

Employee Free Choice Act ... will protect workers

by Sybil Sanchez and Jonathan Zimet

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We urge Jews to support legislation that would combat poverty, improve the economy and make important advancements for workers' rights. The Employee Free Choice Act would restore workers' ability to bargain collectively in the workplace. As we approach Passover, remembering that we, too, were slaves in Egypt, it's important to understand why Jews in particular should support it.

Our tradition recognizes that imbalances of power are inherent in society, making the less wealthy dependent on the wealthier. It provides redress through specific laws such as the prohibition against withholding a worker's pay and the command to leave unharvested some of the field for the stranger. The Talmud also acknowledges the right to organize in order to establish prices and wages.

Our age has given rise to a much more complex economy and society. Inequalities of bargaining power have been augmented by the enormous size of today's companies. We all know the experience of job-seekers, tenants and consumers forced to accept "take-it-or-leave-it" conditions. As individuals, we are powerless to alter such situations. Often, it is only through collective bargaining that workers can obtain a fairer contract.

When faced with union-organizing campaigns, 75 percent of companies hire union-busting consultants. Workers risk intimidation and, worse, termination. Even when they succeed in having unions authorized, companies will drag their feet, legally postponing an initial contract for years.

Employee free choice would allow employees to hold government-supervised elections, as is the case now. However, if a majority wanted to sign up through membership cards, the union could

also form that way. Unlike under the current regulations, employers would be required to remain neutral, empowering employees to debate freely on how and whether to unionize without corporate-sponsored intimidation tactics.

Employee free choice would also strengthen penalties against companies for union-busting, establish mediation and arbitration when parties disagree on the first union contract, and require reinstatement of fired workers when there is reasonable cause to believe their rights were violated.

Many leading modern rabbis in the United States and Israel support workers' rights and continue to do so, including Israel's first chief rabbis -- both Ashkenazi and Sephardi. Along with being the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel remains the most pro-union country in that, as well.

Judaism teaches that people are neither inherently evil nor good. No one person owns another or the fruits of his or her labor. Early on, our tradition recognized labor as a matter of human dignity through the commandment to abstain from it on the Sabbath.

Some within the Jewish community remain skeptical of the Employee Free Choice Act, as they are of unions. Employers may not intend to abuse employees, but their focus is to prioritize profits. Recognizing that we cannot rely on good intentions to protect the vulnerable, both Jewish and secular law seek to safeguard the

worker. Bernard Madoff's fraud and the recent scandal of Agriprocessors stand as tragic examples of the impact that deregulation has had on our community and beyond.

In times like these, with mass layoffs and decreased benefits, workers no longer have the purchasing power necessary to help drive the economy. Conversely, unions have played a critical role in strengthening the middle class. Unionized employees make 28 percent more than nonunionized; nonunion workers are five times more likely to lack health insurance. Strong unions improve workers' benefits even for the nonunionized.

Many American Jews can readily recall their grandparents' or parents' union involvement. Due to those roots, we've fast become an influential part of our country's fabric, succeeding beyond our ancestors' expectations.

However, social advancement comes with responsibility. Supporting the Employee Free Choice Act not only fulfills Jewish values but is in the interest of our community and our economy. It would empower employers and employees to earn a fair living while investing in the nation's future. We urge Jews to support it.

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