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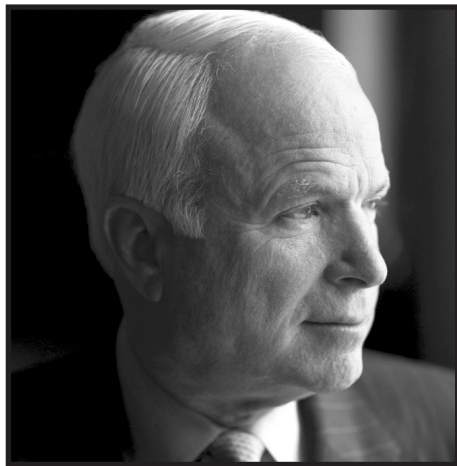
Why labor is getting behind Barack Obama

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Barack Obama was not the labor movement's first choice for president. Some unions initially backed John Edwards. Others supported Hillary Clinton. But now Obama, the junior U.S. senator from Illinois, is the Democratic nominee. And no union in America wants to see Arizona's Republican U.S. Sen. John McCain in the White House. That's because on organized labor's most important issues — trade, health care, and workers' rights — Obama's proposals and his brief legislative record are without question more appealing than McCain's.

Obama, 47, began political life in 1985 as a community organizer on the south side of Chicago, where he helped residents win a youth summer jobs program and asbestos removal. He was elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996, lost a 2000 run for Congress, won his 2004 race for the U.S. Senate, and announced his campaign for U.S. president in 2007. That gives him a very short legislative career to analyze, but AFL-CIO officials in Illinois and Washington, D.C., like what they see.

The Illinois AFL-CIO gave Obama a 90 percent rating for his eight years as an Illinois state senator. His rating would have been higher if he hadn't missed a vote on a bill pushing greater corporate accountability, said Illinois AFL-CIO spokesperson Dana Kennedy. But Kennedy said



JOHN MCCAIN

Obama was very accessible to organized labor while in Springfield, and supported bills when asked. Obama voted for state laws that: raised the minimum wage; protected overtime pay; made it easier for public workers to unionize; made it harder for employers to use temporary workers as strikebreakers; gave unemployment benefits to workers locked out in labor disputes; and tightened enforcement of the requirement that workers be paid the prevailing wage on public construction contracts. Obama also supported public financing for major construction projects that put union members to work, in-



BARACK OBAMA

cluding ethanol plants, downtown Chicago's McCormick Place, and a \$9 billion expansion of O'Hare International Airport.

The 2008 presidential election is the first in U.S. history in which the leading contenders are both sitting U.S. senators. That fact means they have a voting record that can be compared side by side. Since Obama began serving in the Senate in 2005, he and McCain were on opposite sides on vote after vote. Obama voted to increase the minimum wage; McCain voted repeatedly against it. Obama voted no on getting rid of the tax on wealthy estates; McCain voted

yes. Obama also voted no on a bill to eliminate — for federally-funded bridge projects — the "Davis-Bacon" requirement that contractors pay prevailing wage. McCain missed that vote, but has voted against Davis-Bacon before. In 1996, he voted against a symbolic resolution supporting Davis-Bacon, and in 1999, he voted to eliminate Davis-Bacon on disaster-relief projects.

The national AFL-CIO gives Obama a 98 percent rating, and McCain 16 percent.

McCain, 72, often mentions the five-and-a-half years he spent as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. McCain's father and grandfather were admirals in the U.S. Navy. As a Navy pilot with the rank of lieutenant commander, McCain flew bombing raids over Hanoi until he was shot down in 1967 and taken prisoner. He suffered torture at the hands of his captors, and like hundreds of his fellow servicemen, refused offers to release him early if he would make statements against the United States.

Most union members respect McCain's service in the armed forces.

But his service in the Senate has a plainly-marked anti-union bent.

In 1996, for example, McCain supported a bill that would have made the entire country "right-to-work." The term "right-to-work" would be more accurately spelled out as the "right to work under a union contract without

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Union electrician speaks out about unsafe work in Iraq



Debbie Crawford, a member of IBEW Local 48, testifies before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee on shoddy work and unsafe conditions working for KBR in Iraq. Next to her is Jeffery Bliss, an IBEW member and Navy veteran from Ohio. He testified on the unsafe conditions he experienced while working for KBR in Afghanistan.

A union electrician from Battle Ground, Wash., is raising hell over shoddy work and unsafe conditions in Iraq — conditions so bad, she says, that they've resulted in the electrocution deaths of several American troops.

Debbie Crawford, a member of Portland-based IBEW Local 48, provided testimony before a U.S. Senate Democratic Policy Committee that is investigating waste, fraud and abuse in Iraq and the performance of the Defense Department's war contractors. To date, 16 soldiers and contract workers have died by electrocution since 2003. Hundreds more have been injured by shock and burns caused by electrical fires. The Senate committee has conducted 17 hearings.

Crawford, 47, took a job with military contractor KBR (Kellogg Brown and Root) in 2004. She spent two years working in Baghdad's Green

Zone. Her first year, she performed electrical work and supervised Iraqi electricians wiring living trailers for civilian contractors and military personnel, and maintaining State Department facilities and the temporary U.S. Embassy. During her second year she worked as an administrative specialist helping to coordinate the department's safety program.

It wasn't long after arriving in Iraq that Crawford realized worker safety was of little importance to KBR. Many of her co-workers weren't qualified electricians. "They didn't know about conduit or wire nuts — real basic stuff," she said. "My general foreman wasn't even an electrician."

Crawford told senators that she saw countless wiring hazards and jerry-rigged circuit boards. "I saw green wire, which is specifically designated by the National Electric Code as

ground wire, used as a 'hot' wire. I brought this to my foreman's attention but my complaints were totally disregarded," she said.

Crawford said that time and time again she heard, "This is not the United States ... OSHA doesn't apply here. If you don't like it, you can go home."

Until a year ago, KBR was a subsidiary of anti-union Halliburton, of which Vice President Dick Cheney was CEO before taking office with President Bush. Halliburton is the world's biggest oil services company and is making billions of dollars in Iraq reconstruction work — paid for with U.S. tax dollars.

Crawford said she knew nothing about KBR's anti-union history when she applied for the job. "I didn't go over for the money," she told the

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