

Where Public Employees Aren't 'American People'

By RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Monday, June 25, 2012 4:30 pm

Mitt Romney told public employees what he thinks of them in unambiguous terms three weeks ago in responding to President Obama's call for a stimulus bill that would help preserve their jobs.

Speaking three days after Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker survived a June 5 recall election spurred by his incursions on public-employee bargaining rights in his state, Mr. Romney said of Mr. Obama, "He says we need more firemen, more policemen, more Teachers. Did he not get the message of Wisconsin? The American people did! It's time for us to cut back on government and help the American people."

Implicit in that statement was that the workers whom the President was trying to help weren't part of "the American people."

The New York Times reported June 20 that even as private companies since 2009 have gradually been adding to their workforces, there has been a drop of 657,000 government jobs since April 2009. The great majority of those are not part of what people like Mr. Romney deride as the "Federal bureaucracy." They work for state and local governments, and their numbers have diminished as a result of drastic aid cuts starting at the Federal level and trickling down to the states, with the budget-tightening that has resulted expressing itself most notably through layoffs and jobs unfilled as employees leave the payroll for reasons from retirement to finding private-sector posts.

A Bit Strong Even for Walker

Those who were laid off pay taxes and buy products, and so their being out of work has just as great an impact on the national economy as any other displaced worker. It's just that the radical right that has taken control of the national Republican Party doesn't

really see it that way, and Mr. Romney is increasingly moving in sync with that ideology. This wasn't an awkward bit of phrasing that sounded worse than it was, as when he declared earlier this year that he "liked firing people" if they weren't doing their jobs properly; it was a thought-through rhetorical position that he figured would play well with those he needs to convince he is not a moderate.

Interestingly enough, one of those who seemed put off by his comments was Governor Walker, who said, "I know in my state our reforms allowed us to protect firefighters, police officers and Teachers. That's not what I think of when I think of big government."

So why did Mr. Romney put that kind of tag on those employee groups? Vice President Biden offered the theory June 19 in Los Angeles that many Republican officials now reflexively "hear labor and they think enemy."

He was speaking at the convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which generally represents the "other" employees besides first-responders and Teachers that have always been easier targets because the public is less aware, and therefore less appreciative, of the

work that they do.

“They hear labor,” he continued about the GOP hard-liners, “and they see an opportunity to try to scapegoat labor for the problems they created. They don’t get what you do for our communities. They talk about you as if you take advantage of the communities you live in, as if you weren’t part of the communities.

“They call you selfish,” he told the AFSCME delegates. “They don’t know you.”

It was a partisan speech, directed at a 1.4-million-member union that will be strongly behind Mr. Obama in November even as some of its leaders privately express disappointment in the President’s failure to get more done for them, and sometimes even to make the effort, as when he failed to come to Wisconsin to campaign against Mr. Walker prior to the recall vote, apparently feeling he would suffer too much political damage if the Governor prevailed.

A Working-Class Credibility

Mr. Biden’s appearance at the AFSCME convention didn’t pack the emotional wallop that the President being there would have, but his words may have resonated more. He is an easy target because of his penchant for saying what’s on his mind even when it’s not consistent with the message coming from the White House, but he did Mr. Obama a big favor by dragging him into announcing his support for same-sex marriage rather than waiting for the Democratic convention later this summer. And where Mr. Obama sometimes seems to treat organized labor as an acquired taste rather than a passion of his, Mr. Biden—the man accused 24 years ago of plagiarizing a British politician’s speech while running for President—speaks with the credibility of someone who grew up among workers and heard about them in his household.

He told the convention delegates that his father used to say, “Don’t tell me what you value. Show me your budget and I’ll tell you what you value.” Referring to the budget proposal put forward by House of Representatives Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan and embraced by Mr. Romney, Mr. Biden said, “It’s clear they don’t value you very much.”

He noted that as part of the GOP plan to preserve the Bush tax cuts that overwhelmingly offer the greatest benefit to wealthy Americans, “They wanna cut \$810 billion out of Medicaid... causing hospitals in your communities to close. Causing nurses and orderlies... to lose their jobs. If this wasn’t so real, it’d almost be funny.”

Chipping away at the caricature of public workers as those living the sweet life at taxpayer expense, he spoke of the emergency personnel that are part of the group—firefighters and 911 operators and police officers, ambulance workers and emergency-room technicians and hospital aides, and those who plow the roads to clear the snow away so that people could get to their jobs and take their children to school.

‘We Owe You’

“You shouldn’t be vilified,” he told the union delegates. “You provide the safe neighborhoods. You

provide the good schools. You provide the school-lunch programs, you provide the day-care centers. You provide the hospitals, you provide the roads. You provide the ability of people to live a decent middle-class life. We owe you.”

It is likely that soon, if not already, some of those in the GOP who haven't drank too deeply of the anti-public-employee Kool-Aid will inform Mr. Romney that many of the cops he suggested weren't needed are likely to support him as more in line with their conservative political views than Mr. Obama; that many firefighters, despite the exhortations of their national union, are also likely Republican voters in the November election. And so it would be no surprise if Mitt whips out his political Etch-a-Sketch and wipes the slate clean by professing his deep appreciation for public-safety workers, even if he still considers the rest of the government workforce a drag on the American economy.

But this is a guy who during the GOP debates a few months ago was insisting that it was a mistake to bail out the auto companies and that Mr. Obama's successful efforts in that area “gave the companies to the UAW.” As if oblivious to how much the soaring Federal deficit was traceable to Dick Cheney hornswoggling President Bush into giving the wealthy a second big tax break in 2003 just as we were about to go to war with Iraq, Mr. Romney is calling for an even-loonier idea: a further tax cut aimed disproportionately at the wealthy if he is elected.

The Good Side of Carter

GOP strategists have tried to link Mr. Obama to President Jimmy Carter, with whom he shares some personal qualities including a tendency to over-think big decisions and a certain diffidence when dealing with people. In some ways, it is a tempting analogy, even if the two men in other ways are vastly different and Mr. Obama can point to greater domestic achievements than his fellow Democrat and a notable success in dealing with terrorists that Mr. Carter lacked.

But the 39th President, for all his flaws as Commander-in-Chief, could never have been as callous as Mr. Romney when it comes to a segment of the workforce suffering disproportionately in hard financial times. Before New York City had the wherewithal to build up the key city services that had been devastated by the layoffs that followed the 1975 fiscal crisis, the Carter Administration allowed it to use Comprehensive Employment Training Act funds—designed to help unskilled people enter the world of work—to rehire cops and firefighters in large numbers. They may not have voted for him against Ronald Reagan in 1980, but he understood that delivering good public services was not something that should be measured by the political mileage it could produce.

There's little wonder that the most short-sighted of the wealthy in this nation are contributing with both saddlebags to the Romney coffers. The public workers who know of his “we don't need more firemen, more policemen, more Teachers” remarks but are still thinking about voting for him are the unnatural wonder of this campaign.

The former Massachusetts Governor's view of the auto-industry bailout had spoken volumes about his feelings about worker rights and compensation; his reaction to a stimulus bill that could have done something to reverse the tide of those 657,000 lost government jobs was just an exclamation point.

When Mr. Biden said GOP leaders and their financial backers were engaged in “the greatest assault on working-class people and their unions that I’ve seen in my lifetime,” he was speaking as a candidate running for re-election and trying to win over those ordinary employees not completely thrilled by Mr. Obama’s performance in office.

But he was also accurately describing what is going on.