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Daley's 'Big-Box' Veto Sticks

Defiant backers vow to offer even tougher wage measure

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Tribune staff reporters

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Mayor Richard Daley demonstrated his political muscle on Wednesday, bucking proponents of the "big-box" minimum wage ordinance and making his veto of the measure stick.

Daley persuaded three aldermen who originally voted in favor of the ordinance to switch sides, successfully turning away an override attempt at Wednesday's City Council meeting.

The mayor called for action now in Washington, D.C., and, especially, Springfield to increase the minimum wage for employees no matter where they work. Such action, he believes, would not put Chicago at a competitive disadvantage in attracting businesses.

But Daley was put on notice early in the nearly 2 1/2-hour override debate that more Chicago-specific "living wage" legislation is on the way.

"I can count votes and ... I know the outcome of this override today," said Ald. Joe Moore (49th), who sponsored the big-box measure. "But this issue will not go away."

Moore said that at the Oct. 4 council meeting, he will introduce a more sweeping proposal, designed to win higher pay for a greater number of low-wage workers.

At a post-meeting rally with supporters of the ordinance, Ald. Ricardo Munoz (22nd), declared that "Today is a setback, but we're coming back, and we're going to pass a living wage for these retailers that are taking out of our communities."

"It is not a defeat," declared Ald. Freddrenna Lyle (6th). "This is a temporary detour. ... We will persevere. The mayor won the battle today, but we are going to

win the war."

Daley described the vote as a victory for Chicago.

"We worked very hard to put the best interest of our city first and foremost," the mayor told reporters after the meeting. "Today the City Council, after sincere debate, affirmed our commitment to create new jobs and business in Chicago, especially in those communities that most need them. Now it is time to come together to increase wages for all."

Tom Balanoff, president of the Illinois Council of the Service Employees International Union, asserted that Daley and his aldermanic allies passed up an opportunity to help working people and instead "used their power to welcome wealthy corporations paying poverty wages into this city."

"There is a movement in this city for a living wage, and it's not going to stop until it wins," Balanoff declared.

Gerald Roper, president of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, called the vote "a huge victory for Chicago and future economic development in the city's most underserved communities.

"Denying the entry of big-box retailers into our communities by imposing inequitable rules on them would have hindered job growth and economic development in some of Chicago's most underserved neighborhoods," he said. "And it would have put the future growth and economic development of our city at risk."

The big-box measure would have required a higher minimum wage for employees of stores with 90,000 square feet or more operated by companies with at least \$1 billion a year in sales. Workers in such stores would have to be paid \$13 an hour in wages and benefits by 2010 under the ordinance.

The new measure that Moore said he is planning would mandate a city minimum wage for workers of companies that employ at least 1,000 employees, a change that would add the workers of such firms as McDonald's and Walgreens to those of big-box stores such as Wal-Mart and Target.

Daley would not comment directly on the new proposal, but asserted, "Everybody wants a living wage. It has to be statewide."

Some on the council believe the mayor has been distracted and weakened by a federal investigation of his administration that has uncovered contracting and hiring fraud.

As one bit of evidence, they point to his failure to squelch the big-box ordinance when it first was introduced in 2004.

"I think the issue got away from many people in the building," said Ald. Patrick O'Connor (40th), a staunch Daley supporter who nevertheless voted for the ordinance. "I think what we would have done differently is tried to sit down with all of the disparate parties and people in the mayor's office and tried to work it out. We didn't do that in this instance. It's a failing, I think, on all our parts."

But, in the end, Daley prevailed.

A successful veto override would have required 34 of the 50 votes in the council. Supporters of the ordinance were able to muster only 31.

Changing their original votes to back Daley on Wednesday were Ald. Danny Solis (25th), Ald. Shirley Coleman (16th) and Ald. George Cardenas (12th).

In next February's election, union leaders plan to back challengers to incumbent aldermen deemed unsympathetic to worker issues.

Most of the aldermen who have been targeted are Hispanics and African-Americans, Solis said.

"That is a very sad situation," he said. "But if you want to go against me, bring it on."

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