

ELECTIONS 2012: Why Labor's Rank and File Won't Campaign for Obama

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A surreal fog hangs over U.S. labor unions' enthusiastic endorsement of Barack Obama. When AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka announced the labor federation's recent endorsement, the exaggerated pro-Obama comments likely surprised union members everywhere. Has President Trumka paid any attention to the labor policies of President Obama?

In his announcement Trumka stated that: "As president, Barack Obama has placed his faith in America's working men and women to lead our country to economic recovery and our full potential. So we're putting our faith in him." (March 13, 2012).

Sadly, Trumka's faith in Obama is not supported by any facts. The "proof" that Trumka gave to support the Obama endorsement was three-fold, and entirely misleading:

- 1) Obama's initial stimulus plan that created or "saved" 3.5 million jobs (a generous estimate).
- 2) Obama's health care plan
- 3) The Wall Street reform bill

If the AFL-CIO President really wanted to assess Obama's first four years in relation to working people, he should have included the following points:

- 1) He bailed out the bankers, and his administration has refused to prosecute any of them for the crimes they committed.
- 2) The shameful lack of action to create the 25 million full-time jobs the AFL-CIO demanded, until recently, to address the jobs depression.
- 3) The truth of Obama's health care plan; it slashes hundreds of millions of dollars from Medicare; forces working people to buy shoddy corporate health care, and taxes the health care of union workers (so called "Cadillac" health care plans).
- 4) The Wall Street "reform" bill was weak enough to allow Wall Street to continue acting as it had been before the crisis, thus re-creating the conditions that will inevitably lead to another crisis.
- 5) Obama was complicit as Democratic governors attacked the wages and benefits of public sector union workers across the United States, rather than raising taxes on the wealthy to

handle state deficits. The continuing attack on public sector unions aims at the heart of the labor movement.

6) Obama's national deficit reduction plan threatens to cut additional hundreds of millions of dollars from Medicare and reduce Social Security benefits.

7) Obama's badly named Race-to-the-Top education program is a direct attack on public education and unionized teachers, since it rewards states for creating privately administered and non-union charter schools, while attacking the seniority of union teachers in publicly administered schools through new "teacher evaluation" schemes.

8) Obama pushed to pass the pro-corporate South Korea, Colombia, and Panama free-trade deals.

9) Obama promised to pass the pro-union Employee Free Choice Act, but never aggressively promoted it. A broken promise.

10) He promised to renegotiate NAFTA, another broken promise, because he did not even go through the motions of pretending to try.

11) He promised to make immigration reform a top priority and did nothing, again without trying.

12) He campaigned against the Patriot Act and then turned around to support it when he was elected.

What is Obama promising unions this election? Nothing. Why make promises to organizations like labor that don't seem to care if you break them?

What does labor hope to specifically gain from Obama this time? Labor leaders are not saying. In reality, Obama will continue to offer labor a slow strangulation, which some labor leaders prefer when contrasted to the Republican's promised guillotine.

The "lesser of two evils" argument was Trumka's most convincing when he announced support for Obama, yet the logic remains fundamentally flawed.

The power of labor unions is not dependent on politicians, but inherent in itself. Labor unions do not depend on the good graces of Democrats for their survival; workers are quite capable of defending themselves. Last year's events in Wisconsin and Ohio revealed on a small scale the enormous potential of organized labor to mobilize for power.

Unfortunately, some labor leaders have misunderstood the Wisconsin events, thinking that the enormous energy somehow applies to the coming election campaign for President Obama. In regards to labor activity in Wisconsin and Ohio, The New York Times quoted Randi Weingarten, union President of the American Federation of Teachers:

"That was a pretty big wake-up call to the Republican Party and also to the Democratic Party, because it showed what labor unions can do when they're motivated and can reach out to voters across the board."

True, when union members are "motivated," they can do truly incredible things. But the

election campaign of Obama is not a motivating event. The same article continues:

“... [AFL-CIO] labor leaders say they will mount their biggest campaign effort [to elect Obama], with far more union members than ever before — at least 400,000, they say — knocking on voters’ doors to counter the well-endowed ‘super PACs’ backing Republicans.”

And: “The Service Employees International Union [SEIU], with million members, aims to mobilize 100,000 of its members this year — twice as many as in 2008 — to make phone calls and knock on doors. ‘What’s different in our approach this year is massive investment in activating member volunteers,’ said Brandon Davis, the service employees’ political director.” (March 12, 2012).

Sadly, the AFL-CIO and SEIU are dreaming out loud if they think their membership will spring into action to re-elect President Obama. Union members are no different than the millions of non-organized workers across the country who’ve experienced zero benefit from having Obama as their President. Union members, like non-union members, saw their living standards fall under Obama. Many union members remain unemployed, like non-union members, due to Obama’s lack of action to create jobs. To think that these union members will use their free time to phone bank and door knock for Obama borders on delusion.

Rank-and-file union members have observed that giving money to and campaigning for President Obama does not “build power,” but destroys it.

For example, it is demoralizing for union workers to campaign for Democrats and then have to organize protests against these very same Democrats only months later when, for example, they move to implement cuts in services, jobs and reduce health care and or pensions. It is also a completely wasted investment in terms of the dues money of union workers, who would rather see this money spent towards fighting their employers for higher wages and benefits.

Campaigning for Democrats weakens unions further because union members will not be educated about the anti-union policies of the Democrats. An educated union movement is a powerful one.

Labor is crucially weakened by the Democrats because unions must water down their demands and weaken their actions to make them non-threatening to the Democrats. The AFL-CIO was demanding that 25 million jobs be created before Obama made it clear he would do no such thing. Now the AFL-CIO is silent on the jobs issue as it touts the job creating “successes” of Obama.

The lack of campaigning for Obama by labor’s rank and file will confirm to the Democrats what they already know; unions are not as politically important as the big banks and will be treated accordingly.

Wall Street successfully funded Obama’s first presidential bid as labor leaders tried to stay “in the game” by throwing hundreds of millions of dollars into the election, money that Obama didn’t need. It turned out to be a completely wasted investment for labor, though nobody in a leadership position has yet to admit it.

Now they are making the exact same mistake, though in more dire conditions for working people in general and the labor movement specifically. Labor leaders’ denial of Obama’s anti-labor record is not sustainable, they will be eventually be forced to recognize reality

and denounce their beloved President Obama as a betrayer of his promises, but not before wasting hundreds of millions of more dollars in dues money.

During the past year the AFL-CIO began a pilot program running labor union candidates for office on the Democratic Party ticket. Instead of trying to repair a sinking ship, labor should instead abandon the Democratic Party and run its own candidates as independents; the local and national levels, including for President. They could run on a platform calling for massive federal, state and local jobs-creation programs in order to put the 25 million unemployed workers back to work. And this could be the first step in creating a labor party that would really represent working people.

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<http://www.aflcio.org/Blog/Political-Action-Legislation/Citing-Shared-Values-AFL-CIO-Unions-Vote-to-Endorse-Obama-for-Second-Term>

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/us/politics/unions-plan-a-door-to-door-effort-for-2012-election.html?_r=1

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