

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

"TAKE BACK AMERICA"

SPEAKER:

MORTY BAHR, CWA

FRIDAY, JUNE 3, 2005

*Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

ROGER HICKEY: Since 1985, Morton Bahr has served as president of the Communication Workers of America. (Applause, cheers.) Jobs in the communications industry are supposed to be the jobs of the future, but Morty has had to deal with the same pressures that are undermining jobs and workers in all industries: outsourcing, mergers, government policies that undermine and take away the health and safety of American workers.

But he has never faltered in his ability to convince management to improve and upgrade American jobs through training and education. He has also greatly strengthened the CWA through mergers and he believes in organizing the unorganized. So we have one of the most innovative labor unions and one of the most dynamic labor union leaders with us today.

Morty has strongly supported institutions that build the kind of solidarity we have in this room, organizations like our partner, Jobs with Justice. (Applause, cheers.) As I present him to you, I want you to remember that Morty Bahr lives the Jobs with Justice pledge. It goes like this: during the next year, I will be there at least five times for someone else's fight as well as my own, and if enough of us pledge to be there for each other, we will all start winning. Morty Bahr. (Applause, cheers.)

MORTON BAHR: Thank you very much, Roger. Good afternoon. I am glad to see that there are so many members of my union present here. It always makes me feel comfortable. But I have been following reports of the conference in the press and e-mails I have been getting every morning. It clearly has been an issue-oriented conference with a lot of enthusiasm, and I'm certain a great deal of passion behind that enthusiasm. And I hope I can keep the adrenaline flowing.

I was elected a local union president 51 years ago this past April – (applause) – so the first presidential election that I was involved in as a union activist was the second Stevenson-Eisenhower race in 1956. I can tell you without any hesitation that never, even in the Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and first Bush administrations did we have an administration that was so determined to destroy workers' rights and render their unions impotent. It seems obvious to most that the Bush administration would like to repeal the New Deal as it impacts workers and their unions; and, my friends, they are succeeding.

In a speech on May 20th, just a couple of weeks ago, National Labor Relations Board Chairman Battista said the following, and I quote: "Obviously the board majority would reflect to some degree the governing philosophy of the appointing president. The Bush majority on the board proves that statement every single day." In 2004, in a single year, the NLRB and actual cases, and administrative decisions reversed 45 longstanding decisions; 100 percent of them in favor of the corporations.

Here are just three examples of the 45. They took away the rights of non-union workers to have a co-worker present when being disciplined by their employer – that is known as the Weingarten rights. This was an IBM case. CWA has been using that process as part of our organizing at IBM. So the board took that benefit away from the

92 percent of the workforce that is unorganized in order to please IBM. They declared graduate student employees who generally work at least 20 hours a week that they are no longer employees under the act, and thus not entitled to have a union. They found a reason to remove disabled workers employed as janitors from the larger bargaining unit even though they were intermingled and did the regular job of those who were not disabled.

Now, the Bush NLRB is equally dangerous when it doesn't act. The Chinese Daily News is the largest foreign language newspaper in America. We have it organized in several cities. We won an election in California for a wall-to-wall unit of journalists, back-office people, advertising – everyone who works who is not a supervisor. Get this: that election was won on March 19th, 2001.

The company filed objections. They were quickly dismissed by the regional office of the National Labor Relations Board, whereupon the company appealed to the board here in Washington. That appeal is sitting here 44 months. The workforce is composed of immigrants from Taiwan and China. They came here looking for worker rights. They are sure learning a hard lesson about workers' rights in America. Over four years, workers clearly voted for our union by a substantial majority and their rights are frustrated by inaction of this board.

Now, the NLRB's inaction sends a message to other employers. For example, in March, we won an election in a private sector company in New Jersey – about 170 workers. The employer was so angry because he thought he had it won; he announced he would appeal and went on to say, "The union will likely prevail in New Jersey, but then I will appeal to the full board of Washington, fully knowing it will sit at the NLRB until the Bush administration goes out of office" – again, frustrating the desires, clear desires, of the workers.

But it doesn't stop there. After the first – really almost the first action that Bush took in 2001 was to move to nullify the ergonomics regulations promulgated during the Clinton administration. Work on these regulations began when the Secretary of Labor Dole and was bipartisan. Back then I was chair of the AFL-CIO committee on occupational health and safety and I worked with Secretary Dole – clearly bipartisan to correct faults in the workplace.

Bush responded to the request of many in corporate America who do not want to spend the money that was necessary to work their workplaces ergonomically safe without any regard to the tens of thousands who suffer such painful workplace injuries. Testifying at a congressional hearing, an injured worker in response to a question from Congressman Lantos of California as to what it was like to live with these kinds of injuries said – and I quote: "Congressman, I am unable to hug my grandchildren" – profound, and callous to ignore it; how graphic.

About three weeks ago, in response to complaints from corporate executives about the Labor Department's delay in issuing new guidelines governing the new

overtime rules that is going to begin to destroy the 40-hour week. Secretary Chao said the reason for the delay was she was forced to move 45 employees who were working on those new regs over to work on revising the Family Medical Leave Act. That, my friends, was the first time we learned, that they were again bowing to corporate America and would come up with new definitions concerning the administration of FMLA.

