

## **Obama Clear: He's pro-union**

by Lynn Sweet

**Sun-Times Columnist**

May 15, 2007 TRENTON, N.J. -- He won't shop at Wal-Mart. He is for a law making it easier for people to join unions. If president, his appointees would be "sympathetic" to labor. He said he walked picket lines while a state senator.

It's "been a long time since we had a president who said unions are a good thing," said White House hopeful Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) at an AFL-CIO presidential forum, a stop in a day with three New Jersey fund-raisers and endorsements from two New Jersey mayors.

After previous lackluster appearances before union groups, on Monday, Obama made a clear and specific appeal to labor. Giving a nod to workers trying to organize at Atlantic City casinos, Obama said, "We need to stand with them and help them organize."

He spoke at the third in a series of seven forums with the major Democratic 2008 presidential contenders sponsored by the AFL-CIO, to wind up at a multi-candidate forum when AFL-CIO leaders meet in Chicago in early August.

It's too early in the AFL-CIO process to determine if there will even be an endorsement, much sought after by the Democrats in the 2008 field because union members are a large Democratic constituency and the 10-million member AFL-CIO runs a national political organization. AFL-CIO president John Sweeney has asked its union affiliates not to endorse until the August Executive Council meeting.

In mid-March, Obama did not even use the word union when he addressed the International Association of Fire Fighters. His speech was lightly tailored to a union crowd when he talked a short time late at a Building Trades convention.

On Monday, Obama more clearly articulated his support for organized labor and tied it into his drive for universal health care and for ending the war in Iraq.

During a question and answer session, Obama was asked about the anti-union Wal-Mart. "I won't shop there," he said. Obama has criticized Wal-Mart for how it deals with its workers. His wife, Michelle, sits on the board of TreeHouse Foods, a major Wal-Mart supplier.

AFL-CIO political director Karen Ackerman said there has been "a lot of outreach" from the campaigns of the major Democratic candidates and that top staffers from the campaigns have come to Washington to meet with the political directors of AFL-CIO affiliates. "I think this endorsement will be seen as quite a prize so they are all reaching out."

She added, "The situation is so fluid, that it is very hard to predict where this will go."

Charles Wowkanech, president of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO, who moderated the forum, said he was "quite impressed" by Obama's performance.

The first forum was April 29 with Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) in Sacramento, Calif; former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) spoke May 1 in Seattle; Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) appears Wednesday in Miami; New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson comes next on June 4 in Phoenix, and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) is June 9 in Detroit. The final forum with the rivals all together will be in Chicago on Aug. 6 or 7.

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