

Obama's Election: The Democrats Need the Unions

Part I

By [Jack A. Smith](#)

Global Research, April 30, 2012

30 April 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Mitt Romney is the Republican Party's strongest contender, but President Barack Obama still has a good chance for reelection in November.

This is largely because the ultra-right and its antics are alienating a sector of voters who otherwise may have tilted toward the Republicans and will bring to the polls those 2008 Obama supporters who may have stayed home because of disenchantment with the White House record.

Recognizing the conservatives and their Tea Party vanguard have gone too far in openly subverting the needs and security of the American people, Obama has decided to veil his center right political record with progressive populist rhetoric for the remainder of the campaign. He even articulates some Occupy themes — a smart if not entirely convincing stance.

Perhaps the main ingredient in any possible Democratic presidential victory is the labor movement. Without it, Obama's chances plummet. AFL-CIO, Change to Win and a few independent unions are supplying Democratic candidates with over \$400 million this year. Of equal importance, organized labor wants to field an estimated 400,000 campaign workers as well.

For the first time, union members can now ring doorbells in non-union households, which will allow volunteers to reach unprecedented numbers of people. This is one of the only positive aspects of the conservative Supreme Court's Citizens United decision allowing unlimited campaign contributions.

The corporations and Wall Street will provide the Democrats with more money, but they simply cannot field a fraction of labor's campaign supporters in the streets and on the phones. At the same time, as we shall discuss in Part 2 directly below, the unions not only seek Obama's reelection but several of them have an equal interest in reaching out independently and joining with social movements in the fight against the 1%. Many of the issues brought up by the Occupy forces and others are long time union issues as well, and the labor movement needs allies.

Of course all the Democratic constituencies will have to turn out in full force at the polls as well. In addition to union members this includes African Americans and Latinos, women, younger voters, college graduates, and a not insignificant sector of the 1% campaign funders.

It's ironic that during Obama's first term, with Democrats controlling the House and Senate for two years and then the Senate during the last two, the White House has done little for its main supporters, except those of the power elite. The black community, Obama's most loyal supporters, was completely neglected despite its desperate economic circumstances and high unemployment. Considerable numbers of younger voters, and others as well, of course, were disillusioned by the contradiction between the president's strong election promises of "change" and his weak performance in office.

Many union leaders and members are extremely disappointed by the candidate they worked so hard to elect in 2008. Labor was not only ignored since then; aside from occasional tokens of Democratic support it was actually set back several times during the Obama years.

But when the AFL-CIO General Board voted unanimously to endorse President Obama for re-election March 13, its only reference to the casting aside of workers' interests was one paragraph in a declaration of over-the-top support for the Democrats. It read:

"Although the labor movement has sometimes differed with the president and often pushed his administration to do more — and do it faster — we have never doubted his commitment to a strong future for working families. With our endorsement today, we affirm our faith in the president. We pledge to work with him through the election and his second term to restore fairness, security and shared prosperity."

What followed was a series of statements and documents virtually lauding every decision the president made since taking office in January 2009, singling out three for special mention:

- "He took America from the brink of a second Great Depression by pressing Congress to pass the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which saved or created 3.6 million jobs.
- "He championed comprehensive health insurance reform, which — while far from perfect — set the nation on a path toward the health security that had eluded our country for nearly 100 years.
- "He insisted upon Wall Street reform — passed over the objection of almost every Republican. Now, we can finally begin to reverse decades of financial deregulation that put our entire economy at risk."

Many labor leaders saw through this of course but they are uniting behind Obama to keep the Republicans out of the White House and perhaps make inroads in the right wing-dominated House as well. The destruction of the union movement, after all, is a main objective of the Republican Party.

The unions are much weaker than in past decades. Membership today is down to 11.8%, compared to 35% in 1954. But they remain a huge organization and votes Democratic. The N.Y. Times pointed out recently that in 2008 "white blue-collar men voted for John McCain over Mr. Obama by an 18-point margin, but, in large part because of unions' politicking, white blue-collar men in unions backed Mr. Obama by a 23-point margin."

