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Joe Biden's support of labor unions is historic. Here's what it means

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At a UAW hall in Warren last September, then-nominee Joe Biden touted his profuse support for labor unions, calling their members "the best craftsmen and women" in the world and crediting them with creating the American middle class.

He promised to create "good paying union jobs" across the U.S.

While campaign talk can be cheap, this was no empty election promise: More than any president in the last half century, Biden has been an unapologetic advocate for the labor movement.

On his first day in office, he issued an executive order about fighting climate change and creating union jobs in the process. This spring, he signed another putting Vice President Kamala Harris in charge of a task force looking specifically to reverse sharp declines in union membership. Both indicate a virtually unprecedented level of support from a president, considering that even sympathetic Democrats have rarely linked the bully pulpit and political capital of their office with often-fractious arguments between employers and employees and the varying levels of public sentiment toward one or the other.

Yet that's not half of what Biden has done or attempted, having been in office less than four months.

- He took what was a bold step ahead of a union vote at an Amazon facility in Alabama, releasing a video urging workers to realize it was their right to collectively bargain, despite the trend of past presidents to largely stay out of such elections. While the vote failed, it was an indication how far Biden will go on behalf of unions.
- His COVID-19 relief package included \$80 billion to save multi-employer pension plans, including the Central States plan that supports retired Teamsters.
- The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers got a shout-out during his first speech to Congress in April when Biden said it would be their members, specifically, installing charging stations for electric cars and trucks across the U.S.
- When he announced his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, the summary for which included no less than two dozen mentions of the word "union," he did it from a union training center in

Pittsburgh, repeating not only that labor built the middle class but adding, "It's about time they start to get a piece of the action."

Add to that Biden's public support for the "Protecting the Right to Organize" or PRO Act, federal legislation that would make it markedly easier for unions to organize workplaces and effectively prohibit states — including Michigan — from enforcing so-called "right to work" laws which stop unions from collecting dues from nonmembers whom they still have to represent in negotiations, and it becomes even more clear how committed to the cause Biden and his administration are.

"Biden is like nothing I've seen in my lifetime," said Lisa Canada, political director for the Michigan Regional Council of Carpenters and Millwrights union. "It's phenomenal. ... He has always supported unions. I think he's going to push it and I think he's going to be comfortable doing it."

The question is just how rewarding — or risky — such a strategy may be.

Democrats in the U.S. House hold a slim six-vote majority; the Senate is split 50-50, with Harris the tie-breaker. With a president's party historically losing congressional seats in midterm elections, could a full-throated endorsement of labor's most desired goals result in more moderate voters in the suburbs — as well as business leaders just beginning to show support for efforts to combat climate change, protect voter rights and promote racial justice — cost Democrats control and hobble Biden for the rest of his term?

"The sense of being under threat from labor law reform is watched by mainstream business very closely," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, a think tank in Washington. "Things like the PRO Act are the sorts of things that get them interested in resuming contributions to more pro-business candidates."

The U.S. House passed the bill on a largely party-line vote in March, sending it to the Senate. Across the U.S., law firms and business groups, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, have been warning their clients and members about the threat — as they see it — posed by the reforms, saying they could force businesses to cut jobs and upend the economy.

But Biden keeps on swinging. In late April, he sent his transportation secretary, Pete Buttigieg, and Harris' husband, Doug Emhoff, to pitch the infrastructure plan at a Teamsters hall in North Carolina.

"It's not just Joe Biden. It's Joe Biden and the moment," said U.S. Rep. Andy Levin, D-Bloomfield Township, a former union organizer. He believes the threat of climate change requires the traditional American economy to radically change to lower greenhouse gas emissions in transportation, energy production and elsewhere.

But workers — especially those in traditional manufacturing or energy jobs, like building internal combustion engines or mining coal — and their families aren't going to go along with that agenda if the jobs that replace theirs don't offer the security, pay and benefits of union employment based here in the U.S., he said. He's introduced legislation aimed at making sure union workers install electric vehicle charging stations across the U.S. in the next five years and is pushing for adoption of labor law reforms.

