

# Chutzpah? Cintas Corp. wins the sweepstakes



William H. Young

**C**chutzpah is a wonderful Yiddish word that means “audacity or unmitigated gall.” You want to know chutzpah? It’s the guy convicted of murdering his parents who pleads for mercy because he’s an orphan. That’s chutzpah and I’ve been seeing a lot of it lately.

Take the Republican leadership in Congress. In the face of an economic crisis they helped create with their unquestioning faith in Wall Street and weak regulation, they browbeat nearly every moderate member of their caucus into opposing the economic stimulus package that passed Congress in February—only Senators Specter, Snowe and Collins bucked them.

Why did the GOP bosses do it? Perhaps it was sour grapes about the election and becoming an even smaller minority. Perhaps it was a rigid, if born-again, fiscal rectitude—though that wasn’t apparent when they coughed up a tax-cut-only alternative that would increase the national debt by far more than the Obama plan. But me, I think it was pure chutzpah. Like the drunken party guests who trash your living room, refuse to help pick things up and then criticize the way you keep house, the Republican leadership just has the gall to obstruct Obama’s efforts to clean up the Bush administration’s mess.

Or take the former CEO of Merrill Lynch, John Thain. How else can you explain his passing out year-end bonuses of \$3.6 billion—yep, \$3.6 billion—to his fellow failed executives at the near-bankrupt brokerage just weeks before being rescued by Bank of America in a taxpayer-financed bailout?

**But for me, as a letter carrier, Cintas Corporation, owner of Brookfield Uniforms, wins the Chutzpah Sweepstakes.** How can a company that depends on hundreds of thousands of unionized workers to buy its uniforms turn around and slander the American labor movement while fighting the Employee Free Choice Act?

That’s right. Cintas has joined the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a bunch of phony corporate front groups and a boatload of other companies in the campaign against labor law reform. It actually set up a website

for its in-name-only “employee-partners” to solicit their help in blocking EFCA. The site not only features lies about the proposed reform, it also falsely suggests that unions—not companies with their hired-gun consultants—routinely intimidate workers during organizing drives.

In making its pitch to employees to do its bidding with Congress, the company claims to be defending the sacred right of the secret ballot. Cintas falsely charges that EFCA would take that right away. It doesn’t and it won’t. It will leave the decision up to the workers—they can still ask for an election run by the NLRB after 30 percent of workers sign union cards. But under EFCA, they would win union recognition if more than 50 percent voluntarily sign cards, just as millions of American workers have done in the past and just as workers now do in dozens of countries. The “free choice” would belong to the workers, not their employers.

**Cintas claims it is fighting for workplace democracy.** Some democracy—where only employers get access to the workers during organizing drives, where companies force workers to watch bogus anti-union videos with no chance for the union to respond, where supervisors hold one-on-one meetings to scare employees into opposing unionization. Cintas charges that unions will pressure workers into signing cards when the real problem with the current system is that companies routinely use firings, intimidation and fear-mongering to defeat union organizing drives.

So, apparently Cintas sees nothing wrong with both lying to its “employee-partners” and trashing its customers and their unions—the nurses, the fire fighters and police officers, the letter carriers and clerks who buy their uniforms—when it comes to fighting EFCA. Perhaps letter carriers and other uniformed workers should think twice about rewarding such chutzpah the next time they decide which uniform manufacturers to patronize.

Cintas may want to deny U.S. workers a free choice when it comes to organizing, but we still all have a free choice when it comes to buying uniforms. ☒