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AFL-CIO endorses Obama for president

WASHINGTON, D.C. — After remaining neutral in the Democratic primaries, the national AFL-CIO on June 26 endorsed Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) for president.

An endorsement requires a two-thirds majority of the labor federation's General Board, which includes presidents of all 56 unions in the AFL-CIO, as well as Executive Council members and representatives of state and local federations, trade departments and constituency groups. The General Board votes by per capita membership based on the AFL-CIO's 10.5 million members.

During the bruising Democratic primaries, no candidate could muster the two-thirds majority. International unions were all over the map, with some endorsing New York Sen. Hilary Clinton and others backing former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards.

About midway through the primary season Obama picked up endorsements from the Plumbers and Fitters, Boilermakers, International Longshore and Warehouse Union, and American Federation of Government Employees.

The Change to Win labor federation also endorsed Obama.



BARACK OBAMA

In its endorsement statement June 26, the AFL-CIO General Board cited Obama's strong support of working families on issues such as health care reform, fair trade that will lift up

workers here and around the world, retirement security, and the freedom to form unions and bargain for middle-class living standards. Obama has a 98 percent voting record as tracked

by the federations Committee on Political Education (COPE).

National AFL-CIO President John Sweeney called Obama "a champion for working families who knows what it's going to take to create an economy that works for everyone, not just Big Oil, Big Pharma, the insurance companies, the giant mortgage lenders, speculators and the very wealthy."

But the endorsement was not unanimous.

The International Association of Machinists voted "present" and IAM President Thomas Buffenbarger and Transportation Communications Union President Robert Scardelletti (a division of the IAM) said they still have questions for Obama.

The Machinists and other industrial unions have large segments of blue-collar male voters who favored Clinton in the primaries.

"Blue-collar Democrats are born skeptics," Buffenbarger said. "Their skepticism grew during this campaign. And to turn skeptics into supporters takes more than a perfunctory knock on the door of the House of Labor."

Scardelletti and Buffenbarger said "now is not the right time for an en-

dorsement. We look forward to a productive conversation with Obama about policies that can resonate with blue-collar Democrats," Buffenbarger added.

That wasn't the case for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The 1.4 million-member AFSCME endorsed Clinton in the primary (Oregon AFSCME Council 75 supported Obama).

General President Gerald McEntee said his union expects to mobilize at least 40,000 members for Obama in the fall campaign. It also expects to spend "close to \$50 million on the campaign."

A big motive for AFSCME is defeating the presumed Republican nominee, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), whom McEntee said "would bring us four more years of the disastrous policies of George W. Bush."

McCain sports a 16 percent COPE voting record as tracked by the national labor federation.

In conjunction with the endorsement, the AFL-CIO also launched a new Web site: "Meet Barack Obama." Log on at www.MeetObama08.com.

Students replace full-time Portland school custodians

Labor peace for custodians was short-lived at Portland Public Schools (PPS).

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 represents PPS custodians, about half of whom were reinstated in September 2006, after the Oregon Supreme Court declared a 2002 privatizing decision by the school board was illegal.

In February, PPS signed agreements with SEIU and two other unions — ending long-running union contract standoffs at a time when the district was expecting to ask voters to approve \$1.4 billion in bonds for building improvements. That bond request has now been shelved, and Llewellyn Elementary head custodian Mark Freimark — co-chair of the union's PPS unit — says the district has returned to its attitude of undervaluing custodial work.

PPS told the union in early June it would be hiring 100 high school students at minimum wage to do custodial work 20 to 40 hours a week. At the same time, PPS is reducing its full-time permanent custodial workforce by 40 positions. The reduction will be achieved by leaving about 20 vacancies unfilled and laying off about 20 workers. Workers to be laid off were given the option of converting to part-time status — at \$11.01 an hour with no benefits.

That wage is the union-negotiated rate for part-timers, wrote PPS spokesperson Sarah Carlin Ames in an e-mail responding to

questions from the NW Labor Press. Ames said the district's backing off its demand for significant wage reductions was accompanied by firm recognition by both sides that PPS had to meet its budget.

"The trade-off was explicit: Rather than maintaining the 285 full-time custodians that had been hired, PPS would shift to a workforce of 245 full-time custodians and a flexible workforce of 60 part-time employees."

Freimark, who was present at the negotiations, denied that any such understanding took place.

"We think this shows the utter lack of respect that the school district has for front-line employees who are dedicated to the health and safety of children and teachers in these buildings," said Local 503 spokesperson Ed Hershey.

June 30 was the last day for the laid-off custodians, who began work exactly one year before. Since the custodians were hired on the same date, layoffs took place on the basis of rankings in the civil service hiring process instead of seniority by date of hire.

On SEIU's behalf, attorney Jim Coon filed a complaint June 23 with the PPS Custodial Civil Service Board, contesting the layoffs. The Board's next meeting is July 17. Coon said the civil service law that covers PPS custodians has a process for laying off cus-

todians when there is a lack of work; but there is no lack of work in this case.

The laid off workers included one of Freimark's helpers at Llewellyn Elementary in Sellwood, a Bosnian immigrant who had spoken proudly about her work when Superintendent Carole Smith and two school board members visited the school last October.

"I think it's rotten," Freimark said. "She's the best helper I've had in 20 years."

The district's May 29 ad on craigslist.org described the "temporary student summer custodial helper" jobs as an "exciting opportunity."

Ames, PPS spokesperson, said the district has a tradition of hiring students for summer help. "This summer we are expanding on that past practice and offering more students short-term, part-time work."

For now, Ames said, PPS expects the students to work just in the summer months, but the district is considering formalizing the student work experience as an apprenticeship or internship program.

"This could tie nicely into our Career Pathways work experience program," Ames wrote.