

Now the tough stuff starts

Now, the tough stuff starts. The new Democratic-run House, carrying out the promise by Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) raced through its opening agenda of six measures—including raising the minimum wage—in fewer than half of the 100 legislative hours she said they would need.

That's a great start, but a look at the road ahead shows that's all it is: A start. Consider what Congress must tackle now, and what workers and their allies must lobby on and keep tabs about, and this is just a partial list:

•**The minimum wage.** Yes, the House passed it and Senate debate opened Jan. 24. But the Republicans used a filibuster to block the raise—from \$5.15/hour now to \$7.25 in just over two years—for the nation's poorest workers. They and anti-worker GOP President George W. Bush say they'll go along with the hike if there's another tax-cut bonanza for "small business." At least one key Democrat, Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) agrees and crafted an \$8 billion present for plutocrats. We must lobby to keep the minimum wage bill clean.

•**Iraq.** Bush wants to send 21,500 more troops

to Iraq. He also wants to spend billions more on his war, even as U.S. servicemen and women keep dying or getting wounded in what is obviously an intra-Iraq civil war. The question Congress has to tackle is how to stop Bush's troop shift and force him to start a pull-out, without harming present troops, whom the Pentagon has left short of armor and ammo, among other things.

•**Health care.** Covering the uninsured is back on the agenda. That's vital, but so is covering the insured without loading all the costs onto workers and taxpayers. There are competing health care plans floating around. Most keep some role for the private insurers, though their denial of care killed 18,000 people last year. The plans that use the private insurers also don't control their costs and their profits.

Bush promotes YOYO—"yer own yer own." He leaves workers unprotected against the rapacious evil health "insurance" companies.

The alternative is government-run single-payer health insurance, like Canada's, or Medicare's. But the insurers will use their millions in campaign contributions and "big lie" techniques—Remember

the Harry and Louise ads?—to try to kill that.

•**The Employee Free Choice Act.** Workers' rights are honored in the breach in the U.S., and they're a low-profile issue in Congress. The AFL-CIO plans a vigorous campaign to promote EFCA, which would help level the playing field between workers and companies. Pelosi promises a vote in the spring. Time to marshal the troops.

•**The budget.** Spending for all but a few agencies was frozen at 2006 levels, or less, this year. Bush will try to cut everything from student loans to food stamps to Medicare. And you can bet that over the next two years, he'll use his veto pen on pro-people bills. So we must gird ourselves for fights not just to pass increased money for programs benefiting you and me, but to re-pass them when he tries to stomp on them.

Like we said, this is only a partial list of the thorny problems the new Congress must tackle. And the perils increase because of the Right Wing's ability to muster 41 GOP senators for filibusters to preserve their policies and oppose pro-worker ideas. All that means we'll have our work cut out for us, lobbying, every day, for two years.