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Op-Ed

Labor's love lost

Unions helped Democratic candidates win in 2008 and last November, especially in California. So why are Democrats not delivering on issues important to labor?

By Steven Mikulan

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Having delivered a clean sweep of state offices to California's Democratic Party in the November election, organized labor might want to brace itself for some punishing payback — from the very Democrats it helped into office. As Republicans press a ferocious campaign against public employee unions, we're already seeing some in the Party of FDR adopting an arm's-length camera pose with labor.

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At September's Labor Day Breakfast, held at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, keynote speaker and gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown thundered for 15 minutes about jobs and technology — without once uttering the word "union" or tipping his hat to organized labor.

On the federal level, President Obama has frozen the salaries of heavily unionized government workers for two years, a move that was applauded by the Wall Street Journal but has only symbolic economic value — except for the 2 million employees left in the cold. Meanwhile, Obama backed down on trying to block an extension of the Bush tax cuts — a kind of DREAM Act for millionaires. And you could almost hear AFL-CIO chief Richard Trumka grind his teeth as he responded, on the group's website, to Obama's State of the Union address by begging

the president to "stick to his campaign promises of reforming trade deals" and to not cut government spending.

California union leaders won't admit there is any daylight between the Democrats and labor — how can they, after spending \$30 million, plus all that get-out-the-vote grunt work, on Jerry Brown alone? Instead, when asked what they expect from Brown, they simply say they want the governor to focus on jobs, on "putting California back to work."

Public sector employees now account for the majority of all organized American workers and, with their job security and guaranteed pensions, have become Republican piñatas — especially in California, which is staring at a \$25-billion deficit. As governor, Brown will have to negotiate contracts with six state employee unions that refused to cut deals with his Republican predecessor. And he isn't sounding particularly generous.

Even in the state's Democratic strongholds, unions face significant threats. In Los Angeles, city workers have suddenly found their contracts opened to renegotiation, while Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a former organizer for United Teachers Los Angeles, has accused UTLA leaders of obstructing reform, calling them "the most powerful defenders of the status quo."

"Public sector unions are very much in the eye of the storm," says Joshua Pechthalt, a UTLA vice president. "Many traditional Democrats have joined a national movement to vilify teachers unions."

Of course, unions bear some responsibility for their plight. Infighting, bickering and an unwillingness to compromise have left them vulnerable. A split between the Service Employees International Union and the AFL-CIO, the SEIU's local corruption scandals, along with its veritable War of the Roses against other L.A. unions — all have distracted the movement's focus and sapped its resources. This has made L.A.'s once-invincible public sector union movement look like a paper tiger, one that is powerful only during flush economic times.

Nelson Lichtenstein, the director of the Center for the Study of Work, Labor and Democracy at UC Santa Barbara, sees a wedge being deliberately driven between Democrats and their union allies.

"Elected Democrats," Lichtenstein says, "are under this incredible hammer — 80% to 90% of a state's budget is labor." With Republicans able to obstruct the passage of any new taxes, he notes, the only choice for balancing the budget is to go after labor costs. And unions. In Lichtenstein's wedge scenario, the more state offices Democrats hold, the more budget confrontations the party has with its union supporters.

"The Republicans understand this brilliantly," Lichtenstein says. "They create a civil war within the Democratic Party by denying cities money."

There was justifiable rejoicing among state labor leaders with the victories of Brown and other Democrats. Yet it had been the same on election night 2008. Then, with Obama headed to the

White House and Democrats reveling in a near-supermajority, the rank and file was told it now had "a seat at the table."

Inaction would speak louder than words, however, as passage of the Employee Free Choice Act fatally stalled when neither the president nor Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) lifted a finger to push the bill, which was perhaps the last, best and final chance in the near future to make it easier for American workers to unionize.

Organized labor will soon see whether the men and women it helped elect keep their promises or their distance. If union members feel they've been moved from their seat at the table to a place under the bus, they may wonder if their work on behalf of Democrats is worth all the effort.

Steven Mikulan is a Los Angeles journalist.

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