For organized labor, this year's Labor Day isn't joyous occasion

By Tom Beal

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

It's Labor Day weekend — time to take a deep breath and appreciate ourselves and the work we do. That is, if we can stop worrying about whether we'll have a job tomorrow.

Labor Day celebrates all working people, but it has its roots in the organized labor movement. And local unions will gather Monday, as tradition dictates, for picnics and speeches in the park.

With Democratic control of Congress and the election of a Democratic president from Illinois, these should be heady times for organized labor, said James McBrearty, associate professor of economics at the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona.

"This is probably the most friendly administration they've had for an awfully long time. The unions went all out for Obama. They certainly helped him get elected," McBrearty said.

The economy, however, blunts that good news.

"Home values are down, 401(k)s are down, pension funds are disappearing. The worker is very stressed," said McBrearty. "If they haven't been laid off, many have had their wages cut or reduced indirectly. Given the state of the economy, labor is in a very defensive position right now."

Linda Hatfield, chair of the Pima Area Labor Federation, said negotiations over union contracts are different these days, but possibly more important than in the days when the issues on the table were raises and increasing benefits.

In addition to chairing a federation of 22 unions with 20,000 workers in Pima County, Hatfield is president of Local 7000 of the Communications Workers of America.

She represents white-collar workers in the Tucson Unified School District and the cities of Nogales and Tucson.

Public employees recognize the plight of their employers as tax revenues shrink, she said. Nobody is asking for a raise.

"If there is no money and they're looking at take-back, I have to figure out what I can do to improve things."

This year, she found herself arguing for fewer furlough days with the city of Tucson. "They started at 17; we got them down to five," she said. Then, she proposed furloughs as a way of avoiding layoffs at TUSD. "TUSD wouldn't entertain furloughs," she said.

By the numbers

| 155.1 million | the American labor force |
| 16.1 million  | Union membership         |
| 10.4 million | self-employed            |
| 7.7 million  | hold more than one job    |
| 3.5%         | public-sector union membership |
| 7.6%         | private-sector union membership |
| 24.9%        | union membership in New York state (highest in U.S.) |
| 3.5%         | union membership in North Carolina (lowest in U.S.) |
| 8.8%         | union membership in Arizona |
| 9.2%         | National unemployment rate (July 2009) |
| 9.4%         | Arizona unemployment rate (July 2009) |
When layoffs are threatened, it’s the union’s role to make sure seniority is honored, she said. “Our job is to make sure that rules are followed, that people are treated fairly,” she said.

Hatfield sees brighter days ahead. "Patience is a virtue," she said. "There is always tomorrow. There is always next year."

McBrearty, who has made a lifelong study of Arizona’s labor scene, said the state was once a union power, due mostly to strong unions in the mining trades — steelworkers, teamsters, construction trades and laborers.

That ended in 1983 when Phelps-Dodge broke the unions at its mining operations, he said. Asarco, now coming out of bankruptcy, has the only union mining contracts in the state.

Private-sector union membership has dropped drastically across the nation since the Reagan administration years, he said.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, private-industry union representation has dropped from 20.1 percent in 1983 to 7.6 percent in 2008.

Labor leaders are pushing for a major shift in rules allowing labor formation, McBrearty said, but he expects that, even with a Democratic Congress, the Employee Free Choice Act currently in Congress will be considerably weakened before its passage.

"With the economy being what it is, I don’t see much change in the private sector," McBrearty said.

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union membership in New York state (highest in U.S.)

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National unemployment rate (July 2009)

8.1%

Pima County unemployment rate (July 2009)

9.2%

Arizona unemployment rate (July 2009)

8.1%

Pima County unemployment rate (July 2009)


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