

December 20, 2002

Labor leader: Scaffold law more important to lawyers than unions

The president of the Chicago Federation of Labor distanced himself Thursday from union-supported efforts to revive the Scaffolding Act, pointedly saying the measure is more important to trial lawyers than to organized labor.

While not opposed to reinstating the act, Dennis Gannon said pressing the issue in the General Assembly could divert attention from worthier legislative goals and aggravate union relations with the construction industry. The act, repealed in 1995, makes it easier for employees injured at a construction site to sue an array of contractors and their subs.

"It's a legislative issue for the trial lawyers but not necessarily for organized labor at this time," Gannon said. He added that "if the construction industry does well, our members do well and if this is going to erode that relationship, then it's something we have to look at."

Business lobbyists have said they

expect the scaffold law, technically named the Structural Work Act, to be one of the top items on the legislative agenda now that Democrats are in power. The act was repealed in 1995 in one of the first actions of a Republican-led General Assembly.

The Illinois AFL-CIO lists reinstating the act as one of its prime lobbying goals, saying it's an incentive for workplace safety. The Illinois Trial Lawyers Association, a top campaign donor, has worked with union leaders on the issue.

Business groups argue the law did nothing for safety but made it easier for lawyers to charge multiple defendants with negligence, increasing contractors' insurance premiums.

The Chicago labor leader's comments indicated unions could be split on the issue, cutting chances for the act's return. Michael Carrigan, secretary-treasurer of the Illinois AFL-CIO, said that while

the Scaffold Act has been discussed, his group hasn't decided its legislative priorities.

Gannon said union lobbying should focus on other goals, such as strengthening workers' right to organize and expanding use of "project labor agreements" in government-funded construction. The agreements provide that in exchange for promises not to strike or engage in a work slowdown, unions win exclusive representation at job sites.

He called for a law that guarantees injured workers would continue getting paid while they await a potential settlement with their employer.

Carrigan said the Illinois AFL-CIO is evaluating possible legislation dealing with organizing rights, corporate accountability and the shortfall in the state budget, expected to hit \$3 billion.