

Labor activists foil plans for a Portland stop on national anti-union bus tour

It's not clear what effect a campaign of anti-union TV ads is having on public opinion. But in Oregon, the ads appear to have made many pro-union workers hopping mad. When local labor activists heard about an anti-union campaign bus headed for a stop outside a union workplace, Oregon Iron Works, they sprang into action.

Two buses were touring the country as part of the VoteForBusiness Bandwagon, a project of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. One bus set out from Atlanta Aug. 12 with about a dozen publicity stops scheduled in a circular route that ended in Denver outside the Democratic National Convention. A second bus starting in Washington, D.C., Aug. 15 was headed for the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis as of press time.

At each stop, Chamber of Commerce staff register people to vote and promote the chamber's political agenda. That agenda includes ratifying NAFTA-style trade agreements with Colombia and Korea, heading off a proposal to increase tariffs on Chinese goods, and making it easier for companies to drill for oil off the U.S. coast.

The chamber's highest political priority, however, is stopping the Employee Free Choice Act — a bill in Congress that would beef up penalties for violations of workers

rights and make it easier for workers to unionize and get a first union contract. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, far and away the chief opponent of minimum wage laws and other worker protections, professes to be concerned that the Employee Free Choice Act will cause workers to lose their right to a "secret ballot" union election, since it would require employers to recognize a union if a majority of workers sign cards requesting it.

The Denver-bound bus arrived in Oregon Aug. 22 with two stops planned for the Portland area — nonunion Miles Fiberglass & Composites in Happy Valley, and Oregon Iron Works in Clackamas, where workers belong to Iron Workers Shopmen's Local 516.

The Oregon AFL-CIO learned about it a day before, and assigned Kevin Card to organize union supporters to greet the bus with fliers supporting the Employee Free Choice Act. Card is a union letter carrier who has taken a leave from work to help with the Oregon AFL-CIO during the political season. Card said the response was overwhelming.

"We've done such a good job talking to our members about the Employee Free Choice Act that when they found out the Chamber of Commerce had put together a bus to spread more lies, everybody wanted to be there," Card said.

When word of the event got to Iron Workers Local 516 president Mike Lappier, he wanted to know why Oregon Iron Works, which has good relations with the union and with pro-union Democratic politicians, would host such an event. A phone call later, Lappier learned that company sales and marketing director Tom Hickman had been deceived: The event had been sold as a "Democratic" bus headed for the convention and registering voters along the way. Hickman promptly nixed the event.

That was probably for the best, Lappier said.

"Our members would probably have rolled the bus over if they'd started in on any of that anti-union stuff," Lappier said.

But Card wanted to confront the bus staff, and put out an "all points bulletin" of sorts, calling on unionists to scout other likely spots the bus might choose. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48 members and staff were ready to go. Local 48 staff organizer Brian Trueb-Bresee headed over to Precision Castparts, and to his surprise spotted the brightly painted VoteForBusiness bus, heading north on I-205. In cell phone contact with Card, Trueb-Bresee followed the bus all the way to Corbett as it headed out of town on I-84 on its way to its next stop, Billings, Montana.

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