"I don't know if this can happen in this Congress, and I don't know if we will pick up seats or lose them in the next election," Levin said. "(But) the PRO Act is my No. 1 priority of anything, period. Restoring workers' voices (is critical). ... Joe Biden shares that understanding. I think he's willing to fight. ... I think he's willing to expend the necessary political capital."

Given how hard labor unions have been hit in recent decades, Canada said it's long past time to make moderate Democrats choose a side.

"Labor doesn't have that much farther to fall," she said. "We need a strong leader whose willing to push the envelope for us. It is not a time to be hesitant."

Union support on the upswing

Union membership in the U.S. has fallen precipitously since the 1980s and that's as true, if not more so, in Michigan than in any other state as manufacturing jobs have been shed or moved overseas.

Since 2000, when the Bureau of Labor Statistics began keeping state union estimates, Michigan has seen union membership decline by 310,000, tied with Illinois for the most anywhere. Nationwide, union membership has fallen by more than 2 million in that time.

In the 1980s, 20% of all American workers belonged to a union. By 2020, they represented less than 11%. Among private sector workers, like those in manufacturing, it has fallen from 17% of the workforce to 6%.

"The issue is a lot of union jobs have been lost to globalization (and) a lot have been replaced by machines," said Dan DiSalvo, a professor and labor expert at the City College of New York. "The number of jobs that were potentially organizable ... has been declining for the last 30 years."

But there's some reason for optimism, despite a history of failed efforts to reform labor laws under past Democratic presidents and congresses. For one thing, wages of workers who are union members or represented by unions have remained higher than those of nonunion workers. Talk in the Senate of reworking the filibuster rules — which require a 60-vote majority on most nonbudget matters — could break a long-standing logjam on passing collective bargaining or voter rights reforms.

Public support for unions is also higher than at any other point in the recent past, with Gallup's annual poll on the issue in 2020 showing 65% of Americans approving of unions compared with just 48% amid the Great Recession in 2009. And the approval numbers are even higher among people ages 18-34, at 71%.

What's fueling that feeling? Part of it may be a growing activism in the U.S., a willingness to take to the streets to demand justice that coincides with the image of labor action through the decades. Another may be that as voters split more along partisan lines, unionism — long identified with the Democratic Party, at least in the North — became an even stronger pillar. In the past, presidents, including Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, were clearly sympathetic to unions, but also tried to maintain a certain distance in order to keep fragile coalitions of Democrats — some less interested in supporting unions — together.

When Obama had a 60-vote Democratic majority in the Senate and could have potentially forced through labor law reforms, he and they let the chance pass, concentrating instead on reforming health care.

Former President Donald Trump, too, deserves some credit: More so than any other Republican, his rhetoric forced pro-business members of his party to accept trade deals and protectionist policies which were meant to help workers, especially manufacturing workers in the Midwest. Biden has so far declined to get rid of those deals.

"Context matters," said Joe McCartin, a labor expert and executive director of the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor at Georgetown University. "Look across our country, we see lots of evidence of disquiet, of unrest, of people having feeling that the system is not working for them."

Historically, he said, changes in labor law come when a tipping point is reached for enough people and politicians take notice of the groundswell.

The labor movement in the U.S., he said, has "always progressed in fits and starts. ... Times of progress have always been preceded by lots of losses. ... The question is, in the losses, are unions learning how to win?"

Yuval Levin, director of Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a think tank in Washington, and editor of National Affairs magazine, has written about the importance of factions inside political parties to moving them forward. He sees a "political logic" to Biden's talking up unions.

"If it's a rhetorical strategy, I don't really see a downside. It speaks to workers and the party needs to do that," especially since Trump was able to attract support from white working-class voters, he said. If, however, it leads to attempts to make sweeping changes on economic policies, such as taxes and trade, "there are risks, individual members (of Congress) will have to think about."

Rhetoric vs. reality

Even with Biden's profound level of public support for the labor movement, there are enormous reasons to be skeptical that he can change what has been a 40-year slide in union membership.

