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Biden to Labor Leaders: Things Could Be Worse

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

ORLANDO — When Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. spoke to the nation’s labor leaders on Monday, he seemed to be speaking not so much to them but to millions of disaffected Americans. And he pushed a straightforward message: We get it. We hear your pain, and we’re trying to do something about it.

Speaking at the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s executive council meeting, Mr. Biden once again played champion of the beleaguered middle class, talking of jobless fathers, laid-off single mothers and their struggles maintaining their dignity and paying for their kids to go to college.

“Right now there are tens of millions of people who are sitting down at their kitchen table and they don’t think we get it,” Mr. Biden said. “They know they’re not getting a fair shot, and they don’t think we understand the nature of their problems.”

Mr. Biden’s subtext was that even though many Americans, including many in the fast-growing Tea Party movement, don’t appreciate many of the administration’s policies, the administration is doing the right thing.

“They’re turning around watching the Cable News Network and other news networks, they’re constantly hearing about this thing called TARP, where hundreds of billions were committed to bail out the banks that got us in trouble.” Mr. Biden said. “And now they’re hearing that these bankers are giving themselves tens of millions of dollars, if you add it up in the aggregate, billions of dollars in bonuses.”

Showing sympathy for the public’s anger toward the big banks, he said that folks “don’t want people to get to get down and say, ‘Thank you. Thank you.’ But they sure in God’s

name resent people not showing any gratitude.”

Recognizing that the bank bailout and the auto bailouts were deeply unpopular, Mr. Biden took pains to explain them and defend them.

He said that had there not been a bailout of the banks, “had they shuttered their doors, we would have been in a flat-out depression and millions more would be out of jobs.”

And he acknowledged that people were angry about the Detroit bailout. “Even if we did help G.M. and Chrysler stay afloat, they thought, with some justification, that management didn’t know what they were doing, that they were short-sighted, that they were out of touch, that they were building cars that nobody wanted.”

“I come from a U.A.W. and some people were asking why are you bailing these guys out?” he continued.

And then he quickly answered his own question. “We would have lost 300,000 high-paying jobs immediately,” he said, “and 700,000 more as their suppliers went under.”

Mr. Biden said the United States cannot rely on 20th century industries to thrive in the 21st century. He said the federal government was dedicating billions of dollars to create the jobs and industries of tomorrow—wind turbines, high-speed trains, nuclear power plants, and solar panels. And making common cause with the labor leaders, he said that those are the industries that unions would need to organize if the labor movement is to grow again.

He said that some American unrealistically expect the Obama administration to create 8 million jobs in a year, which would largely erasing all the jobs lost since the recession began in late 2007. Predicting growth of 100,000 jobs a month this spring, he said it was impossible to create 8 million jobs in a year.

He added that the economic growth in the last quarter of nearly 6 percent was hardly solace to someone still unemployed.

“Had we not done these unpopular things to stabilize the banking industry, the auto industry, the housing sector, if we didn’t have growth of nearly 6 percent, we wouldn’t have any shot at all” he said. “They’re necessary preconditions to create genuine,

renewed economic growth.”

At another appearance at a construction site in Clermont, Fla., the vice president slammed Senator Jim Bunning, Republican of Kentucky, for efforts that have stalled a jobs extension bill and began resulting in furloughs for thousands of Department of Transportation employees.

Mr. Biden said that Mr. Bunning was “attempting to undo a lot of the good work we’ve already done on the recovery act. If his filibuster succeeds, for example, it’ll mean that state and local governments won’t get paid for projects they’ve already done. It means furloughing 2,000 people this week alone who are responsible for overseeing projects in the state of Florida and a lot of other projects around the country.”