Montana AFL-CIO Convention

Max S. Baucus

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Remarks of Senator Max Baucus
Montana AFL-CIO Convention

June 29, 1996

Good afternoon, friends.

I'm very happy to have the chance to speak with you today. Because four months from next Friday, Montana has a fundamental choice to make. A choice that will have some small effect on my personal future -- but much more important, a choice that will affect the future of every working Montana.

PAT WILLIAMS

But before I talk about this fall's campaign, let me say a few words about Pat Williams.

For eighteen years, Butte's native son has been one of America's great champions of working families. A defender of the great outdoors. A voice in Congress for Native Americans. A friend of education. And one of the greatest orators in America.

I am grateful for the counsel and friendship he has given to me over the years, and even more grateful for the record of achievement he has created on behalf of the working people of Montana.

We will miss him in Congress -- even though Newt won't. But in whatever path of life he chooses, Pat has a lot to give Montana, and he will be one of our state's and our Democratic Party's great leaders for many years to come.

THE RIGHT KIND OF CHANGE

Now let's talk about where we stand today. This fall, Montana will decide what is the right kind of change for our working families. Is it the Gingrich agenda -- or is it something else.

And let me begin with a story that sums up the stakes of this Montana Senate campaign for working people.

A couple of months back, we had some folks come in to Helena from Washington, D.C. and California. They were here to plug something called a "National Right to Work Law." It was Charlton Heston, the movie actor from "Planet of the Apes" -- and along with him, it looked like the rest of his supporting cast.

They were also here to announce a big ad campaign against me for this fall's election.
Now, do they have something personal against me? I doubt it - - I've never even met any of these people.

Were they here because they care about our state's future? Of course not. They don't give two hoots about us.

The reason they came into town -- the reason they are attacking me -- is that they want to get at you.

They want to pass a law that puts unions out of business -- not only in Montana but all across America.

They know they can't get that law in Montana because Governor Racicot will veto it. They can't get it in Washington because I and other Democrats will stop it in the Senate.

But the other Party's nominee, Dennis Rehberg, has promised that he will vote to impose it on the whole country.

I think that is wrong. It would be the biggest step backward in labor law in American history. More important, it would mean lower wages, fewer health and pension benefits, and a lower standard of living for Montanans.

THE BASIC CHOICE

Now, Dennis is not here to defend himself. So I don't want to be too tough on him.

But it is a fact that he has brought New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato in to run his advertising campaign.

It is a fact that he brought the Three Blind Mice -- the Senators from Michigan, Ohio and Minnesota -- into Billings last week campaign against raising the minimum wage. Some of you were there to tell the truth, and I thank you for that.

It is a fact that he endorsed the Gingrich budget, with its $270 billion Medicare cut, its slashing of student loans for middle-class families, and its raid on company pensions.

It is a fact that he endorsed a federal product liability law that obliterates Montana's Workmen's Compensation program.

The list goes on and on. It is exactly what you'd expect from a fellow with a 7% lifetime AFL-CIO voting record. And I think it is the wrong kind of change.

TOUGH TRADE POLICY
Then look at trade policy. Dennis might give you some tough talk on the NAFTA. He can do that, because he’s taken every position there is on it. When Governor Racicot endorsed it, that was fine with Dennis. Later he said he wanted to repeal it. Now he wants to "revisit" it, whatever that means.

So you have to look at his actions when it really counts for Montana. And the best example of that is lumber.

Canada has been shipping subsidized timber imports here for decades. They broke the agreement we put together in 1986, and they were threatening hundreds of jobs here. The timber flood helped to close mills in Bonner, Libby and Superior.

So I went to the mat with the Canadians. I put in a bill that threatened a retaliatory tariff of 25% on all Canadian timber.

Dennis went a bit weak at the knees when he heard that. He said threatening to retaliate was a bit too much. Consumers might pay a few dollars more. Our country should just live with subsidized imports.

But sure enough, when the Canadians figured out we were serious, they backed down. And we saved a lot of good Montana mills. The price of lumber was $280 per thousand board feet a year ago and it’s up to $420 today. That means hundreds of mill jobs saved for Montana.

THE WALK

So there are some very clear differences between me and Dennis. It is important to talk about them. But it is just as important to talk about what you’re for.

So now I want to turn to that. To tell you what I’m for. My vision. My hopes for the future of our working families.

Over the past couple of years, I’ve been walking across Montana. Up to the Idaho border at Lolo Pass. Across the Continental Divide on the road from Three Forks up to Butte. Through the Great Plains, from Fairview down past Billings.

As I’ve walked along these roads, I meet folks at work. Families on vacation. Ranchers bringing their stock to market. Teachers at elementary schools and folks at coffee houses.

A few topics come up just about every time. People are worried about their health insurance. Folks are angry about low cattle prices. Most of all, people are worried about jobs and wages.
THE RIGHT KIND OF CHANGE

We’ve had good economic growth for the past few years. Companies are doing well. But wages are stuck. Our average income has fallen for 30th to 41st in the nation. Retirement is getting less secure. Health insurance and college educations are getting further out of reach.

So what do we need from Congress? They could start by simply keeping the government open.

Go on from there to make health insurance more affordable and guarantee that you can keep it when you changes jobs.

Help young people afford college.

Make employee pensions and Medicare more secure for older men and women.

That’s the right kind of change.

THE MINIMUM WAGE

It’s nowhere more clear than on the minimum wage.

The minimum wage today, adjusted for inflation, has not been this low in more than forty years. Think about that.

The American minimum wage has not been this low since Dwight Eisenhower was President of the United States.

Before the Columbia Falls aluminum smelter opened.

Before the Anaconda Company broke ground for the Berkeley Pit.

My friends, that is a national disgrace. Americans know it is a disgrace. Montanans know it is a disgrace.

The labor movement is right. Montana needs a raise.

That’s why three Montanans in every four support an increase in the minimum wage. That is why the revolutionary Congress felt the heat. And that is why the white flag has already gone up over Fort Gingrich, and why we’re fighting in the Senate to get the job done and the national minimum wage up to $5.15 an hour.

CONCLUSION

That is what we’re for. We believe in higher wages. We believe in education. We believe in good jobs.
And that's why I need your help. We will be outspent in this election. Dennis and Al D’Amato have already spent nearly a half million dollars on an illegal advertising campaign to buy this Senate seat. The Right to Work Committee will spend some more.

So we have to depend on the truth and on hard work. And that's a good thing, because the truth is on our side and nobody knows hard work better than Montana's working men and women.

It will be as tough a battle as we have ever fought. But we are right on the issues and ready for the fight.

We are in this together. And I promise you, we are in it to win.