

Democrats to Focus on Trade to Win Working Class

By REUTERS
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COLUMBUS -- Former steelworker Bill Hartley doesn't give Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama a ringing endorsement, but his top concern is free trade, so he said he doesn't want another Republican in the White House.

"I'm not sure what we're going to get with Barack Obama, but I'm going to support him, because what's the alternative?" said Hartley, 50, who was a steelworker in this Midwestern state for 15 years before he was disabled on the job.

"This administration (of President George W. Bush) has run up a record high trade deficit while two and a half million manufacturing jobs have been sent overseas," Hartley said. "McCain will just be four more years of Bush."

As Obama and Republican rival John McCain go head-to-head in the race to the November presidential election, the votes of the white working class in middle America have become the Holy Grail -- a key voting bloc up for grabs in states critical for a White House victory.

With the economy slumping and middle-class voters insecure about rising unemployment and factory closures, the Democratic message of more trade restrictions -- of "fair trade not free trade" -- resonate in heartland states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan, where the election could be decided.

But the vote is no sure thing. Blue-collar voters have long eschewed political loyalty in America, gravitating to Republican Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, Democrat Bill Clinton in the 1990s and Republican George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004.

Obama, who would be the first black president, struggled to win white working class voters in Democratic primary contests, and many voters cited race as a concern.

'UPHILL BATTLE' FOR OBAMA

Sherry Cooper, chief economist at BMO Capital Markets in Toronto, believes Obama has an uphill battle with much of the white working class, despite economic concerns that make them obvious Democrat targets.

"I'm not saying he's going to walk away and let them vote for McCain unchallenged, but unless he gets to them in a personal way, and really is heard on the subject, it's very tough to break through these stereotypes," Cooper said.

"That's why he's been talking about renegotiating NAFTA and all that."

Both Obama and McCain hit the campaign trail this week focusing on the economy and criticizing each other's position on taxes, trade, spending and jobs.

Obama has urged renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada to strengthen provisions on labor and environment. McCain opposes any changes to NAFTA and the two men disagree on most other trade issues.

Recent polls have shown that the economy is the top concern of most voters, with a majority of Republicans saying free trade has been bad for America. Some 3.5 million manufacturing jobs have been lost since Bush took office.

Hartley, who shows off his Made-in-the-USA running shoes as evidence of his commitment to American jobs, admitted his sister will vote for McCain in November because she, like McCain, is anti-abortion.

Jeff Harper, 39, a laborer at a Columbus carbon plant and president of the United Steelworkers in America Local 2342, has already started to organize union members to vote for Obama. But he wants some co-workers to stay home in November – because they worry more about gun-control than free trade.

"I've got a bunch of rednecks where I work who say '(Democrats) are going to take my guns,'" Harper said with dismay. "The only time you hear about guns is election time!"

Scott Paul, of the Alliance for American Manufacturing, a nonprofit group concerned about unfettered free trade, said the 2006 mid-term elections provide a roadmap for Democrats to overcome such social concerns.

"Democrats in culturally conservative areas in 2006 who ran on an economic populist platform were very successful," said Paul, noting that those gains allowed Democrats to take control of Congress. "I think that shows as a political strategy raising issues about trade and globalization makes a lot of sense for Obama and can be successful."

Economist Cooper expects to see trade at the top of the agenda for many Democratic candidates in industrial states.

"They'll make whatever promises they think they need to make in whatever part of the country they need to make it in."