

LABOR

Presidential Race Has Unions Flexing Their Muscles

Building trades focus on voter registration in tight race but some won't knock Bush

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By Sherie Winston

Construction supporters of President George W. Bush or his Democratic challenger, Sen. John F. Kerry, both believe the Nov. 2 election is the most important in their lifetime. Leaders of organized labor claim Bush administration policies are the most anti-worker in recent history.

The skyrocketing cost of health care, loss of jobs across numerous sectors and such trade issues as outsourcing of jobs to foreign countries are the key rallying points for labor's battle to send Kerry to the White House. Labor's fight began almost immediately after Bush took office when, in February 2001, he issued an executive order that essentially banned project labor agreements on most federal construction projects. "Another four years of this administration will kill us," says the political director of one building trades union.



(Photo courtesy of Office of the Architects of the Capitol/Charles Badal)



RECEIVING LINE Bush makes a campaign stop at the carpenters' Las Vegas training center. (Photo courtesy of AP/Wideworld)

Bush backers, led by the nonunion Associated Builders and Contractors, assert the administration must remain in office because of its strong support for "open competition and free enterprise," the hallmark of the group's merit shop philosophy. ABC maintains that Bush's re-election will allow small construction firms the "freedom to do business in this country without government red tape and frivolous regulations." The trade group made re-electing the president its top priority in June 2003, long before the campaign season began. All parties agree, however, that the November election will be as close as the 2000 presidential race.

Organized labor's all-out strategy is being directed by the AFL-CIO, in its most aggressive get-out-the-vote effort, including grassroots programs to increase voter

registration among craft workers and their families by at least 10%. Labor is focusing on issue education and increasing voter turnout on election day from the approximately 26% of union households that voted in 2000.

The labor group wants greater visibility of the presidents of its affiliated member unions. Each has been assigned at least one state, many considered battlegrounds, where they will spend considerable time between now and Nov. 2, knocking on the doors of union households, attending rallies and speaking to the rank-and-file. Painters' President James A. Williams calls the level of involvement by the general presidents "the highest I've ever seen."

Individual building trades unions have tailored their own programs, most increasing their participation well before the traditional Labor Day campaign kick-off. The laborers' union suspended most of its organizing campaigns several weeks ago so that organizers can focus on voter registration drives, says laborers' General President Terence M. O'Sullivan. The laborers' chief is assigned to Ohio, a key swing state where pundits expect the race to be as close as Florida was in the 2000 election. That makes it especially important to "register every member that you can," adds O'Sullivan, who has visited Ohio twice to knock on workers' doors.

The economy, including the mounting cost of the war in Iraq, is a hot issue for workers. Sean McGarvey, political director for the painters' union, says that when the economy is strong and workers are employed they are more concerned with a candidate's view on social issues, particularly guns and abortion. Some believe...

those union voters who hunt cast ballots for Bush in 2000 because of his opposition to gun control. "They're not as concerned about their guns this time. They're more concerned about their jobs," says Vincent Parvini, political director of the sheet metal workers' union.

Many building trades members are veterans and most describe themselves as patriotic. But a growing number "are pretty mad about Iraq," says McGarvey. He notes that Eric Orłowski, a member of painters' union Local 660 in Buffalo, N.Y., serving as a Marine reservist, was one of the first casualties in Iraq. Plumbers' union President Martin J. Maddaloni says workers are concerned about the high cost of the war and who is going to pay for it.

Another high-profile issue is the continuing trend of sending manufacturing jobs overseas. "For every manufacturing plant that is closed, we lose jobs building and maintaining facilities," says Maddaloni. Joseph J. Hunt, president of the ironworkers' union, says that pension reform for multi-employer plans is important for both his members and the union's contractors. In meetings with Kerry, Hunt says the candidate has pledged to consider changes for multi employer plans that were omitted this year when Congress passed legislation that granted relief for single employer pension programs.



FIRM GRIP Sheet metal workers in the swing state of Nevada come out to support Democratic candidate Kerry.

Not all of the 15 building trades unions are backing the Democratic ticket. For now, the carpenters' union and the operating engineers' union have yet to endorse either candidate. But the relationship between carpenters' President Douglas J. McCarron and the Bush White House has sent many tongues wagging across organized labor. Putting the issues in front of the president is the focus, insists McCarron, who adds that if he calls the White House with a

concern his telephone call is returned. "I think that is positive," says McCarron. "When I explain our relationship to the [carpenters'] delegates, they understand it. The president has a lot of power. A lot of the building trades people don't understand that." McCarron describes himself as a lifelong Democrat, but says bipartisanship is necessary. "You get more with honey than vinegar," he adds.

The carpenters' union could still back a presidential candidate. At a routine meeting of its council leadership scheduled for Sept. 15-16, carpenters will look at the presidential race with a "possibility" of making an endorsement, McCarron says. Operating engineers' President Frank Hanley declined to discuss his union's position for this article. A spokesman says the operating engineers educate their members and encourage them "to vote for candidates who support our issues."

All of the unions insist they do not tell their workers which candidates to vote for in the presidential contest or in the congressional races. But many take creative steps to encourage a vote for a particular candidate. Some ironworker locals have "adopted" a local in a battleground state. For example, members in New York may send handwritten postcards to ironworkers in Ohio that declare the importance of the New Yorker's vote, but that it is even more important for the worker in Ohio to vote. The brief notes, usually written at a union meeting, are sent to a worker's home. The postcards have been met with "a warm response from the locals," says Hunt.

Workers also respond to the "personal" contact even if it takes the form of a message left on a telephone answering machine. Hunt and Edwin D. Hill, president of the electrical workers' union, have each recorded messages that are delivered to a member's phone. The message, often sent to a worker identified as an undecided voter, tells them they will soon be receiving an important mailing. After the information is sent, a follow-up call is made by a phone bank volunteer.

Workers "tend to perk up and listen," when they hear their union president on the phone, says a spokesman for the electrical workers. Hunt was recently greeted by a member tickled to get a call from the president. "It's been more effective than I thought," he says. He'll have to make a few more calls between now and election day to see if the tactics make a difference in a tight race.