

## Proposal would ease Hawaii unionization

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HONOLULU (AP) -- Labor unions would automatically form with full negotiating rights whenever a majority of workers at a small business in Hawaii decide to organize, according to a bill pending at the Capitol.

The measure faces a likely veto from Republican Gov. Linda Lingle by Monday, but majority Democrats in the Legislature may attempt to override her.

Small business owners are against the bill because they say it would drive up costs while taking away workers' rights to form a union by secret ballot.

"It will make a potential entrepreneur or small business owner think twice about doing business in Hawaii," said Tony Kawal, owner of BC Burrito in Honolulu, one of four businesspeople who met with reporters in the governor's office Friday. "This bill would come as a shock to smaller restaurants."

Unions support the proposal as a way to ensure workers are protected, said Cade Watanabe, spokesman for UNITE HERE Local 5, which represents about 12,000 unionized hotel workers.

"It's a basic human right to be collectively organized and represented," Watanabe said. "If workers choose and express their right to be represented, they should have that right immediately without any interference by the employer whatsoever."

Hawaii is one of the most unionized states with 23.4 percent of workers belonging to a union in 2007, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Only New York and Alaska were more unionized. Nationwide, union members accounted for 12.1 percent of the wage and salary workers.

The bill would require employers to recognize unions after being presented union cards signed by a majority of eligible workers on their payrolls. Under current labor law, a company can demand a secret ballot election supervised by the federal government after being presented the union cards.

Similar federal legislation is pending before the U.S. Senate. The Hawaii law would apply to businesses covered by state labor relations rules, mostly agriculture and small businesses.

"For us, it's about putting freedom of choice above all else in matters of worker rights," said Majority Leader Kirk Caldwell, D-Manoa. "If employers treat their workers right, they shouldn't have a problem."

Companies worry that unionization could add more than 25 percent to Hawaii's already high cost of doing business, said Alicia Maluafiti, executive director for the Hawaii Crop Improvement Association.

"This is not the workers saying, 'We need this,'" she said. "I don't think the system is broken. We have a competitive labor market. ... We choose employers because we like to work for them."

If the bill passes into law, aggressive labor unions will come into Hawaii and harass workers for their signatures, said James Hardway, special assistant to the director in the Hawaii Department of Labor.

But Caldwell says the legislation is needed because workers have more to fear from employer intimidation than they do from unions.

Following Lingle's expected veto of the measure, lawmakers will have to decide whether to attempt an override, which requires a two-thirds majority in both the House and Senate, Caldwell said.

In passing the measure, only seven Republicans and one Democrat voted against it in the 51-member House. The bill passed the Senate with opposition coming from the chamber's four Republicans.