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## Union Head Would Back Bill Without Card Check

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

WASHINGTON — The [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#)'s president has signaled a significant shift to try to move a long-stalled pro-union bill, saying he would support a change that calls for speedy unionization elections, a provision that would replace the much-attacked card-check provision.

In an interview, [John J. Sweeney](#), the federation's president, said he would accept a fast election campaign instead of card check because it would meet his goal of minimizing management interference during organizing drives.

Mr. Sweeney said he "could live with" fast or snap elections "as long as there is a fair process that protects workers against anti-union intimidation by employers and eliminates the threats to workers."

The move away from card check would be a victory for the business community. Randel Johnson, senior vice president for labor, [immigration](#) and employee benefits at the United States Chamber of Commerce, nonetheless criticized the proposal for elections after a short campaign.

"That has the effect as a practical matter of eliminating the ability of the employer to educate its employees about the potential adverse effects of unionization," Mr. Johnson said. "It still begs the question, what is wrong with the existing secret ballot process?"

In recent months, several crucial Democratic senators have told organized labor that they could not round up the 60 votes needed to assure passage of any bill containing card check.

Despite such warnings, labor leaders continued to cling publicly to the idea; Mr. Sweeney's comments were a major departure from that position.

“If modifying that in some way or another is going to bring some more votes for the bill, I think that’s worth it,” Mr. Sweeney said.

Under Mr. Sweeney’s idea, a secret ballot would be held probably within five or 10 days of a substantial number of workers petitioning for a union. Such a brief length of time would be far different from the current practice when campaigns often last two months, giving companies time to persuade workers to vote against a union.

Even before [President Obama](#) took office, labor made it clear that its No. 1 legislative goal was a law that would make organizing easier, including a so-called card-check provision that required employers to recognize a union as soon as a majority of workers signed cards favoring a union.

But card check faced huge opposition from Republicans and corporations, which complained that it would largely replace secret ballots. Under current law, companies that face organizing drives can insist on secret-ballot elections, which unions say they often lose because of management’s lengthy and intense anti-union campaigns.

In an interview Thursday evening, Richard Trumka, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s secretary-treasurer, who will become the federation’s president on Sept. 16, stopped short of endorsing fast elections.

He said the A.F.L.-C.I.O. wanted to make sure that any legislation contained three components: a process in which workers were free of intimidation; greater penalties against employers that break the law during organizing drives, for instance by firing outspoken union supporters; and binding arbitration to prevent employers from indefinitely dragging out negotiations without ever reaching a contract.

Business groups denounce the binding arbitration provision, saying it would be wrong to have federally appointed officials issuing rulings that determine a company’s wages, hours, pensions and working conditions.

Echoing Mr. Trumka, Mr. Sweeney said he would accept snap elections only as part of a bill that also called for binding arbitration and stiffer penalties against management.

Mr. Sweeney said President Obama had assured labor that as soon as health care legislation was passed — if it was passed — he would work with labor and the Democrats to pass the pro-union legislation, known as the

## Employee Free Choice Act.

Mr. Sweeney voiced optimism that the bill would pass.

“It’s going to be this year,” he said.

Mr. Sweeney said that corporate lobbyists would find it harder to attack fast elections than card check because business could no longer contend that labor wanted to eliminate “sacrosanct secret-ballot elections.” But some corporate lobbyists are already attacking snap elections as “ambush elections.”

David Bonior, a former House Democratic Whip who heads a group, America Rights at Work, that has campaigned for the pro-union bill, said he still hoped card check could be salvaged.

“The first preference for everybody in labor is the original bill,” he said. “And if we preserve the principles of the original bill and there are some changes — and if we can get 80 to 90 percent of what we started with — I think people would move forward on that.”

Meanwhile, a Gallup Poll released on Thursday found that while 66 percent of Americans continued to believe unions were beneficial to their own members, fewer than half of Americans — 48 percent, a record low — approved of unions. That was down from 59 percent a year ago.

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