

Trump's Labor Pick Tests if Republicans Are Warming Toward Unions

While union leaders embrace the nominee's pro-union positions, they are wary of other actions Trump has taken

By Paul Kiernan
The Wall Street Journal

Republicans, long skeptical of [unions and labor regulations](#), have lately shown signs of openness toward both. A confirmation hearing Wednesday for President Trump's pick to run the Labor Department could show just how far they have moved.

The nominee, former Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer of Oregon, is unusual for a Republican administration because she was one of only three GOP House members in the previous Congress to co-sponsor the PRO Act, a bill that would make it easier for workers to unionize. Her selection by Trump worried some conservatives and infuriated proponents of "right to work" laws allowing employees to opt out of paying union dues, even as it pleased unions and attracted the support of some Democrats.

"She is a Republican who has endorsed two of our marquee bills," said Jody Calemine, director of advocacy at the AFL-CIO, the largest U.S. labor organization, referring to the PRO Act and another bill that would ensure the rights of government employees to organize. "That is a very promising thing."

Yet the olive branch to unions represented by the Chavez-DeRemer nomination contrasts with adversarial actions Trump has taken since taking office Jan. 20. He has battled with public-sector unions over his efforts to make federal employees easier to remove and to limit their collective-bargaining rights. He fired two Democratic members of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and a Democratic member of the National Labor Relations Board. Their terms weren't yet over, and the legality of the moves has been questioned.

In prepared remarks for Wednesday's hearing, Chavez-DeRemer said she would aim to ensure "a level playing field for businesses, unions, and most importantly, the American worker."

Organized labor is at a crucial point in its history. The share of U.S. workers who are union members has been in decline for decades, falling to 9.9% in 2024. The trend continued through the previous administration, despite wide-ranging efforts by President [Joe Biden](#) to encourage workers to unionize. Union leaders overwhelmingly backed then-Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) in the fall election, even as blue-collar workers helped deliver the election to Trump.

Sean O'Brien, president of the Teamsters, broke from the broader labor movement in 2024 by declining to endorse a presidential candidate, dismaying Democrats after Biden arranged to set aside tens of billions of taxpayer dollars to save the [pensions of Teamsters](#). After the election, O'Brien urged Trump to nominate Chavez-DeRemer, the daughter of a Teamster.

In an opinion piece published in the journal *Compact* just before Trump announced Chavez-DeRemer's nomination, O'Brien praised what he said was a growing number of Republicans who "have proved that they are willing to listen to and stand with workers fighting a broken system."

Vice President [JD Vance](#) is the most prominent figure in the "New Right," a [conservative political movement](#) that argues that American capitalism has failed to uplift workers. Sen. Josh Hawley (R., Mo.), a member of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, which is reviewing Chavez-DeRemer's nomination, has drafted legislation to prevent employers from stymying unionization efforts by slow-rolling contract negotiations. Expected co-sponsors of the legislation include Sens. Bernie Moreno (R., Ohio), Cory Booker (D., N.J.) and Gary Peters (D., Mich.), according to a person familiar with the talks. *Axios* earlier reported on the initiative.

Antiunion activists are alarmed. "Our biggest problem, politically, is Republicans," said Mark Mix, president of the National Right to Work Committee. It is one of the few groups that have voiced strong opposition to Chavez-DeRemer's nomination, calling her an advocate for "forced unionism."

Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.) last week reintroduced the National Right to Work Act, a bill he has introduced in every Congress since 2013. It aims to make it easier for employees at unionized workplaces to opt out of joining or paying dues to a union. Its 17 current co-sponsors—all Republicans—are the fewest since Paul began introducing the bill, though more could sign on.

The Labor Department is one of several tools the federal government has to shape labor policy. As secretary, Chavez-DeRemer would oversee and enforce rules governing unions, their finances and ethics; workplaces, including safety guidelines; worker classification as employees or independent contractors; and overtime pay.

The new administration has taken several actions that upset organized labor while mollifying pro-employer groups.

A week after taking office, Trump fired Gwynne Wilcox, one of two Democrats on the NLRB, which oversees union-organizing drives. The ouster, which appeared to violate a provision of the law that says presidents can only remove board members in cases of neglect or malfeasance, left the panel without a quorum to vote on decisions.

In a [letter notifying Wilcox](#) of the decision, Trent Morse, deputy director of the Office of Presidential Personnel, accused her and the NLRB's general counsel of adopting "decisions that have improperly cabined" employers' rights to speak on the subject of unionization and of "disfavoring the interests of employers." Wilcox is challenging the removal in court.

Counterbalancing Chavez-DeRemer, Trump nominated as her deputy Keith Sonderling, a former commissioner on the EEOC and an attorney who defended corporations in employment disputes. After that nomination a number of business groups—including the National Restaurant Association, National Retail Federation, International Franchise Association and the American Hotel and Lodging Association—issued statements in support of Chavez-DeRemer.