Unions Find Members Slow to Rally Behind Democrats

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

The Democrats will depend on labor unions — the shock troops of their political campaigns — to offset two new developments this election cycle: Tea Party enthusiasm and corporations’ ability to spend unlimited amounts thanks to a Supreme Court ruling.

Labor leaders, alarmed at a possible Republican takeover of one or both houses of Congress, promise to devote a record amount of money and manpower to helping Democrats stave off disaster. But political analysts, and union leaders themselves, say that their efforts may not be enough because union members, like other important parts of the Democratic base, are not feeling particularly enthusiastic about the party — a reality that, in turn, further dampens the Democrats’ chances of holding onto their Congressional majorities.

“The problem for us is to really re-excite the rank and file to the greatest degree possible,” said Gerald W. McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and chairman of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s political committee. “They’ve been disappointed that the House and Senate haven’t done more, especially to create jobs.”

It is a measure of the dread among Democrats and their labor allies that several unions are no longer threatening to withhold endorsements from some conservative or moderate Democrats, like Representative Zack Space of Ohio, because they had bucked labor on health care legislation or other issues. Now, unions are generally backing those Democrats, feeling labor cannot afford such a strategy when the Democrats’ prospects seem so troubled.

“People are evaluating this a little bit differently from three months ago,” said Jon Youngdahl, political director of the Service Employees International Union. “Our goal obviously is to have a majority for Speaker Pelosi next year. That’s driving a lot of decisions.”

The stakes of labor’s participation may be even higher this year than in 2008 when new voters, including students, came out in droves, overwhelmingly supporting President Obama and the Democrats. Political experts say these midterms, unlike in 2008, will not be a
“surge” election — students, for instance, are markedly less passionate about the Democrats this year.

In a base election, the party that gets its traditional supporters out to vote is more likely to carry the day. And the Republicans’ base, even if parts of it are insurgent and unpredictable, is highly motivated to topple the Democrats.

Unions feel a need to respond, and that means energizing their rank and file. “You have to go educate your base, mobilize your base, inspire your base,” said Larry Scanlon, political director of the state, county and municipal employees’ union.

Moreover, corporations — freed by the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision in January that lifted restrictions on direct corporate and union spending on political campaigns — are expected to spend record amounts in this election cycle, making labor’s vaunted ground war all the more important to Democrats, who hope it will neutralize the corporate dollar advantage in the advertising air war.

A.F.L.-C.I.O. leaders say that they will spend around $50 million on races in 26 states and that unions already have 1,500 full-time campaign workers on the ground. The service employees have budgeted $44 million for the election, while other unions will spend tens of millions of dollars more. All told, labor strategists say their ground troops will make more than 10 million phone calls to members’ homes, distribute millions of fliers at workplaces and knock on millions of doors.

But Charlie Cook, a nonpartisan political handicapper, questioned how successful labor’s push will be. “The question is, how effective can labor be when so many of their people are unemployed or underemployed and just not happy campers?” he said. “How effective will they be in getting people to do the hard work — to do the phone banks, the get-out-the-vote?”

Patricia Elizondo, president of the 2,000-member Milwaukee local of the International Association of Machinists, fears just that.

“People have been unemployed for two years, and they’re unhappy that the health care bill was not as good as they expected,” she said. “Two years ago, I had many members going door-to-door to campaign. Now they’re saying, ‘Why should I? We supported that candidate, but he didn’t follow through.’ ”
For the union brass, turning around voters like Mike DeGasperis, a steelworker from Martins Ferry, Ohio, could prove difficult; two years ago he was motivated by his “anti-Bush” feelings.

“We heard everything was going to change, but there hasn’t been much change and the unemployment is still bad and the area we live in is still really depressed,” said Mr. DeGasperis, who was laid off for 10 months last year.

He said he had not decided whom to back in the House, Senate and governor’s races — all key in Ohio, a pivotal swing state. “I’m going to keep my options open.”

Union leaders say Mr. Obama’s recent speeches — at a union picnic on Labor Day in Milwaukee and later in Cleveland should help whip up rank-and-file enthusiasm.

Labor leaders, once frustrated themselves about Mr. Obama and Congressional Democrats, have warmed to them recently after they enacted a $23 billion package to save the jobs of teachers, police and firefighters and after the president proposed a $50 billion infrastructure plan. Now they are asking Mr. Obama for another favor — to order trade penalties against China over charges that it illegally subsidizes its clean energy industry.

“There’s no ambivalence here with the leadership,” said Richard Trumka, president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. “We hope to provide union members with the facts to show that there are stark choices in this election — whether we go forward to build an economy that works for everyone or whether we go back to an economy where corporations and Wall Street run wild.”

Doug Heye, communications director for the Republican National Committee, voiced respect for labor’s operation.

“They’re always effective,” he said. “The union leadership is wedded to the Democratic Party. But what we’ve seen cycle after cycle is the membership demonstrates real independence and votes independently of the union bosses.” (According to a national exit poll conducted by Edison/Mitofsky, 60 percent of union members voted for Mr. Obama in 2008 and 37 percent for Senator John McCain.)

Mr. Heye voiced confidence that Republicans would outdo the Democrats in November, even with labor’s big push, because the enthusiasm gap greatly favors the Republican Party.

Mr. Trumka said: “I don’t think the Republicans even want our votes. They just want us to get so frustrated and angry that we don’t even vote so then they’d have an easy walkover.”
To wit, labor leaders are telling the rank and file that Mr. Obama and the Democrats have done good things for working people — the $787 stimulus package, the health care overhaul, Wall Street reform and the rescue package for Detroit automakers. They note that Mr. Obama has appointed a union-friendly labor secretary and union-friendly members to the National Labor Relations Board.

Labor leaders say Mr. Obama and the Democrats wanted to enact more stimulus to create jobs, but say the Republicans often stymied them. They also note that many Republicans have vowed to privatize Social Security and repeal the health care law and Wall Street reform.

“A lot of people are frustrated, and we have to turn that frustration into positive energy,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 17, 2010

An earlier version of this article misstated when President Obama delivered a speech in Cleveland. It was last Wednesday, Sept. 8.