

Unions set to blast Dems for selling out on FAA reauthorization

By [Greg Sargent](#)

One of the biggest requests that labor had made of Congressional Dems was this: Don't sell out unions when the long-term Federal Aviation Administration reauthorization is renegotiated with House Republicans. Unions saw this as a top priority for 2012.

Well, now the verdict is in: Over a dozen unions — including a number of AFL-CIO affiliates, like the Communications Workers of America and the International Association of Machinists; and possibly the SEIU — are preparing to unleash a new letter blasting Senate Dem leaders for reaching a bad deal with Republicans on this core priority, claiming it could compromise their ability to organize in the future. They will demand that Dems pull out of the deal and insist that Dems push the GOP harder for a “clean” reauthorization that doesn't rewrite labor law.

One labor official told me that the deal has led to “significant union discontent” with the Senate Dem leadership, which may not bode well for Dem-labor relations heading into an election year.

To back up: Last fall, Obama and Senate Dem leaders won applause from labor for standing fast against the House GOP, which was trying to insert a union-busting provision into the FAA reauthorization. That provision would count it as a “No” vote when airline or railway workers failed to vote at all on whether to unionize. After Dems refused to budge, the House GOP backed down and agreed to a “clean” temporary extension.

This increased hopes among unions that Dems would again hold fast when the longer-term reauthorization was negotiated with Republicans.

A few weeks ago, Harry Reid [announced a deal](#), authored by Senator Jay Rockefeller, that would nix the GOP's desired union-busting provision; in exchange, the threshold required for triggering a union election would be raised from 35 percent worker interest in a union to 50 percent. Labor was mostly quiet on this deal, but now, after closely examining its implications, officials say they've concluded it could be disastrous.

Their objection is that the raised threshold will make it harder to organize amid mergers of unionized and non-unionized airlines, a key labor target.

They also see opening the door to rewriting longstanding labor law as a terrible precedent. In a draft of the letter to Dem leaders that I've obtained, unions will say:

We remain strongly committed to passage of a clean FAA Reauthorization bill. An aviation safety and security bill is no place to impose unrelated and controversial labor provisions that will ultimately serve to harm both airline and railroad workers. The proposed Railway Labor Act changes would drastically rewrite a statute that was crafted by labor-management cooperation and has not been changed for over 75 years without the agreement of both employer and employee representatives. Airline and rail workers would suffer significant losses as contracts are jettisoned, collective bargaining rights are cut and legal hurdles will be placed in the way of gaining a voice at work...

Rewarding the House Republican Leadership's desire to rewrite decades of long standing labor law in a flash by inserting an unrelated and controversial labor provision in a much needed aviation safety and security bill, without notice, hearing, or debate, sets an extremely dangerous precedent. We urge the Senate to delete the provisions of the bill that would amend the RLA and pass the clean FAA Reauthorization that all concerned recognize this country sorely needs and supports.

This could create a headache for Congressional Dem leaders at a moment when they're trying to unite the party behind a populist, pro-labor message heading into this year's elections. More when I learn it...

UPDATE: A Senate Democratic aide emails a response:

“ This bill is a compromise – by definition, not everyone got everything they wanted. That said, Democrats stood firm to protect American workers, and forced Republicans to back down on the workplace fairness provision that prompted this fight in the first place, leaving that provision intact and unchanged. At the end of the day, we think that creating 300,000 jobs is good for American workers and our economy overall, and that is likely why many major unions support the compromise.”

By [Greg Sargent](#) | 01:53 PM ET, 01/30/2012