

# Anti-Union Air Grows

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By Rekha Basu, Columnist, Des Moines Register

The president is taking heat from both Democrats and Republicans for engaging in so-called class warfare. His critics suggest that by calling Mitt Romney's legacy at Bain Capital a poor qualifier to be in the White House, Barack Obama shows hostility to big business.

Surprisingly few people, including some of those Democrats, are talking about big business' hostility to labor. There is class warfare going on, but it wasn't launched from labor's side.

Successive Republican administrations have worked to erode the rights of labor that once were enshrined in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, whose goal was to "curtail certain private sector labor and management practices, which can harm the general welfare of workers, businesses and the U.S. economy."

As CEO pay has climbed to over 300 times that of the average worker, private sector union membership has fallen from a third of workers in the mid-20th century to less than 8 percent today, according to the Center for American Progress. It blames union-thwarting laws subsequently put in place. Yet Obama's attempts to even modestly balance the scales have businesses fighting back. They're enlisting consultants like the law firm of Faegre Baker Daniels to guide them on fighting unions before they are even talked about.

"Ten things you can do now to prevent unionization later" was the theme of a Wednesday breakfast strategy session at Des Moines' Embassy Club.

Attorney Greg Utken openly advised employers on how to ward off organizing efforts at the front end. Among his recommended tactics: Posting notices declaring a work site to be union-free, removing union leaflets from car windshields, educating employees on the "risks and downsides" of unionization and redefining some positions into team leaders and filling them with anti-union people in units where there could be a union vote.

Utken told the employers that recent "pro-union moves" under Obama would probably continue unless Romney wins and, as expected, appoints pro-employer, rather than pro-labor, members to the National Labor Relations Board, which Obama has done.

Obama has supported the Employee Free Choice Act, which would allow workers to organize a union through a simple majority sign-up process. Though that has yet to pass, Utken pointed to other measures taken by Obama's NLRB making it easier for workers to organize. For example, employers would be required to post public notices explaining employees' rights to organize, though that provision is on hold while employers appeal it. It would also be possible for groups of employees to organize into smaller bargaining units than before, based on the specialization of their jobs.

Acknowledging that his own Teamster grandfather would be “rolling over in his grave” by what he is doing, Utken said, “In my 38 years here, I’ve never met an employer who says, ‘Gee, I’d love to be union.’ ”

That in itself is troubling. At one time, employers recognized the need to balance the interests of workers and employers, and employers knew unions were integral to a long-term productive workforce. Why can’t being profitable go hand in hand with supporting workers’ rights to organize on their own behalf for decent wages and working conditions? Why must it be that for one to win, the other must lose?

Unionized workers reportedly earn 11 percent more than non-union workers in comparable jobs, are 28 percent more likely to have employer-provided health coverage and 60 percent more likely to have employer-provided pensions. It makes sense for workers to want unions. “The problem isn’t that the American people aren’t productive enough. You’ve been working harder than ever,” Obama said recently. “The challenge we face right now and faced for over a decade is that harder work has not led to higher incomes and that bigger profits at the top have not led to better jobs.”

Romney’s ads, by contrast, decry taxes and “job-killing” regulations on business.

Obama clearly isn’t the guy for those who want a president who will protect their wealth from taxation and prevent their workers from unionizing.

But he should be the candidate of American workers who want a fair shot in the workplace and a better balancing of interests between laborer and CEO.

Yet this is where it gets confusing. A recent Pew Research Poll has Romney trouncing Obama 54 percent to 38 percent among the subset of white voters making less than \$50,000 a year.

Why won’t most blue-collar Americans vote in their own economic best interests? Is it the social issues, like abortion and gay marriage, that drive them to the Republican column no matter what else the GOP does? Is it discomfort with a black president? Or have they so bought into the hard-right rhetoric of the Rush Limbaughs and Glenn Becks that they’ve forgotten what their own best interests as workers are?

They should just hear employers’ strategies to fight those who try to organize. It could be a wake-up call.