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AFL-CIO refuses to endorse Holden over health care

Citing his vote against the reform bill, the state's biggest labor organization says it will remain neutral in U.S. Rep. Tim Holden's primary race.

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U.S. Rep. Tim Holden's vote against health care reform cost him one of his most loyal and powerful allies in the Democratic primary.

The Schuylkill County Democrat failed to capture the endorsement of the AFL-CIO, Pennsylvania's biggest labor organization. The union made its endorsements in Democratic primary contests at an executive meeting Tuesday in Swatara Twp.

The group will remain neutral in Holden's primary race against Sheila Dow-Ford, a Harrisburg lawyer who supported health care reform. To capture the endorsement, Holden needed support from two-thirds of the present members.

"People from his area in the labor movement were very adamant about his decision to walk away from the good and welfare of the people in his district in reference to the health care bill," said Bill George, AFL-CIO president.

Holden has enjoyed support from the group.

But Eric Nagy, Holden's campaign manager, said Holden knew labor leaders wouldn't like his health care vote.

Holden was convinced the vote was best for his constituents, and he has a history of supporting labor, Nagy said.

"Throughout his career, he's kept the best interests of working men and women in mind," Nagy said. "And he'll keep fighting on their behalf to bring good jobs to the region."

Nagy said Central Pennsylvania Building Trades has endorsed Holden, along with the Schuylkill County Democratic Club and the Dauphin County Democratic Committee.

Dow-Ford said Holden's inability to capture the AFL-CIO endorsement is an opportunity for her, as she's worked to court the labor vote. Dow-Ford joined labor groups on a bus trip to Washington, D.C., for a rally urging support for health care reform.

She said the union's refusal to endorse Holden sends a message.

"I think that is a positive nod in my direction," Dow-Ford said.

Though Holden is experiencing a backlash from the left, his health care vote might have been cast with an eye toward the general election in a heavily Republican district, said Christopher Borick, a political science professor at Muhlenberg College in Allentown.

Borick considers Dow-Ford to be a significant underdog, while a potentially stiff test awaits Holden against the Republican nominee. That field includes state Sen. Dave Argall, R-Schuylkill County, Josh First, a Harrisburg businessman, Frank Ryan, a Lebanon County businessman, and Allen Griffith, director of Biblical Family Ministries in Myerstown.

In November, labor unions might rekindle their historically positive relationship with Holden, Borick said.

But the symbolism of losing the AFL-CIO as a supporter is strong, and it could mean the loss of some campaign efforts that unions typically contribute, he said.

"To have a group that is usually a loyal supporter of your campaign not give you the nod this time around has to be seen as a pretty big disappointment," Borick said.

Diane Bowman, chairwoman of the Dauphin County Democratic committee, said she was disappointed by Holden's health care vote.

Had reform lost by one vote, she would have been far more upset, she said.

But with the bill passed, she said that she is willing to move on because Holden reliably pumps federal money into the district, which includes Dauphin and Lebanon counties.

"A lot of us realize that he might not vote the way we want him to vote on some issues," she said. "But at the end of the day, we know we can count on him to support us financially, to bring money back to our area."

Also Tuesday, the AFL-CIO endorsed Sen. Arlen Specter over Rep. Joe Sestak in the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate.

The announcement followed appearances by both candidates at the meeting.

"It is very meaningful to me on a personal level, and it certainly, on a political level, is tremendous in a Democratic primary," Specter said.

In a statement, Sestak said he has a 97 percent lifetime voting record with the AFL-CIO, compared to 61 percent for Specter.

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