The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY

CYRUS JULY 9

March 3, 2010

Still With Obama, but Worried

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

ORLANDO, Fla. — The nation's union leaders said on Tuesday that they were "appalled" at remarks made by President Obama condoning the mass firing of teachers at a Rhode Island high school.

Coming the day after union presidents sharply complained to Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. over stubbornly high unemployment, stagnant wages and the administration's failure to do more to create jobs, the statement — voicing a rare vehemence toward a Democratic president — underlined the disillusionment of an important Democratic constituency.

Because unions have been so crucial to the Democrats election after election, political experts say labor's ambivalence, or worse, toward the Democrats could greatly deepen that party's woes this fall.

"Labor is very disappointed, whether it's about card check or the effort to tax Cadillac health plans," said Charles E. Cook Jr., publisher of the nonpartisan Cook Political Report, referring to a bill that would have made it easier to unionize and to tax high-cost health plans that many union members have. "They're really disillusioned. I think one by one unions will start getting engaged and helping out the Democrats, but it could be half-hearted."

Mr. Cook said that ever since the Republicans captured the House in 1994 (the Democrats regained it in 2006), labor has played an increasingly important political role every two years to lift the Democrats' fortunes. But he does not see that happening this fall.

Labor leaders are disappointed over how little Mr. Obama has delivered and are angry over his support of the firings of the entire faculty at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island because of its poor graduation rate. Nevertheless, leaders attending the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s winter meeting here in Orlando said they would mobilize

labor's base for this fall's elections. They hope to minimize widely anticipated Republican gains. But that might not be easy.

"People aren't feeling so good about the president because the economy hasn't turned around," said Johnny Saunders, a steelworker in Martins Ferry, Ohio. "There are still massive layoffs, and people really believe that he bailed out Wall Street and forgot about Main Street. I think it's going to be a real challenge for organized labor to try to re-energize its base."

Organized labor played many roles in electing Mr. Obama: spending more than $200 million on his behalf; getting white male union members, who often vote Republican, to support him; and providing 200,000 ground troops for canvassing and getting out the vote.

In battleground states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan, unions like the Teamsters, United Steelworkers and United Automobile Workers helped Mr. Obama roll up substantial victories. Mr. Obama beat his opponent, Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, by 18 points among white males who belonged to unions, while losing among white, male nonunion members by 16 points.

Now, even as many conservatives assert that Mr. Obama has done too many favors for labor — they often cite the Detroit auto bailout — union leaders complain that he has fallen short on several of their priorities. They note that he has failed to enact the card-check bill, which would make it easier to unionize workers, and has not pushed for a government option as part of a health care overhaul.

And they are fuming that he has sought to tax some unionized workers' health benefits.

"The relationship between labor and Obama is far better than it was under Bush, but some people in labor are still wondering, 'Where's the beef?' " said Harley Shaiken, a labor expert at the University of California, Berkeley.

James P. Hoffa, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, voiced frustration along with some praise.

"We obviously hoped that more would have been done," he said. "We're disappointed that jobs were not

emphasized the first year. We're disappointed that the president got bogged down in the health care debate. To some extent we're all frustrated, although we're explaining to our members that he's been slowed down by the right wing."

Concerned about disaffection among union members and middle-class voters, the White House has taken several recent steps to show it cares. President Obama has visited several economically battered towns, pushed for a second stimulus bill to create jobs and began an initiative to rebuild manufacturing, especially through renewable energy projects. The Obama administration is also drafting a new procurement policy that would favor contractors that provide higher wages and better benefits.

Mr. Obama and the Democrats face problems among much of their base. Women's groups are angry that some Democrats are pushing new restrictions on abortion as part of the health care overhaul. Many Hispanic groups are upset that Mr. Obama has not pressed for immigration reform this year. And gay and lesbian groups are unhappy he has not ended "don't ask, don't tell" as a military policy.

In light of these problems, not having the 15-million-member union movement fully engaged and enthusiastic this November could be a major blow for the Democrats.

In a poll of Pennsylvanians conducted by Franklin & Marshall College in January, just 44 percent gave Mr. Obama a favorable rating, a development that has Democrats worrying that they might lose several House seats in the state and perhaps Arlen Specter's Senate seat, as well.

"We've seen a decline in support among union members for both Obama and the Democrats," Terry Madonna, director of the college's Center for Politics and Public Affairs, said. "Part of it is that unemployment brings low job performance ratings, no matter what the party. And less enthusiasm means that union members are less likely to vote."

After labor leaders grew angry at Mr. Obama's effort to tax high-priced health plans, he negotiated changes so that union members would be exempt through 2018.

Republicans say Mr. Obama's concession to labor on the excise tax enraged so many Americans that it helped deliver victory to Senator Scott Brown, Republican of Massachusetts.

“There are a lot of things he’s done that are egregious giveaways to labor,” said Kevin A. Hassett, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. “Obama has been identified as this guy who’s really pro-labor in a way that is out of the mainstream. Some of his pro-labor policies are so radical that even with 60 Democrats in the Senate he couldn’t get them through.”

Mr. Obama has certainly taken numerous actions that have pleased labor: pushing through the $787 billion stimulus plan, naming a union-friendly labor secretary and ruling against China in trade disputes involving tires and steel.

“He really does get it,” said the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s president, Richard L. Trumka. “He understands what working people are going through and he really does listen and we really have a seat at the table.”

“It’s totally unfair to say that the president hasn’t done this or done that,” Mr. Trumka added. “He’s tried on the stimulus bill. He faces tremendous Republican opposition. On health care, I give him the highest marks for tenacity.”

Mr. Trumka said that unions would not campaign for Democrats who had done little for labor, especially on issues like the card-check bill. Even though Mr. Brown’s victory denied the Democrats the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster, Mr. Trumka voiced confidence that Mr. Obama and the Democrats would find a way to enact that bill, the Employee Free Choice Act.

Union leaders have adopted varied strategies toward Mr. Obama. Some criticize him to nudge him to do more, while others praise him, hoping to reassure a restive rank and file that he still deserves their support.

“We haven’t gotten everything we’ve wanted, but we sure get a hell of a lot of things from him,” said Gerald W. McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Mr. McEntee predicted that if Mr. Obama got a health care overhaul enacted and advanced a bill making it easier to unionize, that would go far to re-energize the labor base. But Larry Newbury, a longtime member of the firefighters’ union in Traverse City, Mich., is not so sure.

Having voted enthusiastically for Mr. Obama in 2008, Mr. Newbury now says, “He’s not what he purported to be, which was, ‘I’m going to change things, I’m going to fight for you, the average guy in the street.’ He’s not fighting. He doesn’t have the guts to push hard enough for what he believes. The ones that voted for Obama, they’re not as enthusiastic.”

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company

Privacy PolicyTerms of ServiceSearchCorrectionsRSSFirst LookHelpContact UsWork for UsSite Map