For now, it goes without saying that as long as the Senate requires a 60-vote threshold, it's unlikely to occur minus a major upheaval domestically. While the Senate is closer than it has been to changing the rule, perhaps allowing votes to proceed with a 51-vote majority, it's still unclear whether, and when, that might happen.

Few presidents in recent history have had much success in twisting legislative arms to secure victories, as opposition parties have increasingly refused to accede, regardless of the cost.

That means unions may not be any closer to what they view as perhaps their most desired change: requiring companies to recognize a union if more than half of the employees sign cards saying they support it to collectively bargain on their behalf.

Under current U.S. law, a business can — but doesn't have to — recognize the union in such cases and can require a secret ballot election instead. Unions complain that under U.S. law, it's too easy for companies to call meetings in the workplace and take other steps ahead of those

elections to discourage workers from organizing. Companies, on the other hand, say using signed cards opens workers up to intimidation from labor.

There are other reasons for the labor movement to be anxious.

The U.S. Supreme Court now has a conservative majority and could present a bulwark to major changes or at least keep them tied up in court for years. Meanwhile, Biden failed to push through a federal minimum wage increase to \$15 an hour — a long-standing priority of labor — and recently General Motors announced it would make some electric vehicles in Mexico, possibly undercutting union jobs. The UAW had already been battling to make sure GM pays higher wages at battery plants.

The UAW said it's working with the White House to rewrite subsidies for electric vehicle purchases and investments to make sure they support "the jobs of U.S. workers." And U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Dearborn, has been holding meetings with labor, management and state officials trying to sort out how to "bring everybody together" on agreed-upon incentives.

But given how imports have shaped the auto market and much of the content of American-made cars comes from overseas — not to mention Republican antipathy toward outward support of unions — labor-specific initiatives could face an impossible climb, at least under current conditions, in Congress.

For Detroit's automakers and their employees, it comes at a potentially perilous time: With California and other states saying they want zero-emission vehicles to be the only ones sold in the coming years, automakers are moving to bring dozens of electric or electric-hybrid vehicles to the market. But it takes fewer employees to make those vehicles — and the battery manufacturers, where much of the work is done, are more apt to be nonunion shops.

On the other hand, climate change policies could result in more union jobs for industries like energy production and construction, said Marick Masters, a labor expert and professor at the Mike Ilitch School of Business at Wayne State University in Detroit.

He sees Biden's pro-labor rhetoric as deliberate, saying, "They are concerned about sending a message that they want union jobs." By doing so, he said, Democrats can build on a traditional base and hopefully bring back some white working-class voters who have migrated more to the Republicans amid the culture wars and a growing sense that the Democratic Party is more centered on college-educated voters and their concerns rather than those who do not have a four-year degree.

As such, there's no surprise that Biden is moving to bolster apprenticeships and make community colleges free.

"In the bigger picture, I'm not sure any of this will mean much in terms of reviving the labor movement," said Masters. While unions are enjoying greater levels of public support, he said, the Amazon vote still seemed to indicate the uncertainty workers feel about whether they could take a step they perceive — rightly or wrongly — could cost them their jobs. Especially in the wake of the economic upheaval created by the pandemic, he said, "All these things create uncertainty in people's minds and uncertainty makes it hard to organize."

On the level of partisan rhetoric, there is far less of a downside for Biden, though he has to be aware that balancing some other priorities — like immigration and the environment — create a

challenge. When Biden moved, for instance, to block construction of the controversial Keystone XL pipeline, the United Association of Union Plumbers and Pipefitters blasted the decision as lifting up the "voices of fringe activists instead of union members."

More of those challenges could be coming. But Ron Bieber, president of the Michigan AFL-CIO, is growing more confident that after seeing U.S. presidents leave labor's priorities behind, Biden — at last — is the real deal.

"I'm 60 years old and have been doing this for 42 years, and I've never seen a president position himself so outwardly pro-union as Joe Biden has. It's not even close," Bieber said. "He said it all through his campaign ... but we hear that a lot. And then when they get elected, you look to hear the word 'union,' or 'good-paying jobs.'

"You look to see it once. With him, it's repeated over and over. ... He's making it cool to be pro worker. It's a breath of fresh air."