

Labor flexes its muscle for tobacco industry

By Chris Black
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Tobacco industry efforts to quash antismoking legislation on Beacon Hill are being strengthened by the separate but compatible concerns of organized labor.

Organized labor opposes legislation that would restrict smoking in the workplace and ban tobacco advertising on billboards because it prefers that workplace conditions be negotiated in collective bargaining and fears a tobacco ad ban would cost some of its members their jobs.

At a time when public opinion is swinging toward smoking restrictions,

the posture of labor, a highly influential lobbying force in the State House, is giving the tobacco industry an unexpected boost.

Rep. Marilyn L. Travinski (D-Southbridge), House chairman of the Committee on Commerce and Labor, said labor's concern had injected a new element into the debate over billboards.

William R. Delaney, a tobacco industry lobbyist, said the industry had not solicited labor's support but welcomed it because labor support makes a difference in the State House.

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"This Legislature does consider carefully when labor speaks up," said Rep. Lucile P. Hicks (R-Wayland), sponsor of many of the antismoking bills. "It will certainly have an impact."

Despite statistics that show smoking kills 8,000 Massachusetts residents each year, with residents of blue-collar neighborhoods suffering disproportionately higher rates of smoking-related illnesses, labor officials said they were acting in the best interests of their members.

"We are against anything that will cause a loss of work opportunities for our members, which the cigarette legislation proposed this year does," said William Murphy, an organizer for Painters District Council 35.

Murphy said that the billboard industry, which relies upon tobacco advertisements for much of its revenue, employed about 1,000 members of sign painter, sheet metal worker, electrician and iron worker unions.

"If the industry were to lose cigarette advertising suddenly overnight without the ability to go after different advertisers, obviously it would raise havoc with a number of people employed in the industry," Murphy said. He also said a ban on advertisements of a legal product raised First Amendment freedom of expression issues.

Martin Foley, lobbyist for the Massachusetts State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, said labor believes workplace conditions are more appropriately dealt with in the collective bargaining process.

Rep. John C. McNeil (D-Mal-

den), House chairman of the Health Care Committee and long-time smoking opponent, said labor's position on antismoking legislation was an example of the leadership being at odds with the membership. "Labor is not comfortable being in that position but I'm not sure it has any choice," he said.

"Their membership is overwhelmingly in favor of the restrictions they are testifying against," said Richard Daynard, president of the Group Against Smoking Pollution. "It suggests that they are making some kind of short-term political deal at the cost of the health and welfare of their membership and their members' children."

Dr. Gregory Connolly of the Department of Public Health described labor's position as short-

sighted because the tobacco industry is systematically targeting advertising toward blue-collar and ethnic neighborhoods to recruit adolescent new smokers to replace those who die or quit. He said that 40,000 adults stop smoking - 8,000 because of death - in Massachusetts each year but 35,000 teen-agers pick up the habit.

National Center for Health Statistics data show a significantly higher percentage of smokers among blue-collar than white collar workers. State public health studies show smoking-related illnesses, including lung cancer, are significantly higher in blue-collar neighborhoods like South Boston. Critics of the tobacco industry charge that the industry is targeting its marketing to young women, minorities and blue-collar workers.