LABOR
Consumer, Union Bills Get Top Spots On Harkin's Agenda

Thursday, Sept. 10, 2009
by Dan Friedman and Jerry Hagstrom, with Kasie Hunt contributing
Minutes after publicly taking the helm of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee on Wednesday, Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, made clear that he will push a labor- and consumer-friendly agenda with a popular food-safety bill as a top priority.

Just after Senate Democrats announced changes to key committees following the death of Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., Harkin told reporters he will work to move a bill to help unions organize, and said the food safety legislation would receive quick consideration.

"We'll move a bill here hopefully this fall," Harkin said.

Harkin gave up the chairmanship of the Senate Agriculture Committee to fill Kennedy's slot after Senate Banking Chairman Christopher Dodd announced he would stay in that job instead of heading the HELP panel.

The House has passed a food safety measure. Harkin said the HELP panel will move a modified version of a similar bill offered by Senate Majority Whip Durbin.

Though Senate Majority Leader Reid in August said food safety legislation could move during this work period, senior Democratic aides last month said the HELP panel's focus on healthcare reform legislation could complicate the timetable.

A Durbin spokesman said Harkin's statements fit the timeline Durbin has urged.

Harkin did not outline planned modifications to Durbin's bill, which differs from the House measure on fees and safety requirements. A spokeswoman said Harkin "will work closely with the other members of the committee to move food safety legislation."

Durbin's bill does not contain House provisions for a $500 per facility registration fee or requirements that all facilities have a food safety plan before engaging in interstate commerce.

The House bill also differs from the Senate measure by requiring a provision for a nationwide trace-back system, civil penalties for violating food safety laws, country-of-origin labeling requirements for certain products and other regulations.

Both the House-passed bill and Durbin's version would expand FDA's power through increased inspections, beefed-up recall provisions and expansion of FDA access to records to determine whether firms are complying with food safety laws.

Harkin also said that an effort he has led since last spring to craft and move a compromise version of the Employee Free Choice Act remains a priority.

Harkin said he has the votes to move the bill out of committee, but is unlikely to move it while Democrats have 59 votes because of the vacancy caused by Kennedy's death. A special election to fill Kennedy's term is scheduled for January, but Massachusetts lawmakers are weighing changing state law to allow the governor to appoint an interim senator until then.

"As soon as we see what happens [in Massachusetts], we can take the Employee Free Choice off the warm burner and put it on the hot burner," Harkin said.

Harkin's load as chairman is lightened because Dodd will continue leading efforts to move the HELP Committee's version of healthcare legislation through the Senate, an arrangement Harkin said he proposed. Dodd had led the committee's work on the health measure while filling in during Kennedy's illness.

Harkin noted he will play a role in determining how to spend more than $80 billion in estimated savings from President Obama's plan to end a federal student loan program. Obama wants to end the Federal Family Student Loan Program and provide student loans directly from the Education Department.

The House passed the proposal, but it faces a tough road in the Senate due to opposition from large student lenders and senators who represent states where they are based.
Reid: ‘Card Check’ Not in the Cards

Aug. 27, 2009, 12:51 p.m.  
By John Stanton  
Roll Call Staff

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said Thursday that passing a controversial labor bill that would make it easier for employees to organize is no longer in the cards for the Senate, at least for now, according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Speaking at a Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, Reid said the chamber’s schedule is too crowded to consider the Employee Free Choice Act, otherwise known as “card check.”

“We have too many other things on our plate,” Reid said.

But even if the Senate’s schedule was freed up later this year, it is unlikely Reid would bring the bill to the floor short of major changes to the legislation. Republicans have universally panned the bill — as have a few Democrats — making it impossible for Reid to break a Republican filibuster.

Meanwhile, the Review-Journal also reported Thursday that Reid said he would allow bipartisan health care negotiations to continue “for a couple of weeks” in September. But that if no progress is made by a group of six Senators, led by Finance Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.), he would pull the plug on those talks and prepare to pass health care reform under the reconciliation process, which would only require 51 votes and would avert a Republican filibuster.