For Idaho labor

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Defeating right-to-work law all uphill

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Idaho labor, although it has won temporary court rulings, faces a tough road ahead to thwart the right-to-work law.

It is fortunate that eventually the Idaho people will decide the fate of this highly controversial issue. It will be on the November 1986 general election ballot. In the meantime, there may be some court skirmishes and acrimonious debate between the Republican legislative leaders who are pushing the law, and Idaho labor and some Democratic officials who are opposed.

Jim Kerns, president of the Idaho AFL-CIO, is confident of victory. His optimism may be misplaced.

Fourth District Judge Robert Newhouse, Boise, has granted an indefinite injunction against enforcement of the law that bans compusory union membership. However, it must be emphasized the judge did not rule against the law itself, and Idaho labor leaders and others in opposition should bear that in mind.

Idaho Republican legislative leaders were so eager to enact the right-to-work law that they got caught in their own trap. They enacted the law with only a short committee hearing, which showed their arrogrance through power. They then affixed an emergency clause that it go into effect immediately, rather than on July 1, the date new state laws normally take effect.

Republican leaders, including Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, the House majority caucus leader, say they resent the courts interference in preventing the law going into effect. They have only themselves to blame.

Even Bateman admits that the emergency clause should not have been enacted, but he and other backers of the law feel the court should not have ruled on that declaration — that it is strictly a legislative function.

However, this is a legal question and the courts — which admittedly have been prone in the past to interfere with prerogatives of the Legislature — have every right to make a ruling on this issue.

The Legislature last January made Idaho the 21st state with a right-to-work law. Unions immediately filed an lawsuit against the new law, blocking enforcement.

Union leaders chortle over the fact they garnered 61,337 signatures to enforce a referendum on the law for the 1986 general elections. This is nearly twice the number required, but it is small when compared with the more than 400,000 eligible Idaho voters.

The Idaho denturists in 1984 gathered more than 45,000 signatures for their denturist law without hardly any publicity. The unions made a great ado about the petitions but it is really not that big a deal, to get something like little more than 10 percent of the voters to sign petitions.

The right-to-work law was rejected in 1958 by a scant 3,000 votes in one of the most bitter campaigns in Idaho's election history.

Even more remarkable, it attracted one of the highest campaign costs at that time and drew a record voter turnout. As a result, many people who ordinarily did not vote came to the polls. The result was giving Democratic majorities to both the Senate and House, the last time this has taken place. It was a thumping victory for both Idaho labor and Democrats.

It is now a quarter of century later and the political temper has changed. Since that time, Idaho voters have become progressively conservative and the Republicans have steadily increased their majorities in the Legislature. They now rule the Senate 28-14 and the House 67-17, the widest majority ever.

The conservative trend may have reached its zenith and there could be a swing to a more moderate position, but how much is a question. It is an important question relative to how the right-to-work law and the Democrats fare in the voting next year.

On the national scale, President Reagan's popularity may also have reached its apex. His coattails may not be so long next year, particularly if the farm economy plunges and the budget adds to the deficit. His failure to reduce the budget deficit materially and the Republicans' plan to freeze the Social Security payments could bring a voter backlash, not only in Idaho but throughout the nation.

Yet, it still would appear labor and the Democrats have a long way to go to gain control. It's still too early to tell the political mood for the 1986 general elections.

From this long distant view it would appear, however, that Idaho labor and Democrats face long odds in sidetracking the right-to-work law. They could make some gains, but how many will only be answered by the voting.