

Obama Talks Tough(er) on Trade to Win Wisconsin

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JANESVILLE, Wisconsin -- When I talked with Russ Feingold last week about what the Democratic candidates for president should do to win Tuesday's Wisconsin primary, he suggested that both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton should go to the senator's hometown of Janesville and talk about trade.

Obama got the hint.

On Wednesday, the first full day of a Wisconsin primary campaign that he hopes will solidify his emerging lead over his once "inevitable" rival, the Illinois senator started in Janesville, where he delivered a rebuke to free-trade policies of the Bill Clinton and George Bush eras that sounded a little like a speech Feingold might have delivered.

"We are not standing on the brink of recession due to forces beyond our control. The fallout from the housing crisis that's cost jobs and wiped out savings was not an inevitable part of the business cycle. It was a failure of leadership and imagination in Washington -- the culmination of decades of decisions that were made or put off without regard to the realities of a global economy and the growing inequality it's produced," Obama told workers at the General Motors Assembly Plant in the southern Wisconsin city.

"It's a Washington where decades of trade deals like NAFTA and China have been signed with plenty of protections for corporations and their profits, but none for our environment or our workers who've seen factories shut their doors and millions of jobs disappear; workers whose right to organize and unionize has been under assault for the last eight years," continued the senator, who is suddenly very conscious of the need to appeal to working-class voters in Wisconsin and Ohio who have been battered by trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the decision the Clinton administration to extend permanent most-favored-nation trading status to China.

In addition to proposing new infrastructure spending designed to "generate nearly 2 million new jobs -- many of them in the construction industry that's been hard hit by this housing crisis," Obama sought to distinguish himself from Clinton on trade.

"It's also time to look to the future and figure out how to make trade work for American workers. I won't stand here and tell you that we can--or should--stop free trade. We can't stop every job from going overseas. But I also won't stand here and accept an America where we do nothing to help American workers who have lost jobs and opportunities because of these trade agreements. And that's a position of mine that doesn't change

based on who I'm talking to or the election I'm running in," Obama said, taking a swipe at Clinton. "You know, in the years after her husband signed NAFTA, Senator Clinton would go around talking about how great it was and how many benefits it would bring. Now that she's running for President, she says we need a time-out on trade. No one knows when this time-out will end. Maybe after the election."

Then Obama declared, "(When) I am president, I will not sign another trade agreement unless it has protections for our environment and protections for American workers. And I'll pass the Patriot Employer Act that I've been fighting for ever since I ran for the Senate--we will end the tax breaks for companies who ship our jobs overseas, and we will give those breaks to companies who create good jobs with decent wages right here in America."

This speech represents progress for Obama, who has not up to now been a particularly strong advocate for the fair-trade policies favored by labor and environmental groups and senators such as Wisconsin's Feingold and Ohio's Sherrod Brown. The cautious contender is still a long way from embracing the full agenda of the steel and auto workers union leaders and industrial-state senators and congressmen he has been talking with at some length in recent days. And there will be appropriate skepticism about whether Obama will continue to err on the populist side after Wisconsin and Ohio have finished voting – and after key players such as Feingold, Brown and former candidate John Edwards have endorsed.

But Obama's message at the GM plant was a good one--not just for the workers of Janesville and the other factory towns that will be voting in Wisconsin on Tuesday and Ohio two weeks later, but also for Feingold. The Wisconsin senator says he has not made up his mind regarding the Obama-Clinton contest, but he holds open the prospect of a pre-primary nod to one of the contenders.

Obama wants that nod, and the support of Wisconsin workers who have come to see their senator as a champion in the fight for fair trade.

Obama is not where Feingold is on trade and economic issues--the two recently split on the Peru Free Trade Agreement, with Obama favoring it and Feingold opposing. But the presidential candidate is listening to the Wisconsin senator, and responding. Heck, he was even talking Wednesday about how jobs at the GM plant created the prosperity that caused "homes and businesses (to begin) to sprout up along Milwaukee and Main Streets" in Janesville – avenues not far from where Feingold grew up.

And what of Hillary Clinton? She was in McAllen, Texas, Wednesday morning--headed not for Janesville but for San Antonio.