Pursuing the American dream

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The U.S. House of Representatives last week passed a bill that could help narrow the widening income gap between wealthy Americans and the nation's working class. But its fate is dicey: Even if it passes the Senate - a long shot - President George W. Bush has indicated he would veto it.

The statistics are clear: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, union members last year enjoyed a median pay of $833 per week for full-time work, compared with $642 for non-union workers. Union members earn more than nonmembers in nearly all occupations tracked by the government.

But only 12 percent of American workers were organized as of last year, down from 20 percent in 1983, when the Bureau first began counting them. Unionization is strongest among government workers; only 7 percent of private sector employees are organized. Poor union leadership is partly to blame for falling membership. Unions largely failed to make the jump from shrinking manufacturing companies to growing service businesses. But the law also stacks the deck against workers who want to organize. The House bill passed last week would fix that problem.

It's illegal to fire workers for union activity, but if an employer is caught, the only penalties are reinstatement of the worker and payment of back wages, minus any money earned by the employee from other work.

In addition, a Cornell University study from the 1990s found that about half of employers facing possible unionization threatened to close their operations if workers organized, although such threats can violate the law, too. Other firms stalled. And about a quarter of companies fired union activists. The result: Even when a majority of workers sign cards indicating the desire to unionize, the firings, threats and delays mean unions win only 60 percent of the representation elections that follow. The Employee Free Choice Act, which passed the House by 241 to 185, would change that. Unions could represent workers when a majority signs cards, with no additional election necessary. Employers who fire union activists would have to pay triple lost wages and civil fines of up to $20,000. The bill would require binding arbitration to settle a first contract if a union and employer can't agree within 120 days.

The bill surely would increase union representation and, as a result, produce higher wages and offer a ticket to the middle class for more Americans. Last time we looked, those were keys to the American dream. Signals notwithstanding, the Senate should pass it, and Bush should keep his veto stamp in the drawer.

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