

The times are a-changin' and it's time for us to act



William H. Young

Around the time I first started in the Post Office, Bob Dylan wrote an extraordinary song called “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” Change really was in the air. The civil rights movement was reaching its peak, the country was yearning for a peaceful end to the Cold War and the messy cultural battles of the 1960s were just starting to heat up.

We live in a time like that again, and Dylan’s song came to mind last month when Congress began work on the Employee Free Choice Act, with Big Business and its allies in Washington trying to stand in the way with the same old scare tactics and lies. A couple of lines from the song resonated:

“Your old road is rapidly agin’; Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand; For the times they are a-changin’.”

Every day, the depth of the economic crisis inherited by the Obama administration becomes more apparent. Unemployment has soared to 8.1 percent. Entire industries—auto manufacturing, construction, newspaper publishing and, unfortunately, the mailing industry—are threatened by the recession. In 2008 alone, U.S. household wealth declined by more than \$11 trillion as the value of our homes, savings and pension plans plunged by more than 18 percent! In view of such developments, you’d think everyone would be eager to lend a hand in turning things around—especially those who led the country down this disastrous path.

Sadly, you’d be wrong. Just look at the hysterical reaction of Wall Street and Big Business to the Employee Free Choice Act, a key part of Obama’s agenda for rebuilding the middle class. Randel Johnson of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce promised “a firestorm bordering on Armageddon” in reaction to the bill. The founder of Home Depot, Bernie Marcus, said, “This is the demise of civilization; this is how a civilization disappears.” And billionaire Las Vegas hotel magnate Sheldon Adelson actually said, “Radical Islam and Employee Free Choice are the two fundamental threats to society.” Wow. The hyperbole takes your breath away.

The hyperventilating of Big Business

notwithstanding, there is nothing radical about “card check” organizing—it built our labor movement from the 1930s to the 1970s and it is used today in more than 70 countries around the world. Vice President Biden captured this thought perfectly when he reminded the AFL-CIO Executive Council in March that “we aren’t asking for anything special—under the National Labor Relations Act, our country’s policy is to ‘encourage collective bargaining.’ It says so in the law’s preamble.” But you can’t encourage collective bargaining if employers are allowed to thwart union organizing.

Since 1935, workers have been allowed to form a union either through majority sign-up (card check) or a National Labor Relations Board election. But employers can currently veto workers’ decision to organize through majority sign-up and force them into a divisive NLRB election process instead. This has to end—the choice should be the workers’, not their employers’.

As explained in the excellent cover story of last month’s *Postal Record* (“What the #@&% Happened?”), business interests steadily stripped away the rights of American workers to organize and bargain collectively over the past 30 years, with the help of their allies on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and on the federal courts. The country has paid a terrible price for this: decades of stagnant wages, vanishing pensions, growing inequality, middle class job flight and financial instability.

Now it is time to regain our rights by winning the battle for Employee Free Choice. NALC has to do its part (see pages 2-9). I hope every letter carrier will help deliver the message: Congress must pass the Employee Free Choice Act.

As Brother Dylan sang when I was a young man:

“Come senators, congressmen; Please heed the call; Don’t stand in the doorway; Don’t block up the hall; For he that gets hurt; Will be he who has stalled; There’s a battle outside and it is ragin’; It’ll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls; For the times they are a-changin’.” ☒