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Obama Says Energy Policy a Moral Issue

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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Democratic presidential candidates argued Saturday night that organized labor is an essential part of the nation's economy whose troubles mirror the deterioration of the middle class way of life.

"The only way to reinvigorate the middle class is to reinvigorate the labor movement," Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware told several hundred union members at a labor forum in eastern Iowa.

For all the candidates, it was one stop in a busy several days leading to a Sunday morning debate in Des Moines. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York leads the Democratic field in national polls and has pulled into a three-way tie in Iowa, where the first votes of the 2008 campaign will be tallied.

One of her chief rivals, former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, energized the crowd with his rebuke of Democratic candidates who accept donations from lobbyists. While he has done so at other forums, this time Edwards did not single out Clinton for raising tens of thousands of dollars from lobbyists.

"We are not the party of Washington insiders. We are the party of the people, and so from this day forward we say no no forever to the money from Washington lobbyists," said Edwards, the party's vice presidential nominee in 2004. "Their money is not good anymore."

He singled out money tied to drug companies and health insurance companies. "I don't represent those people," he said. "I want to represent you."

Clinton addressed the crowd first. "It was unions that organized workers, that gave them better wages and working conditions and benefits like health care and pensions," she said. "And what is happening now is that the American middle class is under assault."

The crowd thinned out after Edwards' speech, leaving scores of empty seats for Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, who spoke third. The rest of the field spoke to mostly empty rows.

Obama said a Democratic president, backed by organized labor, can change Washington and protect the middle class.

"We need a president ... who is not afraid to mention unions," he said.

Biden said Republican are trying to destroy the so-called house of labor "the house the built the middle class."

Labor organizations are critical to any Democratic candidate, particularly in Iowa where grass-roots organizing is key.

"I never once had to look over my shoulder and wonder whether organized labor and unions stood with me," said Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., in a fiery speech.

"I'm a union guy!

Obama plans to attend fewer such multi-candidate events in the future, his campaign manager wrote on Obama's 2008 Web site.

"We simply cannot continue to hopscotch from forum to forum and run a campaign true to the bottom up movement for change that propelled Barack into this race," David Plouffe wrote. He added, "I think this approach will be better for the voters and the campaign."

He said Obama was committed to five remaining debates sanctioned by the Democratic National Committee, two Iowa debates in December and one in Florida on Sept. 9.

Many of Obama's rivals also have complained about the overwhelming number of multi-candidate gatherings and could follow suit

Earlier in the day, Clinton, Edwards, Dodd and Biden attended an event at a minor league baseball field where they ate boiled sweet corn and made their pitches to more than 1,000 people.

In central Iowa, Obama toured a city-owned utility plant to promote his energy policies. He said the country faces an "an urgent moral challenge" to reduce reliance on oil and needs a president willing to defy special interests in Washington that dictate energy policy.

Obama, casting himself an agent of change in a crowded field of White House hopefuls, suggested that he is voters' best bet to shake up the status quo.

"We've got to have a president in the White House who sets bold targets and sets broad goals and isn't intimidated by the barriers and the roadblocks and isn't driven by those who already have an investment in the status quo somebody who can overcome the lobby-driven, divisive politics that characterizes this issue," Obama told about 300 people at Waverly Light and Power, the city utility.

Associated Press Writer Amy Lorentzen contributed to this report from Clinton, Iowa.

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