

## **Teamsters leader urges Social Security compromise**

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In a break with other union leaders who have opposed Social Security reform, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa commended President Bush on Tuesday for starting a national conversation on the issue.

"Social Security is a major problem in this country," Hoffa said during an interview in his office two blocks from the U.S. Capitol. "We have to make sure that it's preserved for those that come after us. I think President Bush should be given credit for the fact that he has initiated a debate regarding what we should do."

Hoffa, who described his union's relationship with the Bush administration as "not close," but also "not far away," campaigned for Bush's defeat last year. But he also has sided with the administration on issues such as drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and renewing terrorism insurance to help the commercial real estate industry.

The Teamsters leader is hoping the administration and congressional Republicans will shepherd into legislation a proposal that would help the long-term financial viability of multiemployer pension plans to which many of his members belong.

However, Hoffa indicated that he agrees with other labor leaders who oppose Bush's plan to carve out part of the Social Security payroll tax for personal savings accounts. He also opposes raising the retirement age.

But Hoffa doesn't agree with other unions that have put up roadblocks to any reform.

AFL-CIO lobbying against Bush's proposal has been intense, with the labor federation organizing picketing around the country at financial services firms that back Bush's proposal for creating personal savings accounts.

Hoffa's 1.4 million-member union, which is also embroiled in a fight with AFL-CIO President John Sweeney over the federation's future direction, has not officially participated in those events.

AFL-CIO officials, for their part, see no advantage to any of the changes that have been proposed, such as private accounts, a higher retirement age or a reduction in future benefits. "There's no reason to compromise right now," said Stewart Acuff, the federation's organizing director.

White House spokesman Ken Lisaius indicated that the president isn't ready to give up his plan for personal savings accounts, but does want to begin negotiations.

"The president has called on members of both parties and both chambers of Congress to come up with ideas and solutions," the spokesman said.

The Teamsters leader said Social Security is part of the larger issue of retirement security that needs to be addressed.

Hoffa and other top Teamsters officials said they received a pledge earlier Tuesday from the Republican chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee \_ Rep. John Boehner of Ohio \_ to support proposed legislation to help the nation's 1,650 multiemployer pension plans.

Boehner's spokesman Kevin Smith described it as a "productive business meeting" but declined to indicate whether Boehner would support the legislation. Boehner's committee is expected to introduce a wide-ranging package of pension changes next month.

About 10 million workers belong to multiemployer pension plans, including many in the trucking, building trades and grocery industries where the Teamsters union has many of its members.

"We are backing legislation to amortize losses and make it easier for pension plans to survive," said Hoffa, indicating that the workout period would run 10 years and pension plans would be put into three categories based on their level of funding.

The American Trucking Association and the Motor Freight Carriers Association also back the multiemployer pension legislation.