

(The following column was written John Nichols, associate editor of The Capital Times.)

Florence Reece's great labor union anthem asks: "Which Side Are You On?"

President Franklin Roosevelt answered that question not long after Reece, the wife of a United Mine Workers union organizer, tore a sheet from a wall calendar and wrote the lines:

Come all you good workers

Good news to you I'll tell

Of how the good old union

Has come in here to dwell.

Arguing that "there are no neutrals" in the struggle between labor and management, Reece asked the miners of Harlan County,

Kentucky, where a bloody strike was playing out in 1931:

Which side are you on?

Which side are you on?

Roosevelt's reply left little doubt regarding his choice.

"If I went to work in a factory, the first thing I'd do is join a union," the 32nd president declared.

His wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, went a step further. The first lady, who began penning her syndicated "My Day" column during FDR's first term, joined the journalist union, the Newspaper Guild, in 1937. She remained a member in good standing for a quarter century and her union card was in her wallet when she died in 1962.

Having a pro-union administration in the White House matters.

And, while we have in recent decades had a president who was a former union president (Ronald Reagan) -- and a vice president who once carried a union card (ex-International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers member Dick Cheney) -- we have not exactly had union-friendly administrations in a White House where the bipartisan consensus has been in favor of free trade, deregulation and Wall Street. Republicans weren't the only offenders. Bill Clinton, the former head of the union-bashing Democratic Leadership Council, made it a point to distance himself from labor.

Not so Barack Obama.

While the current president continues to fall short of Roosevelt when it comes to actual policies -- the stimulus package was compromised in favor of unneeded tax cuts, and the auto industry bailout needs to be radically retooled -- the president is comfortable taking sides when it comes to unions.

At a town meeting in New Mexico the other day, Obama said, "One of the things that I believe in --and if you look at our history, I think it bears this out -- even if you're not a member of a union, you owe something to unions. A lot of the things that you take for granted as an employee of a company, the idea of overtime and minimum wage and benefits, a whole host of things that you, even if you're not a member of a union, now take for granted, that happened because unions fought and helped to make employers more accountable."

It wasn't just rhetoric. He put his statement in the context of the current struggle to enact the Employee Free Choice Act, which would make it easier for workers to form unions.

There's no question that labor law reform is needed.

A new study by Cornell University Professor Kate Bronfenbrenner, one of the nation's top experts on labor issues, finds that the right to organize a union and bargain collectively has been severely undermined by employer coercion, intimidation and retaliations.

Studying data from the past two decades, Bronfenbrenner and her research team found that when workers seek to organize, employers strike back. According to the data, employers have blocked legitimate and popular unionization drives by:

- In 63 percent of organizing drives, interrogating workers in one-on-one meetings with their supervisors about support for the union.
- In 54 percent, threatening workers in such meetings.
- In 57 percent, threatening to close the work site.
- In 47 percent, threatening to cut wages and benefits.
- In 34 percent, firing workers.

Even when workers succeed at forming a union, notes Bronfenbrenner's study, 52 percent are still without a contract a year after they win the election, and 37 percent remain without a contract two years after the election.

That's what Obama is talking about when he says: "There's a bill called the Employee Free Choice Act, and what it would essentially say is that if a majority of workers at a company want a union, then they can get a union without delay and (without) some of the monkey business that's done right now to prevent them from having a union."

Obama is a realist; he acknowledges that EFCA will likely be altered before it is enacted.

"I think that there may be areas of compromise to get this bill done. I'm supportive of it, but there aren't enough votes right now in the Senate to get it passed," he says. "And what I think we have to do is to find ways in which the core idea of the Employee Free Choice Act is preserved, which is how do we make it easier for people who want to form a union to at least get a vote and have an even playing field. ...

That's what we're working on right now. I think it's going to have a chance at passage, but there's still more work to be done."

Obama's right about the need to preserve the core purpose of EFCA -- the leveling of the playing field.

When the majority of employees want a union -- an absolute majority -- they should have a union.

Obama's even more right about the benefits of unions.

What he said is absolutely true: "Even if you're not a member of a union, you owe something to unions."

And it is absolutely necessary for the future of America's working families -- and for the prospect that the middle class might survive the economic twists and turns of the 21st century -- to have a president who acknowledges, as Obama does: "I do not view the labor movement as part of the problem; to me it's part of the solution."

(The preceding column by John Nichols was published May 21, 2009, by The Capital Times. Nichols is the Capital Times associated editor.)