

Unions Brace for Legislative Assaults

Written by Rich Miller

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Organized labor is engaged in a furious multi-front legislative war in Illinois, and more skirmishes may be on the horizon.

Trade and industrial unions are hoping to mitigate major damage from proposed workers' compensation reforms. Teachers unions are trying to fend off what it considers to be some egregious education reforms. And public-employee unions are warily eyeing a potential new battle against a well-known foe that their counterparts in other states have had to face in the recent past. Looking at the battlefield right now, you'd probably never know that the Democrats held onto power in last month's elections.

The House appears to be taking the more radically conservative approach, but the Democratic Senate president is determined to pass some form of workers' compensation reform before the current General Assembly wraps up business in early January. The same unions that pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into Senate campaigns are now fighting the very people they helped re-elect just a few short weeks ago.

The teachers' unions are preparing scorched-earth tactics for the House's education-reform bill, which they say will all but take away their right to strike, severely limit their collective bargaining powers, and impose new state standards for firing or laying off teachers.

The union focus has lately turned toward a proposed constitutional amendment in the House for

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a “Taxpayer Bill of Rights,” or TABOR as it’s more commonly known around the nation. The proposal was quietly introduced during the veto session by Representative Keith Farnham (D-Elgin), who is also backing the education reforms.

The measure would limit state spending to the previous year’s levels plus (or minus) the average percentage increase (or decrease) of per-capita personal income over the previous five years. Any spending above that would require a declaration of a fiscal emergency by the governor and a three-fifths vote in both chambers of the General Assembly. Any “extra” money would be placed in a rainy day fund or given back to taxpayers.

While House Speaker Michael Madigan’s position is not officially known, the unions have convinced themselves that Madigan will push it next month when the lame-duck session resumes. Colorado’s TABOR required voter approval before spending or taxes could rise and was twice watered down by referenda. Attempts at passing similar proposals have failed in other states. Illinois may be the only state where a TABOR has Democratic backing.

The assault on public-employee unions and government spending is not confined to Illinois, of course. Several other states are currently considering legislation to undermine the unions. Wisconsin’s new Republican governor-elect wants to get rid of collective-bargaining rights for public workers. And New York Democratic Governor-elect Andrew Cuomo has demanded a wage freeze from state-employee unions and hinted at major layoffs if he doesn’t get what he wants. Cuomo also wants pension reform, teacher wage cuts, and a 2-percent local-property-tax cap.

The Illinois Senate has been far less receptive to the House’s education reforms and will likely not love the Taxpayer Bill of Rights if it arrives. But the unions point to the big majorities for pension givebacks this year in both chambers and the Senate’s push for business-backed workers’ compensation and Medicaid reforms, so they aren’t taking any chances.

Unlike New York, where Cuomo courted trade unions during the campaign and tended to ignore the public-employee/teacher unions, Governor Pat Quinn heavily courted all sectors of organized labor and received gigantic contributions from pretty much everybody. Quinn, the unions believe, could be the ultimate “stopper.”

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But if these and other reforms are used by legislative Democrats to pry loose Republican votes for a tax hike, Quinn might have no choice but to climb on board and bite the hands that fed him so well this year.

So far, the House Republicans appear to be a bit more receptive to Democratic outreach than they were even a few weeks ago. The odds are still stacked against it, but if the Democrats keep moving rightward, the Republicans *might* possibly release a few votes for a tax hike.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.