

Debt-Ceiling Deal Has Angry Labor Officials Losing Faith in Obama

Leadership Questioned After GOB 'Bullies' Force Cuts Without Taxing Rich

Posted: Monday, August 8, 2011 5:00 pm | Updated: 1:11 pm, Mon Aug 8, 2011.

By RICHARD STEIER |

National labor leaders, frustrated by the compromise debt-ceiling agreement that will impose major cuts in domestic spending while failing to raise tax revenue from wealthier Americans and corporations, reacted last week with a seething anger that hinted at disillusionment with President Obama.

Their unhappiness was not dispelled by an Aug. 2 appearance by the President at an AFL-CIO Executive Council breakfast in Washington at which he was said to have expressed his own frustration with the way the debt-ceiling battle played out.

'Not Sure He Feels Our Pain'

One spokesman for a major national public-employees union put it this way: "I don't think there's a sense that Obama feels our pain. That's a problem: does he get it? It's hard to feel enthusiastic right now. Actions speak louder than words these days, and we're not seeing a whole lot of action."

A statement issued by the AFL-CIO Executive Council the day after the meeting with Mr. Obama was not quite as blunt but delivered much the same message. Without mentioning him by name, it said, "We expect Democrats at every level of government to stand tall for progressive principles, working families and the American labor movement. We need their leadership—not their excuses or apologies."

In a shot clearly aimed at the President's decision during the negotiations to offer cuts in cherished social programs in return for Republican consent to end tax loopholes for the wealthy and corporations, the statement said that "we oppose any cuts to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid benefits—no matter where they come from, and that includes the Oval Office."

In addition to chagrin that Mr. Obama was unable to use his position to overcome pressure placed on Republican leaders in Congress by the Tea Party movement, the unions are also weary of the full-pitched battles Mr. Obama has been forced to engage in—while winding up with little in return—that distract focus from improving the jobs situation, said the union spokesman, who did not want to be identified.

'Sucked Up a Lot of Oxygen'

"There's been no movement on jobs," he said. "Just like health-care sucked up an awful lot of oxygen in the room, this debt-ceiling thing sucked up a lot of oxygen."

He said more than a few union leaders shared former President Bill Clinton's view that Mr. Obama should have used his powers under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution to raise the debt ceiling without the conditions imposed by congressional Republicans that will sharply curtail spending over the next 17 months, and taken the chance that he could prevail if they filed suit against such action.

One prominent municipal union leader who has been a strong Obama supporter dating back to the 2008 election was also sharply critical of the President and other prominent Democrats for not upholding what he called the party's traditional values, including a belief in labor rights.

Gregory Floyd, the president of Teamsters Local 237, several days prior to the debt-ceiling deal had written a scathing article for the Huffington Post entitled, "It's Time to Question Labor's Ties to Democrats." While his harshest words were reserved for Governor Cuomo, he also took aim at Mr. Obama and congressional Democrats for what he views as either yielding to an agenda set by the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party or adopting pieces of that agenda themselves because they believe it places them in step with their constituents.

'Fixing U.S. on Workers' Backs'

"Around the country and in our nation's capital," he wrote, "we are seeing more Democrats willing to place the burden of fixing the country

on the backs of public workers and the middle class in general. Even more alarming, we have seen a willingness to attack some of our most important institutions, including pensions, Medicare and Social Security.”

He harshly criticized Republicans who he said “fight dirty” for an agenda that protects “corporate interests, oil companies and the super rich,” but grudgingly praised them because “they stand by and fight fiercely for their allies.”

The piece continued, “Where is that same passion from our Democratic supporters? Many of them are too willing to abandon our partnership in the name of ‘reform’ or ‘compromise,’ instead of standing and holding the line...As America was built, Democratic and union leaders stood shoulder to shoulder and fought for the rights and reforms that created a strong middle class. In New York and nationally, unions are the biggest supporters, both financially and politically, of the Democratic Party. We cannot afford to put that shared respect and experience in jeopardy, especially when we are both at such risk.”

Says President Bent Too Far

In an Aug. 4 phone interview, Mr. Floyd acknowledged that although he hadn’t named names in the piece, “the part about compromising was directed at the President. “You’re putting Social Security and Medicare on the table—you’ve already put the unions on the table,” referring to Mr. Obama’s decision early in his administration not to lobby for a bill making it easier for unions to organize that during the presidential campaign he had pledged to sign. “The Republicans have never put anything connected to revenues on the table.”

He continued, “Now the [Federal Aviation Administration] is on the table because the Republicans want to strip away some union rights. Safety is being compromised and you’re losing close to a billion dollars in revenues while 4,000 workers are off the job because of what the Republicans are doing so they can strip away union rights.” (That same day, a deal was reached to temporarily fund the FAA, but it did not compensate workers for nearly two weeks of pay missed during the shutdown.)

Speculation that Mr. Obama believed the public perceived congressional Republicans as bullies during the debt-ceiling fight and that he and Democrats would benefit from a political backlash as a result was irrelevant, the Local 237 leader argued, because other perceptions mattered more.

“People like winners, and they tend to go with the winner,” Mr. Floyd said. “You’ve gotta fight the bullies. How long are you going to give the bullies your lunch?”

He said he had been struck by the remark of one veteran television commentator: “Wouldn’t it be a shame if we had four years of a Democratic administration and we didn’t have Democratic policies?”

More about Debt-ceiling

- **ARTICLE:** No Business Like Gov't
- **ARTICLE:** From Debt Ceiling to Bathtub, A Slow Drip

TOWNNEWS
Online. Community. News.

© Copyright 2011, The Chief, New York, NY. Powered by BLOX Content Management System from TownNews.com.