

Political payback and the Free Choice Act



William H. Young

You might think that losing a second straight election by a landslide, and seeing voters give their new leaders a clear mandate to strengthen the middle class, would make a bunch of politicians stop and reconsider their commitment to the corporate agenda and their hostility to working people and their unions. But no—not if you are the “modern” Republican Party.

A once-secret strategy memo on how to kill the emergency loans to the U.S. auto industry showed Senate Republicans have learned nothing. Instead, they chose to start a fight over the Employee Free Choice Act in the 111th Congress during the final hours of the 110th. “This [auto bill] is a precursor to card check and other items,” the memo warned. “Republicans should stand firm and take their first shot against organized labor, instead of taking their first blow from it.”

And so, the Senate GOP set out to kill the loans to Detroit’s Big Three, led by a group of senators who are proud of the non-union, foreign car producers that took huge tax breaks in exchange for setting up shop in their right-to-work states—namely, Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina and Kentucky. They said the deal-breaker was the UAW’s refusal to accept pay cuts to non-union levels. But the real reason was their burning desire to punish the whole labor movement for its important role in electing a pro-labor president and a pro-labor Congress.

It seems today’s Republican Party hates unions so much that it is willing to risk a total collapse of the U.S. economy just to get its licks in. And total collapse is precisely what would happen if the four million jobs associated with the Big Three were taken down out of spite. That the party most responsible for our financial mess, the party of “free” trade and free-for-all financial deregulation, would act so irresponsibly just adds insult to the economic injury every one of us will suffer before this is over.

Letter carriers have a big stake in what happens to the auto industry and an even bigger stake in seeing the Employee Free

Choice Act become law. The recession is already threatening our jobs by reducing mail volume. Creating a depression by recklessly destroying one of our few remaining manufacturing industries would risk the survival of the U.S. Postal Service.

Beyond the immediate crisis, rebuilding the labor movement is essential to rebuilding the middle class. For eight years, as the government promoted the interests of Wall Street over those of Main Street, wages have stagnated while pension and health benefit coverage has deteriorated dramatically. That is why we need the Employee Free Choice Act. Nothing would challenge the economic status quo more than a growing labor movement. That’s what scares the shrinking band of economic reactionaries who scuttled the auto loan bill in December.

These dead-enders want to blame “the unions.” But it was not the UAW that pushed the free trade agreements that encourage foreign companies to open plants in union-free zones in America—even though these companies’ workers are unionized at home. It was not the UAW that blocked health care reform, leaving the auto companies with the growing cost of providing health benefits, while their Japanese and European competitors benefit from more affordable universal health care systems at home. It was not “the union” that blocked efforts by the Big Three to reduce their bloated dealership networks. And it is not the UAW’s fault that all of us have insisted on cheap gas at all costs—while other countries raised fuel taxes to encourage innovation and conservation, and to fight climate change.

Our brothers and sisters in the UAW need our help. It is no exaggeration to say that the UAW did more to create the American middle class than any other union. Now it is our duty to help re-invent the middle class. Thanks to the gang that killed the auto loan, we know who our adversaries are. And we know where the battle will begin—the fight for the Employee Free Choice Act. NALC will be there, marching shoulder to shoulder with America’s autoworkers. ☒