And what they intend to do is to change the grouping of chronic illnesses to eliminate some, to reduce the flexibility that workers today have. And what I am fearful of is that we are on the brink of turning the clock back to the days when parents had to risk their jobs in order to attend to a family member requiring their care. And we need only remember that President Bush the first vetoed the Family Medical Lead Act twice, and it was the first bill that President Clinton had signed into law. (Applause.)

But all of this leads up to the attack on Social Security. Obviously time does not permit me to go into great detail, but I am sure you know much of the detail. But I do want to point out to you that we can't only look at this as an attack on Social Security; that we must look at it more broadly as an attack on retirement security. You need to look at the millions of dollars corporations have donated, not only to support Bush's private accounts but also to support Governor Schwarzenegger's desire to change the California public employee pension plan into a 401(k)-type plan.

Now, he has got a temporary setback but he will be back next year. And a setback was he thought he could attack nurses, firefighters and cops with immunity. He found out differently. (Applause, cheers.) But should the governor succeed, you will see other Republican governors – and I'm sure we'll have one or two Democrats – try to emulate that.

Now, why are corporations involved in the state issue? They know that the AFL-CIO actively works with CalPERS and the other big employee pension funds. Through this combined work, we are able to have some impact on corporate governance because they hold many shares of stock in these companies. These company executives want us out of their shareholder meetings and their boardrooms. That is what this is all about. (Applause.) It's kind of interesting because one of the easy ways to solve at least 40 percent of the long-term funding of Social Security is simply to raise the 90,000 FICA cap to, let's say, 140,000. (Applause, cheers.)

And so I was just curious – a couple of weeks ago, I had one of our economists – I said, give me a printout of when the CEOs of the 10 biggest companies with whom we hold contracts paid off their FICA in 2004. (Laughter.) So I am just going to mention companies that you will recognize. The CEO of SBC paid off his \$90,000 FICA at 10:00 a.m. on January 2nd. (Laughter.) The CEO of Verizon paid it off at 3:00 p.m. on January 2nd. The CEO of BellSouth paid it off at 4:00 p.m. on January 2nd. And I'm sure you shed a tear along with me that the CEO of Qwest, the company that has been trying to keep itself out of Chapter 11, had to work until 3:00 p.m. on January 5th to pay off his FICA.

Now, I believe that Chairman Dean, the leadership in the House and Senate – and I have actually made this suggestion to them – should simply get a printout of when the CEOs of the Fortune 100 companies paid off their FICA. (Applause, cheers.) Now, what you will have to keep in mind is we are only talking about that that part of salary on which you pay FICA – we're not talking about the options and the dividends and all of the bonuses and all of that kind of stuff; we are talking about the salary.

And I suggest to you that if the Democrats came out with a plan that simply said not one of these 100 CEOs and so many more along with them would suffer any great pain if they had to work until January 3rd to pay off the FICA. And I suggest to you – (applause, cheers) – when you present it this way, as opposed to what Bush is saying that if you earn over \$20,000 a year, somehow, you know, you could afford to take a cut – that is if it is packaged that way, the American people will not charge the Democrats with raising taxes, which they are so afraid of. And this could solve, as I say, about 40 percent of the problem.

Now, the height of this administration's arrogance was their attempt to intimidate every U.S. – every labor leader in this country. And the way they try to do it was by warning us that we may be violating the law by using our leverage with those companies that manage our funds to get them to back off support of Bush's private accounts. It's almost like you would expect that somehow, with no pressure from the White House, these companies anted up \$40 million. But we're telling people who are making money or of our members' money, hey, if you want to keep doing business with us, you have got to work with us, that somehow those threats are going to intimidate us.

Brothers and sisters, we will not be intimidated. (Applause cheers.) Our members understand what is at stake. Our election night poll, the CWA election night poll, showed that 70 percent of CWA members voted for John Kerry – was a little higher than the national average. But those – the national average of union members I'm referring to; I wish it was broader than union members, which was 65 percent nationwide and 67 percent in battleground states.

But among that 30 percent, they are beginning to understand what the real values – the real moral values are; the values that impact on their ability to support their families, their quality of healthcare, job security, a pension, and all of the other benefits that help one raise a family and live in dignity.

Now, it was my generation that was the beneficiary of the New Deal and the opportunities it opened for working Americans. We now have the obligation to succeeding obligations to see that these policies are not unraveled and destroyed. This is no less than the survival of the American middleclass.

We are mobilized; we did not stop after the 2004 elections. Our members are energized for the gubernatorial elections this year in Virginia and New Jersey – (applause, cheers) – and we will continue to build for the 2006 mid-term elections. We

have a simple target; that target in 2006 will be to get enough votes in the House and the Senate to pass the Employee Free Choice Act. (Applause, cheers.)

The Employee Free Choice Act is a bipartisan bill introduced by Senators Kennedy and Specter, and Congressmen Miller and King. The EFCA will be the second coming of labor's "Magna Carta," and will be a strong weapon to be used to take back America. Thank you very much. (Applause, cheers.)