

Labor Notes

Oklahoma Right to Work Law Upheld

On December 16, the Supreme Court of Oklahoma upheld an amendment to Oklahoma's constitution that guarantees workers the right to decide whether to join unions. Gov. Frank Keating (R) and the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation successfully defeated efforts by state union leaders to scuttle the amendment because of its inapplicability on federal property and in the airline and railroad industries. Union lawyers also claimed the amendment violated the Oklahoma constitution's due process and equal protection clauses. The Oklahoma Supreme Court rejected these arguments with reasoning similar to several U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

Judge Blocks Union Financial Disclosure Rules

The AFL-CIO has successfully avoided detailed disclosure of union finances in 2004, an election year. Responding to an AFL-CIO lawsuit against Labor Secretary Elaine Chao to halt use of the new LM-2 financial disclosure form, U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler ruled that unions need more time to comply with the rules, which were to go into effect on January 1. Kessler has not yet ruled on the unions' request to permanently halt the new regulations. The National Legal and Policy Center notes that in 2001, Kessler overturned a 25-year policy at the Federal Election Commission to prevent disclosure of materials from an FEC investigation into links between the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party.

Unions Lose Big in Iowa Caucuses

Prior to the January 19 Iowa caucuses, labor unions split between two Democratic candidates for president. Industrial unions fought hard for longtime ally Rep. Dick Gephardt (D-MO), and the service-oriented unions backed former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean. Dean, almost universally considered the frontrunner in the race, finished third with only 18 percent of the vote, and Gephardt followed with only 11 percent.

NYC Teachers Union Bends Under Criticism

Responding to recent criticism from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (R), Schools Chancellor Joel Klein and the City Council, the New York City teachers union has pledged to cut the time it takes to remove incompetent teachers from as much as several years to no more than six months. "Yes, this is a union president who is going to talk about removing teachers who should not be teaching," vowed union president Randi Weingarten, noting the oddity of her position. More than 200 NYC teachers enjoy the protection of union rules and receive full pay while spending their days in so-called "rubber rooms" because of charges of incompetence and malfeasance.

California Grocery Workers Strike Drags On

A strike involving 70,000 grocery workers in Southern California has dragged on since October 11. Grocery store owners are insisting that employees pay a portion of their health insurance or accept reduced benefits, allowing the stores to compete with chains like Wal-Mart amid rising health care costs. The union workers, mostly women and minorities, claim grocery store jobs are among the best available to workers with limited education and health-care needs. Meanwhile, the stores have hired replacement workers.

Unions Seek Federal Support for Anti-Globalization Efforts

The AFL-CIO—together with the Fair Labor Association, the Sierra Club and other organizations—is calling on the Securities and Exchange Commission to require publicly traded companies to report annually on social and environmental practices overseas. The goal is to get the U.S. federal government engaged in monitoring labor policies worldwide to combat perceived excesses of globalization.