Despite the enthusiastic statement of support, the labor movement has been complaining for well over a year, often in public. AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka repeatedly suggested

last year that labor wasn't getting its due and that the unions should seriously consider taking a more independent stance toward the Democrats.

It was expected the key union leaders would silence dissent during the election year, but they have been unable to mask their irritation as the Obama Administration has taken one anti-union step after another in recent weeks and months.

For example, the JOBS bill, passed in mid-April by Congress and signed with enthusiasm by President Obama, doesn't create jobs. The acronym stands for "Jumpstart Our Business Start-Ups Act," and it's a gift to one constituency — the wealthy contributors of Silicon Valley's tech industry — at the expense of another, the labor movement. The legislation was the creature of Obama's corporate-controlled Council on Jobs and Competitiveness. The bill will greatly benefit big business and Wall St.

Trumka, one of the two labor members of the 24-person blue ribbon 1% panel, thundered: "We are disappointed — and angry — that despite warnings from current and former financial markets regulators, law professors, institutional investors and consumer advocates, 73 senators voted for the cynically named 'JOBS Act'.... This is a vote against investors in the real economy and for Wall Street speculators. When the next bubble bursts, Americans will know who to blame."

And then there's the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was engineered in April by President Obama in Colombia and will go into effect May 15. Obama characterized what has been called a "little NAFTA" as a "win-win" for both countries and an expression of support for the besieged Colombian labor movement. More union organizers have been murdered in Colombia than anywhere else in the world. Two dozen were killed last year alone.

United Steelworkers (USW) President Leo Gerard denounced the agreement, charging that it allows the Colombian government to continue "its shameful distinction as the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist." He suggested Obama's guarantee about enhanced safety for Colombian union organizers was mistaken. Trumka called the compact "deeply disappointing and troubling."

Leaders of the Colombian labor movement joined Trumka in this statement: "The underlying trade agreement perpetuates a destructive economic model that expands the rights and privileges of big business and multinational corporations at the expense of workers, consumers, and the environment. The agreement uses a model that has historically benefited a small minority of business interests, while leaving workers, families, and communities behind."

This is just the latest. In February Congress and Obama approved a bill funding the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) over union objections. The legislation also weakened bargaining rights for workers in the aviation and rail industries by increasing from 35% to 50% the number of worker signatures required to allow an election for union recognition. It wasn't even necessary to pass the measure at all. FAA reauthorization has been extended for the last four years by temporary funding, and could have been continued until the labor restrictions were excised. Labor howled again, to no avail as usual.

In fact Obama has reneged on nearly all his 2008 campaign promises to the unions, such as his pledge to fight for the Employee Free Choice Act, legislation that would have removed

onerous limitations on labor organizing going back many decades. Trade unions have been fighting unsuccessfully for relief the whole time.

The White House also didn't act on labor's call for the administration to create 25 million full-time jobs. Obama ignored a promise to hike the federal minimum wage to \$9.50 an hour by 2011. He didn't, as he vowed, renegotiate NAFTA. He strengthened the Patriot Act after insisting in 2008 that he would get rid of it. He didn't fight for safety and health standards for workers. The White House supports cutbacks in postal services that are strongly opposed by labor.

The list of Democratic dismissals of labor's priorities — to placate the right wing and satisfy Wall St., corporate and wealthy backers — contains many more examples. And as far as the AFL-CIO's three favorite Obama moves are concerned — jobs, health insurance and Wall St. reform — they stand as their own refutation. Each of these "victories" was worked out and compromised beforehand in negotiations with insurance companies, corporations and the financial industry.

This is only part of the story. Several key unions are beginning to engage independently with various movements for social change, mainly on economic issues. Labor is hardly united on this matter, but it's a development worth watching.

(Part 2 forthcoming)

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Jack A. Smith](#), Global Research, 2012

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Jack A. Smith](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca