

Obama, Clinton Wrangle Over Trade Before Ohio Contest

By Kim Chipman and Catherine Dodge
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Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton fought over trade policy today in Ohio, where factory workers who lost their jobs to overseas competitors may help determine the Democratic presidential nomination.

Obama, an Illinois senator, is seeking to tie his rival to the North American Free Trade Agreement, signed by former President Bill Clinton, which many workers blame for the loss of millions of U.S. jobs. Hillary Clinton, a New York senator, accused Obama of knowingly distorting her positions on trade and health care in his campaign literature.

“Shame on you Barack Obama,” Clinton said at a news conference today after a rally in Cincinnati. “He insists on putting out misleading and false and discredited information.”

Clinton is counting on victories in Ohio and Texas to keep her campaign for the nomination alive after losing 11 straight contests to Obama. Polls show her leading in Ohio and the two candidates in a statistical dead heat in Texas.

Obama said his campaign literature is “accurate,” that Clinton supported Nafta and has even written that it was one of the successes of her husband's presidency.

“The notion that somehow we're engaging in nefarious tactics, I think, is pretty hard to swallow,” Obama said at a press conference in Columbus, Ohio.

Clinton accused her competitor of maneuvers “right out of Karl Rove's playbook,” a reference to the Republican political strategist and former White House official.

“We have been subject to constant attack from the Clinton campaign except when we were down 20 points,” Obama said in Columbus. “I think that they need to take a look at what they've been doing.”

Poll Results

Clinton has the support of 50 percent of likely Ohio voters to Obama's 43 percent, according to an ABC News/Washington Post poll taken Feb. 16-20. In Texas, Clinton had 48 percent backing to Obama's 47 percent, a difference that's within the poll's four-point margin of error.

Clinton, 60, is battling to shore up her support among blue-collar workers in Ohio, which has lost almost a quarter of its factory jobs since 2000.

Clinton voiced approval for free-trade agreements when her husband was in the White House. She now supports a “time-out” before any new accords and says that Nafta needs to be fixed.

“I will revise Nafta to have very strong labor and environmental standards,” Clinton said last night at a town hall meeting on the economy at Columbus State Community College in Ohio. “We will review these trade agreements every five years” to determine whether they are helping or hurting the economy.

Making Inroads

Obama, 46, has made inroads in Ohio among union members, winning the endorsement of the 1.4 million-member International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which had longtime ties with the Clintons. He also won the backing of the 1.9 million-member Service Employees International Union and the 1.3 million-member United Food and Commercial Workers.

“These trade agreements are absolutely killing the United States,” Teamsters President James Hoffa said in a Feb. 20 interview. “Working people know about Nafta and how it's cost 3 million jobs.”

Clinton too is backed by powerful unions, including the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and the American Federation of Teachers. She has the support of elected officials including Ohio Governor Ted Strickland.

Clinton Victory Seen

Strickland, who predicts Clinton will win Ohio by a slim margin, said her positions on trade will help her and that it's unfair to link her with Nafta.

“Bill Clinton has told me personally that Hillary was not in favor of Nafta when it passed,” Strickland, 66, said on Bloomberg Television's “Political Capital With Al Hunt,” airing this weekend.

Bickering aside, Clinton and Obama offer similar proposals on trade and labor issues. Both advocate new “green-collar” jobs that focus on lowering greenhouse-gas emissions and making the country more energy independent. And both stress adding strong labor and environmental standards to Nafta and pledge to reward companies that keep jobs in the U.S.

Obama currently has the edge among pledged delegates nationwide, with a total of 1,122.5 to Clinton's 999.5, according to unofficial estimates by The Green Papers, a nonpartisan Web site that tracks delegate allocation.

That doesn't include the 795 so-called superdelegates, Democratic Party officials and office-holders who aren't bound by election results and have tilted toward Clinton. A candidate needs 2,025 votes at the party convention to become the nominee.

Texas and Ohio together have 334 pledged delegates available. They are awarded largely based on proportion of the popular vote; Texas also apportions some delegates based on caucuses.

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