

Unions vs. Security

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It's getting to be a full-time job keeping track of the favors that Democrats in Congress are doing for Big Labor. The latest two episodes are especially notable because they'd benefit unions at the expense of national security.

First up is Senator Jim DeMint's (R., S.C.) proposal to bar certain convicted felons from working in ports. Members of Congress professed to be outraged last year when a few U.S. ports would have been managed by Dubai Ports World. But a far larger concern is that 750,000 workers currently have unescorted access to secure port areas, and felons are obvious recruitment targets for any number of bad actors, including terrorists.

Mr. DeMint offered this amendment last year as part of the port security legislation. Democrats unanimously consented to it on the Senate floor, only to gut it later under the cover of a House-Senate conference. This was done at the request of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which later bragged about its political clout.

Mr. DeMint was back trying again last week, and every Senate Democrat once again voted for his amendment. However, they also voted for a separate amendment from Hawaii's Daniel Inouye that would allow future Administrations to delete the DeMint requirements. Both amendments now go to House-Senate conference, and with Democrats in the majority it's not hard to guess which one will emerge in the final bill.

Meanwhile, Democrats also keep trying to impose collective bargaining rights for all 43,000 screeners at the Transportation Security Administration. Congress expressly denied such organizing ability when it created TSA in 2001, on the sensible grounds that union work rules would compromise security.

Screeners need to adapt to changing threats, often with random and unpredictable methods. Union rules would require negotiating over these methods with labor chiefs at each work site, meaning at every airport. By TSA's estimate, union rules would also require pulling some 8% of the work force offline to meet new management demands. This would require either closing screening lanes or adding thousands of new screeners at more cost to taxpayers.

Democrats in both the House and Senate have nonetheless tucked TSA unionization provisions into their "9/11 Commission recommendation" bills. The White House has objected, however, and 36 Republican Senators have already promised to sustain a veto. So Democrats are now falling back to Plan B, which

is a "compromise" offered last week by new Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill. Under her approach, airport screeners would still be forced into collective bargaining, though the TSA head would have the right to put union rules aside in case of "emergency" or "imminent threat."

Those concepts could certainly use some fleshing out, since we thought terrorism after 9/11 was threat enough. Mr. DeMint asked on the Senate floor last week if Ms. McCaskill considered the global war on terror to be such an "emergency," and she said no -- but that a hurricane might qualify. We didn't know TSA screened for bad weather.

Mr. DeMint also asked if al Qaeda constituted an imminent threat. Ms. McCaskill largely dodged the question, noting instead that denying union rights because of "world-wide terror" was "specious reasoning." We realize that rookie Senators feel obliged to repay their supporters, but someone more senior should protect Ms. McCaskill from embarrassing herself so publicly. A vote on her amendment is expected as early as today.

All of this follows last week's largely party-line vote in the House to deny workers their long-held right to a secret ballot in organizing elections. The Democratic Presidential candidates are also falling in union line, with Senator Barack Obama recently vowing that he'll sign the secret-ballot ban if he makes it to the White House. John Sweeney and the AFL-CIO sure are getting their money's worth; voters are another story.