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June 4, 2010

Unions Make a Stand in Arkansas Race

By SHAILA DEWAN and STEVEN GREENHOUSE

CONWAY, Ark. — They have knocked on 170,000 doors, made 700,000 phone calls, sent 2.7 million pieces of mail and spent almost \$6 million on television and radio advertising.

That is how badly labor unions, by their own count, want to defeat Senator [Blanche Lincoln](#), a Democrat they once supported. Even though Arkansas's labor force is one of the least unionized in the country, labor has thrown huge support behind Mrs. Lincoln's primary challenger, Lt. Gov. [Bill Halter](#), in a runoff election on Tuesday.

The unions have made the race here the centerpiece of a new effort to hold union-backed candidates accountable for their votes after they are elected.

The push is fueled by a frustration that goes back years but that peaked in the health care debate and in the failure of the Democratic-led Senate to bring far-reaching pro-union legislation to the floor. Even as unions lose members and bargaining power across the country, their campaign against Mrs. Lincoln shows that they are determined to flex their political muscles more than ever before.

"We're sending a message here," said Larry Cohen, president of the [Communications Workers of America](#).

"Our members have had it — not just in Arkansas, they have had it across this country."

Mrs. Lincoln, who has received more than half a million dollars in labor money in her career, has done much to

anger unions. She opposed a **public option** in the health care bill; helped block the confirmation of Craig Becker, a union-backed nominee to the **National Labor Relations Board**; and, in what they viewed as a reversal, opposed the Employee Free Choice Act, a bill that would make it easier to unionize workers.

Gerald McEntee, president of the **American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees** and chairman of the **A.F.L.-C.I.O.**'s political panel, criticized Mrs. Lincoln for supporting President **George W. Bush's** tax cuts, including an end to the **estate tax**; for opposing a "windfall profits" tax on oil companies; and for backing the North American and Central American Free Trade Agreements.

"All that kind of stuff convinced us that she was a Democrat basically in name only," he said.

Union advertisements have accused Mrs. Lincoln of being a Washington insider who takes Wall Street money and rarely comes back to Arkansas.

Mrs. Lincoln has countered that the labor attacks prove that she is not a tool of special interests like "Washington unions and Wall Street banks" who want to "bully Arkansas voters." In a recent campaign ad she says, "I approved this message because I'd rather lose this election fighting for what's right than win by turning my back on Arkansas."

Former President **Bill Clinton**, a Lincoln supporter, has also warned voters that unions are "using you and manipulating your votes." On Friday, Mrs. Lincoln's campaign complained about a union flyer that juxtaposed photos of Mr. Halter and Mr. Obama and was distributed in black areas, when Mr. Obama has endorsed Mrs. Lincoln.

Jim Nickels, the state director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said discontent with Mrs. Lincoln began locally, not nationally, with members becoming very sensitive to health care issues after municipalities tried to cut benefits to retirees and dependents.

Mrs. Lincoln, Mr. Nickels said, seemed to be swayed by Tea Party members more than workers. "The frustration came about in that she was for the public option and then she was against the public option," he said.

Only about 47,000 of Arkansas's 1.1 million workers are union members, while about 330,000 people voted in

the three-way Democratic primary last month. But union leaders say labor's voting power is augmented by union spouses and retirees.

And the unions have reached out to nonunion voters through Working America, an A.F.L.-C.I.O. affiliate that focuses on workers who are not unionized. It has 25 to 30 paid canvassers on the ground every day.

On Thursday afternoon, Liz Larson, a switchboard operator who lives in a middle-class neighborhood in Conway, about 30 miles north of Little Rock, opened her door to Corey Spangler, 21, a canvasser wearing a red Working America T-shirt. "I've been very impressed with these guys," Ms. Larson said after chatting with Mr. Spangler about the runoff (she said she was undecided). "They've been the only ones to come out."

Working America has visited her three times, she said.

At the state, county and municipal employees' union headquarters in Little Rock on Thursday night, union members folded mailers and made calls around two large tables. "This is pretty new for Arkansas," said Justin Nickels, the communications director for the state A.F.L.-C.I.O. "It's sort of like we've been thrown into the N.F.L."

Bill Vickery, a Republican political consultant in Little Rock, said he was impressed by the effort of the [Service Employees International Union](#) and other unions. "I can say that the ads, the messaging and the continuity of the messaging and the impact of the S.E.I.U. and other labor ads have been nothing short of brilliant," he said. "Bill Halter has been positioned as a Washington outsider, and Blanche Lincoln has been unable to portray him as a liberal accepting liberal support. It's a colossal mistake on her part."

Mr. Vickery said Mr. Halter's support from labor and left-wing groups was a perfect setup for Republicans, who would portray him as ultra-liberal in the general election. But Mr. McEntee said unions were confident about this November because Arkansas is a heavily Democratic state.

Labor's push to defeat Mrs. Lincoln is its most prominent but by no means only effort to punish Democrats who it says have turned their backs on workers.

In Maryland in 2008, the S.E.I.U. spent \$1.3 million to help Donna Edwards defeat the business-friendly Democratic incumbent, Representative Al Wynn, in a primary. She went on to win in November.

In North Carolina this year, the service employees sought to create a third party that would field candidates against three Democratic members of Congress who voted against the health care overhaul. They failed to gather enough signatures, but still plan to recruit a candidate to oppose Representative Larry Kissell, who is serving his first term.

In New York State, the service employees had threatened to run candidates against two Democratic members of Congress in swing districts, Representatives [Michael E. McMahon](#) of Staten Island and Michael Arcuri of Utica, who voted against the health care bill. But the union was unable to recruit challengers.

Nonetheless, labor leaders say many union volunteers who worked hard to elect those two men as well as Representative Zack Space, Democrat of Ohio, are not likely to campaign for them this year. Mr. Arcuri won by just 10,000 votes in 2008, so a lack of labor support could endanger him.

“We go out and support these Blue Dogs all over the place,” said Mr. McEntee, the union leader. “We give them all kinds of ground support, radio support, and then they get in there and they’ve lost our phone number. For God’s sake, what’s the use of having them in there?”

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