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Labor confronts race issue

By: [Avi Zenilman and Ben Smith](#)
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Since Barack Obama gave a dramatic speech on the subject of race this spring, the issue has lingered over the election, a quiet, awkward factor that the candidates, their campaigns and their surrogates have brushed aside or would rather not talk about at all.

But there's one place the "national conversation" Obama suggested in March is taking place: among white, Rust Belt union workers, who generally voted for Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Democratic primary. Their leaders have led a large-scale, direct and under-the-radar conversation about some members' discomfort with a black Democratic nominee.

"I think a lot of people expected when he made that speech about a national conversation about race that it would be formalized," Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said in a telephone interview from Ohio. "In the labor movements and unions and the way they are composed, it just became a reality.

"Some of our own people had never experienced anything like this before, so the dialogue did take place, the conversation did take place," he said.

The older, largely industrial unions, members of the AFL-CIO, have emerged as key ambassadors for Obama to the parts of the country where he is weakest. Those unions have, in the recent past, been dismissed by Democrats as fading powers — good for turning up some burly, white ethnic workers at campaign rallies, but shrinking and demoralized, and without the energy or organization of growing unions like the Service Employees International Union.

But for the first black nominee, white labor has proved a crucial bulwark of support. The AFL-CIO unions have pressed a concerted and targeted effort that began in earnest in July, when Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka, a former Pennsylvania coal miner with a bushy mustache, delivered a speech to the United Steelworkers' national convention in Las Vegas that many considered a key moment in the campaign to build cultural comfort with the Democratic nominee.

"A lot of good union people just can't get past the idea that there's something wrong with voting for a black man. Well, those of us who know better can't afford to look the other way," Trumka told fellow labor leaders. "I don't think we should be out there pointing fingers in people's faces and calling them racist. Instead, we need to educate them that if they care about holding on to their jobs, their health care, their pensions and their homes; if they care about creating good jobs with clean energy, child care, pay equity for women workers, there's only going to be one candidate on the ballot this fall who's on their side."

The discussion Trumka opened has taken place in conversations between shop stewards and rank and file members, and in large-scale internal union campaigns.

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 98 in Philadelphia, for instance, mailed out a plastic MP3 player to members that featured 60 minutes of local union workers and leaders offering testimonials on Obama's commitment to labor.

"This election is not a personality contest, nor should it be about race. So let's talk about that and get it out of the way right now. The fact that Sen. McCain is white and Sen. Obama is black should not matter. Though I know for some of you it does. You are not alone," says Local 98 head John Dougherty, through a thick Philadelphia accent. "Don't let the color of a man's skin prevent you from doing the right thing. I know Barack Obama. I know him to be a man of great character and conviction."

Other unions have sent out DVDs to members with the same message.

"The last thing I'm going to say to you is we can either have a black friend in the White House or a white enemy in the White House," United Mine Workers of America President Cecil Roberts, after laying out the case against John McCain (opposition to "clean coal") says in a 17-minute DVD mailed to 46,500 members in battleground states.

"Irrelevant side issues — whether race or some other diversionary concern — have nothing to do with our job security, workplace or work site rules, or the protection of Medicare and Social Security for our parents and loved ones," Joseph J. Nigro, general secretary-treasurer of the Sheet Metal Workers International Association, wrote in his October newsletter, sent to every active and retired member, and accompanied by a DVD making the same case.

The umbrella federation, the AFL-CIO, can also reach millions of union voters — 2.1 million in Ohio alone — and their \$250 million political operation has become increasingly sophisticated. They've focused on Ohio, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, AFL-CIO spokesman Steve Smith said.

"The union programs for Obama are the firewall in those states," said Smith. "If we do our job, McCain doesn't win any of those states. If McCain doesn't win any of those states, McCain doesn't win the presidency."

This cycle, they've matched their member lists with other databases — "microtargeting," it's called — to find the union veterans, retirees, and gun owners who might be skeptical of Obama, and sent them customized material and phone calls.

The mass mailings sent out by the AFL-CIO have dealt with cultural minefields by a two-pronged argument: affirm that Barack Obama is an American, and then point to the economy.

In late July, literature featuring pictures of union members and information on Obama's belief in Jesus and America was mailed to 600,000 union households.

"Have questions about Barack Obama? See inside for answers," it read.

The comfort campaign—along with Obama's calm performance as the economy cratered — seems to have resonated. In August, according to recently released AFL-CIO polling, Obama led by 16 percentage points among Ohio union voters; in October, he led by 29 points.

The media campaign has been supplemented by individual interactions. The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, for example, endorsed Obama during the primary. First, the union president, Newton Jones, brought up the issue of race during a convention in April, which was spliced into a DVD that also featured Obama speaking to the union and was mailed to all the local lodges.

"Let's be honest; you look across this country and there are probably a lot of people that will support and vote for John McCain because he is simply a white male and that's what we've always done," said Jones. "There are many people across this country that will look at Barack Obama simply because he is a black male and this is historic.

"There are other factors and more important ones, in my view, that need to be considered," he continued. "I have to make decisions that are truly in the best interests of this union, our members, and this country with regard to what we see are the policies of the candidates.

"We then did 16 to 20 grass-roots training sessions where we went to key states," said Bridget Martin, the director of government affairs. Local leaders were given material and encouraged to talk with members concerned about Obama's race. "We then focused very heavily on one-to-one voter communication."

Most of the union leaders Politico spoke to emphasized the economic message but acknowledged that they had to break through a cultural rift.

"Many voters have never voted for an African-American candidate for any position," said AFL-CIO political director Karen Ackerman. "It's a proud moment in the labor moment in the last six months that there really has been discussion from the union presidents to local union officials to shop stewards on the floor."

Carrie Budoff Brown contributed to this report.

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