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Business Groups Move to Increase Political Clout to Counteract Labor

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WASHINGTON -- Stung by labor's impressive grass-roots efforts in recent elections, business groups are planning to ask employers nationwide to help mobilize support for a business-friendly agenda.

To direct the effort, the Business Industry Political Action Committee is expected Wednesday to announce the hiring of David Gribbin, a longtime aide to Vice President Dick Cheney. Mr. Gribbin had been widely expected to join the Bush administration, but will instead devote much of this year to expanding BIPAC's effort nationwide.

BIPAC's initiative encourages companies to use e-mail and other in-house communications tools to build support for a business agenda among employees. It is aimed, in part, at bolstering business efforts in statewide races, where labor has shown particular strength in recent elections. Its announcement so early in the 2002 campaign cycle is just one sign that business wants to play a bigger role in the constant campaigning that has become the norm in Washington and across the U.S.

The National Association of Manufacturers, which helped found BIPAC three decades ago, has helped to form coalitions of national business organizations to mobilize grass-roots support for tax cuts, Social Security overhaul, a national energy policy and repeal of ergonomics regulations issued last fall by the Clinton administration. NAM also is planning its own political-education effort, including sessions to train company executives about communicating with workers and their congressional delegations.

With control of Congress hanging in the balance in the 2002 midterm elections, BIPAC vows to have three field organizers working in key states by this April to register at least one million new voters. BIPAC also hopes to train big employers in the use of e-mail to educate workers on issues, encourage voter registration and highlight lawmakers' voting records.

AFL-CIO spokeswoman Lane Windham said the BIPAC initiative was "insulting to workers," amounting to "going into work sites and asking workers to stand for things that aren't in their interest." BIPAC says its own surveys show that employees welcome such communications from their employers.

In studying losses of Republican Senate candidates in Michigan and Missouri last year, business activists noted that unions were able to deploy thousands of members to knock on doors and rally support. "We can't beat them in the number of people they can deploy on the ground, but our infrastructure can beat their numbers any time," said Darrell Shull, who directed the BIPAC program's limited roll-out last year.

In a statement, Mr. Gribbin said the BIPAC approach mobilizes voting blocs "at a fraction of the cost of traditional political participation."