



Si se puede... Unions Speak Out

Jennifer Aidoo | February 12, 2009 1:01 AM

"Si se puede. Yes we can!" The crowd chants outside the Federal Building in West Los Angeles following its 10-mile march down Wilshire Boulevard.

Despite the pouring rain Thursday, labor union members from across Los Angeles County gathered in support of the Employee Free Choice Act. Covered from head to toe in rain gear, bearing signs that read "What would MLK do, Stand Up for Fair Wages," "Good Jobs Clean Air," "LA Workers the Fight for Good jobs" and countless other slogans, hundreds of people surrounded the stage as they listened to supporters and representatives from the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO) speak words of encouragement.

Judy Chu is the representative for the California State Board of Equalization 4th District Los Angeles. On a podium overlooking the large group she shouts, "Are we going to pass the Employee Free Choice Act?" The crowd responds with an excited "Yes" followed by loud cheering.

Those who gathered outside the Federal Building demonstrated a great spirit of unity and intense vigor. A people beaten by a devastated economy and an uncertain employment future, it was clear that it was going to take more than a little rain to waver

their sense of determination. "These are tough times with so many layoffs, with these big companies like Home Depot laying off people, with Circuit City closing down, with a 9.3 percent unemployment rate," said Chu. "But what's going to turn this around? Union jobs!"

Proponents of the Employee Free Choice Act say unions are the answer many blue-collar workers are looking for. It is said that this measure with help to solidify people in their employment, making it harder for employers to take advantage of their workers.

In her speech, Chu expressed a sense of urgency and a call to action for workers to support the measure. She urged the people to contact their legislature and tell them to vote for the Employee Free Choice Act. She stressed the importance of unions and outlined the benefits of workers organizing. "We know that it's the union that provides better jobs, we know that it is the union that gives us a 30 percent higher salary, that gives us four times a greater chance to get a pension, that gives us a greater chance to have health benefits."

Attendants of the rally seemed to be motivated by Chu's words. "It's good to see a little rain didn't kill the union spirit or put out that union fire," said Chico Rubio, a Rite Aid employee. Rubio is 43 years old and has worked at Rite Aid for 8 years, two of which he spent fighting for the establishment of a union.

The Employee Free Choice Act seeks to benefit people just like Rubio, who work for low wages and limited benefits. The act is said to put into place a "card-check system" where employees can sign membership cards indicating their desire to unionize.

Once a majority is reached, the federal government recognizes the group as a union. "But you know what, in our quest to get a union we have too many companies that harass, that intimidate that prevent workers from getting the union that they want and so that's why we have to make sure that we fight to get a card-check program where people can sign, where people can make sure that they express their desire to join a union in the comfort of their own place," Chu stated. Also under the measure's stipulations, employees who seek to join a union are protected from company interference and or intimidation.

Following Chu's speech, Maria Elena Durazo, Executive Secretary -Treasurer for AFL-CIO called for a moment of silence in honoring a man by the name of Pablo Antonio Garcia. Garcia was a truck driver who was killed on the job in an accident on the Los Angeles port. According to Durazo, he fought alongside the Teamsters in an effort to form an organization for port drivers that would provide better safety measures. "Now brothers and sisters, it's a shame that that brother, who put in so much of his time and his families time to win a union did not benefit from seeing all the things that could have come from having a union," she said.

Chu encouraged the crowd to fight for what is rightfully theirs-- their civil rights. Minorities made up a significant number of those in attendance, adding to thoughts that the act favors individuals of color.

Whether or not such speculations are true, people were empowered by the march. For Rubio, the enactment of this measure identifies him as a citizen of this country. "That's freedom, that's America and that's how it should be done and we need this Employee Free Choice Act."

