

Labor Punishes Democrats – Barely

Written by Rich Miller
Monday, 18 June 2012 09:31

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Only a handful of state House Democratic incumbents targeted for defeat by the Republicans were endorsed by the Illinois AFL-CIO last week, but the damage to the Democratic Party's chances this fall will likely be minimal.

Organized labor's umbrella organization met in Springfield last week to make endorsements. Labor leaders turned a strong thumbs-down to some suburban House Democratic members who've supported pension changes and voted to cut health-insurance coverage for state retirees.

Labor fought pitched battles on several fronts this past spring. Public-employee pensions and health-insurance coverage were the most visible. Unlike neighboring states such as Indiana, organized labor has worked well with both parties here, and has historically been able to fend off the sort of attacks that Indiana's unions were unable to when Hoosier legislators debated a so-called "right to work" bill this year. That bill is now law.

There were no massive protests this year in Springfield like there were in Wisconsin last year while the General Assembly considered changes to state-worker benefit plans. That's mainly because the unions were at the bargaining table here. Unions were completely shut out up north. But labor still didn't get what it wanted here, and some union leaders were furious at the outcome.

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AFSCME, which represents state employees, and other unions were hoping to withhold labor's endorsements from several House incumbents and candidates because of those fights over pensions and retiree health care. The public-employee unions were only partially successful.

Just three Downstate House Democratic incumbents who are heavily targeted for defeat by the Republicans were given labor's nod. Representatives Pat Verschoore (D-Milan), Dan Beiser (D-Alton), and Jerry Costello II (D-Smithton) were endorsed. Unions are still pretty strong in those districts and are considered important to election outcomes, so Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan pushed unions hard for their endorsements.

But some suburban Democrats were left without labor's backing.

Representatives Fred Crespo (D-Hoffman Estates), Michelle Mussman (D-Schaumburg), and Carol Sente (D-Vernon Hills) were not endorsed. According to one top labor official, the unions withheld their endorsements in those races as a warning to others that the AFL-CIO will not blindly follow the Democratic Party down its current conservative path.

However, those three Democrats represent suburban districts where organized labor is not hugely important, and some of those incumbents may eventually receive backing from individual unions that are locally influential. Ironically enough, Representative Elaine Nekritz, who has played a key role in negotiating pension and health-insurance changes for public employees and retirees, was endorsed by the AFL-CIO. Nekritz (D-Northbrook) is facing a fairly serious challenge this fall, and she's also in the process of becoming a top Madigan lieutenant.

Some of the biggest election battles in the House will be in "open" districts where no incumbents are running, and labor dutifully endorsed several Democratic candidates in those districts. The AFL-CIO also endorsed several Democrats who are challenging sitting Republican incumbents.

For instance, Scott Drury (D-Highwood), who was running against Republican Lauren Turelli for retiring Representative Karen May's seat until Turelli dropped out, was endorsed; Stephanie Kifowit (D-Aurora) and Sue Scherer (D-Decatur), both of whom are running in hotly contested newly created districts, were endorsed. Katherine Cloonen (D-Kankakee), who is running to replace retiring Democratic Representative Lisa Dugan, was also given the thumbs-up. Jeremy Ly (D-Minooka), who's up against GOP Representative Pam Roth (R-Morris), was given the

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nod, as were Sam Yingling (D-Round Lake Beach) and Mike Smiddy (D-Hillsdale), both of whom are challenging Republican incumbents.

Labor also endorsed Republican state Representative Angelo Saviano, who is being targeted heavily for defeat by the House Democrats. Saviano (R-Elmwood Park) usually gets labor's endorsement, so it was no surprise.

The news was far better for the Senate Democrats. All of their most heavily targeted incumbents were endorsed, despite the fact that the Senate passed a state-employee pension-reform bill. No Senate Republican incumbents or candidates were endorsed. But the more important Democratic challengers to sitting Republicans or in open-seat contests were also given the nod.

The bottom line is that the House Democrats barely got a slap on the wrist for what they did this past spring. It will take a much sterner rebuke from AFSCME and the teachers' unions if the Democrats are to get any sort of "real" message.

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