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RAW POWER House Speaker Michael Madigan is raising some eyebrows with the way he's pushing a bill that puts some onerous restrictions on telecommunications giant AT&T. Among other things, the bill would mandate that the phone company return to its 2005 employment levels for maintenance and repair workers. If the company failed to comply it would be forbidden to mandate overtime for its union workers, except in dire emergencies. The corporation would also have to inform the state of its future plans to construct new cable TV systems for customers.

The proposal was filed on behalf of the IBEW, a union which represents thousands of AT&T workers and which has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Speaker Madigan. The bill is reportedly designed to put pressure on AT&T to come to terms in upcoming contract negotiations. The union is upset over mandatory overtime, loss of employment and the sudden relocation of its members while AT&T builds out its new cable TV system.

The first version of the proposal was assigned to the Public Utilities Committee, but it had to be withdrawn and redrafted after encountering stiff opposition. It was then assigned to the Energy & Environment Committee, but was redrafted again before E&E met this week. A total of six committee members were temporarily removed and replaced with other members by Madigan so the bill could pass, but even then it barely survived, passing by just one vote. Committee Democrats warned the sponsor, Rep. Patrick Verschoore, that the bill needed a ton of work before he could call it for a floor vote. Verschoore said yesterday that Madigan would decide when the bill will be called.

If the IBEW wanted to get AT&T's attention, it has succeeded. Madigan has unnerved many of the company's lobbyists with his relentless push. Whether company higher-ups are ready to cut a deal with the union is not yet known, but the beatings will likely continue until it does.

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