Sixty years ago this week, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It codified liberties Americans had long supported: freedom of speech, assembly, association, belief and worship; legal rights and due process; rights to a job at good wages under reasonable conditions, and economic security.

One cannot help but notice that our government has violated or ignored most of the Universal Declaration’s articles in the past eight years. People here and around the world fervently hope that President-elect Barack Obama will deliver on his promises to do far better.

But on one central human rights issue, it is unclear what the Obama team will do. Universal Declaration Article 24 explicitly supports “the right to form and to join trade unions.” The pending Employee Free Choice Act would help do that, but it will stir up a hornet’s nest of Republican and business opposition. There will be no bipartisanship.

Nonetheless, we should bring U.S. labor law into conformity with international human rights standards quickly, for two good reasons: first, because democracy needs it, and second, because our economy needs it.

The Wagner Act of 1935 established the National Labor Relations Administration. The law allowed workers to petition to hold an election for a union or to win union bargaining rights when a majority simply signed authorization cards. Court decisions have eviscerated that last right, while many employers have ignored the law and government has largely failed to enforce it.

Workers who organize today are frequently fired, threatened with plant closings, held in captive audience meetings, or otherwise intimidated. Prior to the Wagner Act, many working-class Americans lacked basic citizenship rights at work. That is true once again today. Polls show that millions of Americans would join a union except they are afraid to try to do so. The destruction of union rights has enabled employers to flout the law and silence workers.
Lack of rights at work also has helped cause our current economic train wreck. Absent unions, soaring worker productivity in the past 20 years has not been matched by increased wages, while CEO profits have shot through the stratosphere. Unionization would increase wages. It would be a far cheaper way to increase consumption than economic bailouts. Business economists claim unions impede economic growth, but most historians say union wage gains made workers into consumers and thereby fueled economic growth for major portions of the 20th century.

So, what would EFCA do? As with the original Wagner Act, when 50 percent or more sign union authorization cards, employers would have to recognize a union and bargain in good faith or risk NLRA intervention. And it would increase and enforce penalties for interfering with workers' rights. EFCA is not a free ride. If workers don't like a union, a petition by 30 percent of them still triggers an election in which they can eliminate it.

We need an organized, informed labor movement to counter the unchecked greed of big money. We need unions to reinvigorate American democracy and the economy. Once, 35 percent of American workers belonged to unions and, as a result, a more equitable income distribution allowed more balanced economic growth. Now, with only 12 percent in unions, economic disparities are vast and consumer power is weak.

Union organizing helped Americans to right the shipwreck of American capitalism in the 1930s. Strengthening union rights can help us to do it again.