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THE 2000 CAMPAIGN: THE UNIONS

THE 2000 CAMPAIGN: THE UNIONS; Secret Weapon In Gore Camp: Unions in Iowa

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

DES MOINES, Jan. 14— Al Gore can be thankful that this state is more than an unending field of corn.

Punctuating the prairies that most Americans see as the essence of this state are dozens of industrial plants that serve the agricultural economy, and the heavily unionized work force in these farm-equipment factories and meat-packing plants is a major factor behind the Gore camp's confidence that the vice president will win Iowa's Jan. 24 caucuses, the first big test in this year's presidential campaign.

In Iowa's caucuses, success traditionally turns on who has the best organization, and the state's 150,000-member labor movement, because it is so big and well-organized, gives Mr. Gore an extra weapon to use against his Democratic rival, former Senator Bill Bradley.

"The Democratic Party in Iowa depends on the activism of organized labor," said Hugh Winebrenner, a political expert at Drake University. "Labor will play a very significant role in the caucuses. Usually, the caucuses are a low-turnout event, and in a low-turnout event labor's impact is maximized."

Notwithstanding labor's anger with the Clinton administration's trade policies, Iowa's union movement has gone into overdrive over the past two weeks with the goal of giving Mr. Gore a convincing caucus victory.

With the A.F.L.-C.I.O. having endorsed Mr. Gore in October, over the opposition of the teamsters and auto workers, the Iowa caucuses are shaping up as a major test not just for Mr. Gore, but for John J. Sweeney, the labor federation's president.

To pump up turnout, Mr. Sweeney's foot soldiers have telephoned more than 30,000 union members who are registered Democrats. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees has sent out four separate pro-Gore mailings to its 12,000 members in the state -- and the A.F.L.-C.I.O. has done three additional mailings to union members. The organization has even mailed out 30,000 five-minute videos in which Mr. Sweeney urges union

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members to participate in the caucuses while telling them, "Al Gore is America's foremost champion of today's unions."

But labor's push has stumbled into two formidable problems. Two of the state's biggest unions -- the auto workers and the teamsters -- are not campaigning for Mr. Gore and have asked the A.F.L.-C.I.O. not to urge their members to back the vice president. Second, many union members cannot get excited about Mr. Gore and seem to care more about Monday Night Football than about the Monday night caucuses.

"I'm leaning toward Gore, but I'm getting tired of the whole process," said Gary Mobley, a member of the United Steelworkers of America who said he would not attend a caucus. "This is all taking place far too long before the election."

On Thursday, at the state A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s aging, brick headquarters, a half-dozen union members -- working at a phone bank beneath the original, century-old charter that Samuel Gompers signed to set up Iowa's labor federation -- were using one of the oldest tricks in labor's electoral playbook. (They were also following one of Mr. Gompers's maxims: "Stand faithfully by our friends and elect them.")

First, the callers asked the hundreds of union members they contacted whether they supported Mr. Gore or Mr. Bradley.

If the union members said they backed Mr. Bradley, the callers said thank you and hung up. But if the union members favored Mr. Gore, they were exhorted to attend the caucuses.

And if Gore supporters said they would miss the caucuses because they had to attend a child's basketball game or swim meet, the callers turned on the hard sell, warning that missing the caucuses was tantamount to voting against Mr. Gore.

"It's much harder to get people to go out to the caucuses than to vote in a primary," said Mark Smith, a former economics professor who is president of the state's A.F.L.-C.I.O. "You're asking people to make a two-hour commitment at a school or somewhere when the wind chill might be 46 below."

The youngest generation of union members is hardly familiar with the process because labor has not shepherded its flocks to the caucuses since 1984, the last time the A.F.L.-C.I.O. endorsed a candidate in the Democratic presidential primaries. That year, labor backed Vice President Walter F. Mondale over Senator Gary Hart.

At this year's 2,142 precinct caucuses, to be held in schools, town halls and homes, Iowans will be asked to move to one part of a room to show support for their candidate. To familiarize union members with this awkward process, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. is organizing mock caucuses in Cedar Rapids, Davenport, Waterloo and 10 other cities.

Mr. Smith said 100,000 of Iowa's union members are registered to vote, 20,000 as Republicans, 30,000 as independents and 50,000 as Democrats, accounting for one-tenth of Iowa's Democrats. But by mobilizing their masses, labor officials hope union members will represent far more than one-tenth of the participants in the Democratic caucuses.

Mr. Smith said that when Democratic union members were polled about candidates, 50 percent said they were undecided or gave no answer, 30 percent backed Mr. Gore, 15 percent supported Mr. Bradley and 5 percent favored others, ranging from the Rev. Jesse Jackson to Patrick J. Buchanan.

Labor's program, he explained, is straightforward, to remind union members that Mr. Gore has supported labor on many issues, opposing Medicare cuts, backing a higher minimum wage, refusing to cross a picket line during a strike at ABC. The next step is to mobilize Gore supporters to attend the caucuses, an effort that has involved shop stewards talking to workers and knocking on union members' doors.

"There's no magic bullet," Mr. Smith said. "It's like Woody Hayes, the Ohio State football coach, used to say, 'Three yards and a cloud of dust.' You don't have to dream up anything fancy."

Labor's pro-Gore push has revved up many members. Mark Rocha, a service delivery coordinator with US West, said he would definitely support Mr. Gore. "The vice president has always been an ally of the Communications Workers, on family issues, on the right to organize," he said. "True, he doesn't knock my socks off, but I'm not looking for that. He's upbeat. He's strong."

The state's union leaders voice confidence that labor will make an impressive caucus showing -- and the Bradley campaign has acknowledged as much, perhaps to lower expectations for Iowa.

"Labor has the potential to make a big difference," said Eric Hauser, spokesman for the Bradley campaign. "Their organized clout is real. Senator Bradley tried to get their attention and support, but they went the other way. We respect that."

Mr. Bradley has periodically visited Iowa union halls in the hope of reaching out directly to members. But his efforts have been undercut by several union mailings that have hammered him, accusing him of supporting school vouchers and raising the age for Social Security -- accusations the Bradley campaign says are inaccurate.

Notwithstanding their attacks on Mr. Bradley, union leaders say their members are generally fond of the New Jerseyan and would have little problem backing him if he won the nomination.

"If Gore doesn't survive the process, we'll endorse someone else and rally the troops for that person," said Dan Albritton, the steelworkers' political director for Iowa. "If it's Bradley versus George W. Bush, it's easy because there are such clear-cut differences. Bush is totally antilabor

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as far as I'm concerned. We wouldn't have problems getting our people fired up if the dog catcher ran against George W. Bush."

Photo: Theresa Malin, left, and Donna Mollis, union members, working the phone banks at the Iowa Federation of Labor in Des Moines. (Rodney White for The New York Times)(pg. A14)

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