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Specter, Unions Disagree on Path for Overhaul of Labor Laws

By [MELANIE TROTTMAN](#)

PITTSBURGH -- Sen. Arlen Specter told the AFL-CIO convention Tuesday that he and a small group of Democratic senators have a road map for putting a long-stalled, union-backed overhaul of labor laws on track toward passage -- an assertion that was quickly dismissed by leaders of the AFL-CIO.

The latest confusion over the Employee Free Choice Act highlights the difficulty the proposal is causing for congressional Democrats, labor leaders and President Barack Obama.

The act would make it easier for unions to organize workers and win initial labor contracts through binding arbitration, which they say would help to counter what they call employer intimidation. It's a top legislative priority for union leaders, but is strongly opposed by business groups, which say the current proposal would allow unions to bypass secret ballot elections and stall contract talks until federal arbitrators impose settlements.

The measure has failed to win the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster in the Senate. The bill faces opposition from Republicans and a group of Democrats from more conservative states where the measure is viewed as a threat to jobs.

Mr. Specter, who recently switched from the Republican to Democratic Party -- and is running for re-election in 2010 -- said the proposed changes would throw out the so-called card-check provision that would have allowed unions to organize workers by simply having them sign cards instead of voting in secret-ballot elections. The new version would call instead for prompt, secret-ballot elections, he said. It would also require that each side structure what it says is its final, best offer before turning to arbitration.

Mr. Specter has for months been trying to broker a deal to revive the bill. He said Tuesday that Democratic senators participating in the talks included himself, Tom Harkin of Iowa, Chuck Schumer of New York, Mark Pryor of Arkansas, Sherrod Brown of Ohio and Thomas Carper of Delaware.

Union leaders and business groups kept their distance from Mr. Specter's effort.

Incoming AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said card check legislation was still in play. The chairman of AFL-CIO's organizing committee, Larry Cohen, said that until there were 60 Democratic-controlled votes in the Senate, "We don't even want to finalize a bill, because who are we discussing it with?"

Business groups expressed continued opposition. The National Association of Manufacturers said the modified version outlined by Mr. Specter was unacceptable.

"The prompt certification that he's talking about is code for ambush elections," said Jay Timmons, the trade association's

executive vice president. He added that the arbitration proposals still allowed "a government-appointed bureaucrat to make decisions which need to be made at a local business level."

Steven J. Law, chief legal officer and general counsel at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has been a leading voice against the bill, said Mr. Specter's proposed omission of the card-check clause was an effort to gain support from moderate Democrats. But "in the end card check would come back," he said.

The Chamber also opposes the proposed changes to arbitration. "To make the government the tie-breaker of last best offers suffers from the same basic flaws we find with forced government arbitration," said Mr. Law.

Mr. Specter said the proposal would help pull "people to the center," adding that the last best offer narrows the arbitrators' discretion.

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