the workplace; can't invite one candidate to address employees without giving equal time to the opposition; and can't tell its rank and file employees anything about who they think is a better candidate. These laws exist to make sure workers can vote their conscience without undue pressure from their employers. But all the things that corporations are banned from doing in federal elections, they're allowed to do in Labor Board elections.

The Employee Free Choice Act - a bipartisan bill that passed the House, had majority support in the Senate, but was filibustered by the Republican leadership - would fix this system. It says that if a majority of employees sign statements saying they want to form a union - and these signatures are verified by the government - their employer has to recognize their union and engage in good-faith negotiations. Seems simple enough, right?

But this simple proposal has been viciously attacked by anti-union big business and corporate lobbyists. They say the current system is better because it ends in a secret ballot. But a secret ballot by itself does not make an election fair. For God's sake, even Saddam Hussein used secret ballots! Dictators around the world regularly win election with secret ballots because they do the same things employers do in labor elections - they force voters to only listen to one sided propaganda, they make sure only the ruling party can communicate with voters, and they threaten people's jobs for backing the opposition.

I suppose that, of all the lies we're going to be fed this election season, maybe the biggest one is this: that what's keeping corporate executives up at night is fear for the democratic rights of their employees. These companies - who would never let their employees vote about moving jobs overseas, or increasing the cost of healthcare, or CEO pay - pick this one area to declare the importance of secret-ballot votes.

The real reason for business opposition to this bill is simple. They don't want more people to have unions, because they don't want to have to negotiate with their employees, and they don't want to have to share the wealth with the people at the bottom. While this greed is understandable, it is also grossly unfair, as no CEO would ever agree to work without a written contract granting their pay and benefits. But for the rest of us who are not in the executive offices, making it easier for employees to negotiate a fair deal by passing the Employee Free Choice Act is a no brainer.

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