

# *Obama, the unions and labour law reform: Ensuring the future of the new Democratic majority*

Eric Lee

President-Elect Barack Obama has a formidable to-do list. Those who voted for him, and people all over the world as well, expect him to tackle the global economic crisis, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, climate change, and much more.

Everyone understands that these are enormous undertakings. It is unlikely that Obama will be able to fulfil even a small fraction of what is expected of him in a single term in office. Indeed, to achieve the kind of fundamental change he seeks it is probably not an exaggeration to say that liberal Democrats need to be in power for a generation.

There is a clear historical precedent for this. Back in 1932, in the darkest days of the First Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt won the Presidency with the same vague promises and clear message of hope. Roosevelt's first hundred days in office are the stuff of legend.

FDR moved swiftly to close down all the nation's banks in what was known as the 'bank holiday.' He proposed to Congress a sweeping set of laws that were passed in what were probably the most dramatic legislation sessions ever.

Much of it was emergency legislation to create an alphabet soup's worth of new federal agencies. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was one of the best known and most successful. Roosevelt used the CCC to employ hundreds of thousands of jobless men to take on a task that was close to Roosevelt's heart – preserving nature. (This combination of job creation and environmental concerns is one of make striking parallels between the Roosevelt and Obama programs.) The CCC was a hugely popular program, and did much in the area of flood protection and tree-planting, but like nearly all the New Deal agencies was eventually closed down.

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What endured from the 1930s were really only two things and both ensured Democratic Party dominance of U.S. politics up until 1980. These were the Social Security Act and the National Labour Relations Act (NLRA). Neither of the Republican Presidents elected during that period (Eisenhower and Nixon) challenged Social Security or the right of workers to join and form trade unions.

Social Security was and remains an enormously popular program. It represented the first time that the federal government acknowledged its responsibility toward the country's senior citizens. In a stroke, it essentially wiped out old-age poverty. Nearly three-quarters of a century after its passage, none of its opponents have come even close to significantly reforming it, let alone abolishing it. (George W. Bush's attempt fizzled early on.) Like Britain's National Health Service, this is the part of the welfare state that even free-market conservatives don't dare to touch.

The National Labour Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act) is the other enduring piece of legislation from the New Deal era. It established for the first time in federal law the right of workers to join and form trade unions. The result of this legislation was the spectacular growth of unions in the 1930s and their continued growth right up until the early 1970s.

Looking back at the Democratic Party's nearly half-century of political dominance with all its achievements – both in the growth of the welfare state and in the triumph of the civil rights movement – it clear that had Roosevelt been defeated in 1936 or even 1940, little of this would have mattered. To achieve change – fundamental change – required the building of what became known as the New Deal coalition in American politics.

That coalition consisted of those groups which benefited from the changes being made. It included ethnic minorities (especially Blacks), the urban working class, and educated liberals (including the Jewish community). At its core was the organized labour movement.

Before the New Deal, unions could not be counted on as part of the Democratic Party base. Indeed the founding father of the American labour movement, Samuel Gompers, was a strong advocate of unions not hitching themselves to any specific party, but instead giving their support to individual candidates based on their records. He called this rewarding their friends and punishing their enemies.

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After Roosevelt, the unions and the Democrats grew increasingly close – a process which continued well into the Reagan era and beyond. In all recent elections, unions have played a central role in Democratic election strategy, and in key demographics – such as white working class males – they are the only group that can deliver votes to liberal Democratic candidates.

For Barack Obama, a repeat of the first two years of the Clinton presidency is the nightmare scenario. It must be avoided at all costs. In 1994, Republicans wrested control of Congress and an exuberant Newt Gingrich – the newly-elected Speaker of the House – brought an end both to any possibility of serious social change in the 1990s and to the prospects of Democratic dominance of American politics. (The latter was achieved by constant Congressional harassment of the Clinton White House not only over the President's inappropriate behaviour with female interns, but over a whole range of real and imaginary infractions.)

Obama cannot allow the Republicans to repeat their 1994 triumph in 2010. And he must be considering even now, even before his inauguration, the steps he needs to take to ensure his own re-election in 2012. Because none of the big issues are going to be solved in two years, or even four.

That's why strengthening the trade unions is essential to sustain the new Democratic majority.

For three decades now American unions have been in steep decline. Among private sector workers, union density has dipped to below 10 percent. There are many reasons why this is the case, some of them shared with other industrialized countries, but a uniquely American feature is the role of intimidation by bosses in the workplace.

A non-union worker in the U.S. who tries to organize his fellow workers is likely to be sacked – and though this violates the NLRA, the employer is unlikely to be punished. This has resulted in a climate of terror in many American workplaces, with workers afraid to sign union cards. Though polls indicate that the vast majority of non-union workers would join a union given a choice, millions are not doing so for fear of such reprisals.

For decades unions have been pushing for the enactment of new, stronger labour laws that would make it easier for workers to join unions and harder for employers

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to intimidate union organisers. The current version of that reform is called the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) and Senator Barack Obama was one its sponsors. As a candidate, he promised to sign it into law. The EFCA gives unions a new, alternative route to organising the workplace based on card check. It greatly weakens the employers' ability to terrorise the workforce – which is why employers' organisations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce are opposing it so vehemently.

Passing the EFCA must become one of Obama's top domestic legislative priorities and not only because he promised it or because it is the right thing to do.

The Democrats need the EFCA because they need a strengthened trade union movement in order to win the 2010 Congressional elections – and to re-elect Obama in 2012. They need powerful unions to sustain Democratic dominance of American politics for the next generation, just as the New Deal coalition did for much of the twentieth century.

If unions with just 9 percent of private sector workers organised were able to have such a significant impact on the recent elections, imagine what would happen if 20 percent or 30 percent of workers would be organised.

We know that unionised workers are different. They learn through experience. White union members were far more likely than non-members to vote for a Black presidential candidate, for example. They are also much more likely to vote than non-members. Being in a trade union is clearly a transformative experience for many workers.

America needs fundamental change. The pundits will come up with a long list of things that need to be taken care of, but Obama must first of all ensure the political survival of the coalition he put together in 2008.

That's why the passage of labour law reform should top the Democrats' legislative agenda in 2009.

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