

# Employers increasingly telling workers how to vote

## GOP candidate Romney encourages workplace electioneering by owners

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

Three years after the U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United decision opened the floodgates to money in politics, corporations are flexing their "free speech" like never before. As the election nears, more and more companies are breaking away from tradition and propriety to tell workers how to vote. That practice was illegal just three years ago: Under the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, corporations were prohibited from advocating for specific candidates to rank-and-file employees. But that was swept away by the Supreme Court, along with restrictions on "independent expenditures."

Now companies around the country are telling workers which candidates they prefer. Leading the way is Koch Industries, a conglomerate owned by billionaire Republican funders David and Charles Koch. Koch Industries owns Georgia-Pacific, and even in 2010, distributed guides urging workers to vote for certain candidates. This year, as reported online by the magazine *In These Times*, Koch again mailed ballot guides to all 45,000

Georgia-Pacific employees.

"If we elect candidates who want to spend hundreds of billions in borrowed money on costly new subsidies for a few favored cronies, put unprecedented regulatory burdens on businesses, prevent or delay important new construction projects and excessively hinder free trade, then many of our 50,000 U.S. employees and contractors may suffer the consequences, including higher gasoline prices, runaway inflation and other ills," writes company president Dave Robertson in a cover letter accompanying the guides. Boiled down to basics, it's billionaires telling workers, "Don't vote for Democrats."

In Oregon, for example, only Republican candidates have the Koch endorsement.

And other employers are following the Kochs' example:

- David Siegel — a billionaire time-share developer who's trying to build himself America's biggest house — told all 8,000 employees in an Oct. 8 e-mail, "The economy doesn't currently pose a threat to your job. What does threaten your job, however, is another four years of the same presidential administration .... If any new taxes are levied on me, or my company, as our current president plans, I will have no choice but to reduce the size of this company. Rather than grow this com-

pany, I will be forced to cut back. This means fewer jobs, less benefits and certainly less opportunity for everyone."

- In a memo to 2,300 employees announcing a bonus, the CEO of a Michigan auto parts supplier included this note: "Talk of additional tax increases by the administration, if re-elected, will have an additional negative impact on the organization ... It is always important to remember the more government takes, the less there will be available to spread around to the working people of this company."

Never mind that the company benefited from the auto bailout; his and Siegel's statements aren't even true: The federal government doesn't tax companies *before* they pay workers; it taxes profit, which is what's left *after* workers and others are paid.

But the important thing about the newly-permitted electioneering is the effect it has on employees, and democracy, says Gordon Lafer, associate professor at the University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center.

"This is one of the things we criticize and deem illegitimate in other countries," Lafer said. In 2002 and 2004, the Bush-era State Department questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's presidential election after universities and other state-owned enterprises told people who to vote for. And an Armen-

ian election in 2003 was called into question after factory and other employees were forced to attend rallies of the ruling party.

Now, those practices are coming home. Workers at a Beallsville, Ohio, coal mine owned by big-time Republican donor Bob Murray were told that attendance at an Aug. 14 campaign rally for Mitt Romney was both mandatory and unpaid.

Romney may not have known the miners were made to attend, but he *has* encouraged business owners to propagandize workers, saying in a June conference call to the National Federation of Independent Business: "I hope you make it very clear to your employees what you believe is in the best interest of your enterprise and therefore their job and their future in the upcoming elections. And whether you agree with me or you agree with President Obama, or whatever your political view, I hope you pass those along to your employees. [There's] nothing illegal about you talking with your employees about what you believe is best for the business, because I think that will figure in to their election decision, their voting decision."

Defenders have asked: If unions may make election recommendations to workers, why shouldn't employers have that right? But longtime cam-

paign finance reform activist Janice Thompson, former director of Common Cause Oregon, says there are crucial differences: "Unions have a democratic process to make their endorsements," Thompson said, "and they don't have any ability to coerce."

Employers may say their speech is not coercive, Lafer says, but it can still have a chilling effect on workers: "Even if there's a secret ballot, when you tell employees who you want them to vote for, it scares everybody into not having a bumper sticker or wearing a button or being photographed at a rally."

"These are the same tactics employers use against workers trying to organize," said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka in a press statement. "The Supreme Court has long recognized that even what appears on its face to be mere persuasion becomes inherently coercive when it's an employer urging its employees to take particular actions."

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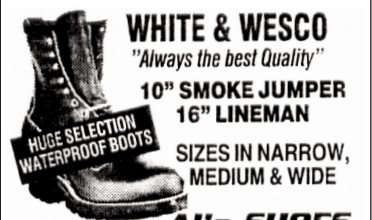
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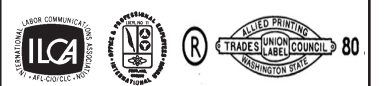
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Published on a semi-monthly basis on the first and third Fridays of each month by the Oregon Labor Press Publishing Co. Inc., a non-profit corporation owned by 20 unions and councils including the Oregon AFL-CIO. Serving more than 120 union organizations in Oregon and SW Washington. Subscriptions \$13.75 per year for union members.

Group rates available to trade union organizations.  
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