Unions See Super Bowl Leverage In Labor Battle

Tom LoBianco, Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Facing a legislative vote that would make Indiana a right-to-work state, alarmed union members are thinking about making their case on perhaps the nation's biggest stage — the Super Bowl.

Labor activists are deciding whether to go ahead with protests that could include Teamsters clogging city streets with trucks and electricians staging a slowdown at the convention center site of the NFL village. What's holding them back is a fear the effort could create a backlash from those who think sports and politics don't mix.

"The last thing the city needs is a black eye," said Jeff Combs, organizing director for Teamsters Local 135 in Indianapolis, one of the unions discussing strategy. Union locals are awaiting guidance from the Indiana AFL-CIO before deciding what to do.

The debate about tactics reflects the desperation of organized labor as the Legislature prepares to vote on the right to work measure, which would ban union contracts mandating that workers pay dues for representation. Republicans, who see the bill as an advantage for recruiting businesses to the state, outnumber Democrats 60-40 in the House and 37-13 in the Senate. Indiana would become the 23rd state with a right-to-work law, and the first in 10 years to pass the measure.

The vote, which Republicans would like to hold in the coming weeks, has already prompted union demonstrations at the statehouse and sporadic boycotts by House Democrats.

"The extreme nature of the folks who are trying to impact this for some of their own special interests is a little bit surprising," Republican House Speaker Brian Bosma said Wednesday.

Indiana, with its auto and other manufacturing industries, has a strong union tradition. Thousands of workers in at least a half dozen unions, including stagehands, truckers, carpenters, electricians and service employees, will be involved in erecting and staffing the huge tent-city of food pavilions, kids' amusements, and live-music venues near Lucas Oil Stadium for a week before the Feb. 5 game.

Opinions among labor leaders are split between those who want to focus on wooing moderate Republican lawmakers and those who want to use the Super Bowl to show the nation the importance of organized labor for staging major events.

"This is why it's not planned out, because there are so many moving parts," said AFL-CIO spokesman Jeff Harris.

Roughly 50 labor leaders from across Indiana met Monday for the AFL-CIO's "Labor Table" to discuss strategy. Harris said unions are ready to begin filing permits with the city this week for protests and other actions.

Organizers from the city's host committee to the NFL say they are confident the game will not be disrupted. "We are aware of the matter but do not anticipate it will be an issue," said NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy.

The Indianapolis Capital Improvements Board, which runs Lucas Oil Stadium and the Indianapolis Convention Center, has no-strike agreements with unions representing stagehands, carpenters, electricians and painters. But other unions, including hotel workers, aren't covered, and the building trades workers could choose to honor any picket lines that are set up at the sites. Brad Holloway, a member of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 481 in Indianapolis, said electricians could also engage in work slow-downs

Host Committee organizers say public safety officials are prepared to deal with protesters or other problems. "Hopefully they see the good of the whole for the community and embrace that," said spokeswoman Dianna Boyce.

Emotions could get the better of some irate union members if the bill passes before Feb. 5.

"You can tell them we'll take the Super Bowl and shove it," said Combs, the Teamsters organizer. Teamsters gathered at the Statehouse Wednesday wearing T-shirts with the roman numerals 46, referring to the Super Bowl, crossed out on the back. He said truckers would be willing to risk arrest by causing traffic jams.

Some Democrats in Indiana's House, who have been stalling legislative action by boycotting House sessions, said it's understandable that union members would take advantage of the game's national television coverage.

"It gives us more national attention," said Rep. Vanessa Summers, D-Indianapolis.

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