

Union bill forges ahead

Dems' boost for labor off to full Senate. State business leaders say the bill, which eases the creation of all-union shops, would slow job growth.

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Hundreds of business leaders crowded the state Capitol on Tuesday in an unsuccessful attempt to block Democratic legislation they fear will slow job growth by making it easier to create all-union shops.

After a three-hour hearing with more than 40 witnesses, the Senate Business, Labor and Technology Committee sided with the unions and approved changes to the Labor Peace Act, sending it to the full Senate on a 4-3 party-line vote.

The full Senate is expected to pass the bill later this week. A final vote will send it on to Gov. Bill Ritter, who is under intense pressure from both labor and business interests to prove his loyalty.

While the heads of business groups lined up to repeat the message that the proposal would put Colorado at a disadvantage in recruiting new companies, union members said it was about making sure Colorado workers have a living wage and decent benefits.

"Do it for the union members," said Daniel Modecker of Teamsters Local 537. "Do it for the single mother who needs health insurance."

But business leaders said the bill would eliminate a careful balance Colorado has struck between the country's 22 right-to-work states and the 27 more labor-friendly states.

That unique balance requires a secret, second vote of all workers before an all-union shop can be created. HB 1072 would eliminate that second vote.

"This serves notice to employers and those considering doing business here that the free-market system is under attack," said Will Temby, chief executive of the Greater Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce.

Temby is also chair of the Colorado Competitive Council, whose members lined the hearing room and statehouse halls wearing stickers that read, "Keep Colorado Competitive."

Ritter campaigned as moderate

Business groups were outraged last week when the bill became one of the first pieces of legislation passed this session by the House. Opponents accused Democratic leaders of rushing the bill through without warning or negotiation, and business leaders criticized Ritter for not taking their side.

Ritter campaigned as a Democratic moderate dedicated to promoting economic development in Colorado, which won him support from a number of traditionally Republican business leaders.

But he also played to his party's labor roots.

"It certainly is a challenging situation for a brand-new governor to be in," said Bob Loevy, a political science professor at Colorado College in Colorado Springs.

Still, Loevy said the legislation to change the 62-year-old Labor Peace Act should surprise no one, given the Democratic takeover of both the legislature and the Governor's Mansion.

"This is exactly the kind of change you would expect. The Democratic strategy is to do it and do it fast and hope they forget," he said.

Senate President Joan Fitz-Gerald, D-Jefferson County, and House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, have both denied that any special preferences were given to rush the bill, which was sponsored by Rep. Michael Garcia, D-Aurora, and Sen. Jennifer Veiga, D-Denver.

"There were no surprises here," she said.

John Straayer, a political-science professor at Colorado State University, called it a bad public-relations move by the Democrats.



Mountain State Employers Council executive vice president Barbara Thompson, seated at table, testifies in opposition to HB 1072 on Tuesday at the state Capitol. The Democratic legislation, which a Senate committee later passed on 4-3 party-line vote, would make it easier to create all-union shops. (Post / Cyrus McCrimmon)

"This is not the sort of thing that the governor needed at this point," he said, suggesting the party might have waited a year, or at least a few months, to float the legislation. "I think the perception is, rightly or wrongly, that this is the first shot out of the box. ... There is a sense that people who have a stake in it were shut out."

Sides may be "bitter enemies"

Indeed, John Brackney, president of the South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce, warned the Senate committee that passage of the bill could hamper negotiations down the road on important issues such as health care reform and funding for higher education and highways.

"We may become bitter enemies for a while," he said, "and we just can't afford to do that as a state."

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Unions in Colorado

CURRENTLY

1. Creating a union requires voluntary recognition by employers or support from at least 50 percent plus one of those who would be covered.
2. Creating an all-union shop, where eligible employees must join or pay an "agency fee" to offset the cost of union work to negotiate benefits, requires support in a special election from 50 percent plus one of eligible voters or 75 percent of those voting, whichever is higher.

HB 1072, BEING CONSIDERED IN THE LEGISLATURE

Would eliminate step No. 2 above, often termed the "second vote."

Would not allow unions in Colorado to seek a "closed shop," where every eligible employee must belong to the union, because such contracts are outlawed by federal law.