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Labor Day not just fun and games for unions

WASHINGTON (AP) — Most Americans consider Labor Day a last chance for summer frolicking, a day for picnics and the beach. But for the nation's trade unionists, it's at least as much a day for assessment, reflection and regrouping.

On Labor Day 1994, unions may have some things to celebrate, but it has been, at best, a difficult and trying year.

It's been "a year like all years," said Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO. "One of struggle, progress in some respects, setbacks in others."

The good news for unions is that the decline in union membership has reversed. In 1993, union membership rolls swelled by 200,000, the first increase in 14 years. Unions are raising record amounts of money to donate to political candidates.

At the same time, they have suffered

some embarrassing defeats in Washington.

The unions began 1994 still smarting from a spectacular loss last fall on the North American Free Trade Agreement at the hands of a president they helped propel into office. They helped draft legislation to strengthen job safety laws, but never got it to the floor of either house of Congress. They did get to the Senate floor a House-passed bill that would have outlawed the replacement of striking workers. But it was killed in a Republican-led filibuster.

They launched a major lobbying campaign in favor of President Clinton's health care plan, but Congress recessed last month without acting on any of several proposals and may not pass any health reform this year.

"It's been a mixed bag," acknowledged Gerald McEntee, president of the American

Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

With Clinton in the White House and Democrats controlling Congress, labor leaders had hoped to reverse the series of defeats they suffered under Presidents Reagan and Bush. They have fared better, but the highly visible losses have left some questioning whether unions are losing their clout.

"I think the labor movement is weaker in some respects because 15 or 20 years ago it was, for some people, the focal point in their life," McEntee said.

"But now you've got issues that cover a wide spectrum and groups that didn't have that much voice are now involved in politics," he said. "Now the union is only one institution taken into consideration when a member of that union makes a political decision."

New rape legislation goes into effect

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (AP) — Some women raped by their husbands have been able to take their cases to court since 1987, but conviction required more evidence than it would if a non-spouse were the assailant.

A state law that went into effect Sept. 1 treats all sexual assault victims equally. Yet, many agree it will be years before the new law will make an impact because much of the public still believes that a husband cannot rape his wife.

"It will take 10 years for the change in the law to become in any way well-known," said Debby Tucker, executive director of the Texas Council on Family Violence. "It takes a very, very long time for attitudes to catch up with these things."

"It will take a terribly brave woman and a feminist prosecutor willing to articulate that a marriage license is not a hitting and raping license."

While prosecution for spousal rape has been legal in certain circumstances since 1987, when the Legislature decided that spouses could be taken to court, few cases have made it there, legal authorities and domestic violence workers said.

In Texas, sexual assault programs re-

ported 2,131 marital rapes between October 1991 to September 1992, according to latest statistics from the Texas Department of Health. About 61,000 women a year are raped by their husbands or ex-husbands, the National Women's Study found.

State Rep. Debra Danburg, D-Houston, pushed for revisions of Texas rape laws soon after entering the Legislature in 1981. Her first bill to change spousal rape laws was defeated by three votes in 1985.

"I then did lobbying on my own by talking to wives of legislators," she said. "Then we changed the law incrementally."

Danburg reintroduced legislation in 1987 and succeeded in making spousal rape a crime if bodily injury or the threat of bodily injury could be shown. In the last session, her work paid off with the elimination of all marital rape exemptions.

Much of the battle has been changing her colleagues' opinion about sexual assault, she said.

"It's not a crime of passion and sex," she said in Sunday's editions of the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. "It's a crime of violence and power. So a lot of it was a matter of consciousness-raising, changing

attitudes of the crime."

Not all Texans are applauding the recent change.

Austin resident Hugh Nations, national vice president for the National Coalition of Free Men, said no input from men's groups was sought before the bodily injury provision was deleted.

Nations also said he is disturbed that rape legislation only deals with the crime of rape.

"We don't deal with those other crimes that stem from rape accusations," he said. Nations cited studies that he said found that between 29 percent and 50 percent of rape allegations are false and later recanted by the accuser.

"Those issues we simply do not deal with, and it is particularly relevant in regard to marital rape, which happens between two people who are presumably already intimate," he said.

Tucker said the new law is an important statement about behavioral expectations.

"I don't dismiss (the change in the law) as being unimportant, but I do recognize that it's going to take a building time for it to matter."

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