
Obama touts middle-class task force led by Biden

By PHILIP ELLIOTT, Associated Press Writer
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WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama signed a series of executive orders Friday that he said should "level the playing field" for labor unions in their struggles with management.

Obama also used the occasion at the White House to announce formally a new White House task force on the problems of middle-class Americans. He named Vice President Joe Biden as its chairman.

Union officials say the new orders by Obama will undo Bush administration policies that favored employers over workers. The orders will:

- * Require federal contractors to offer jobs to current workers when contracts change.
- * Reverse a Bush administration order requiring federal contractors to post notice that workers can limit financial support of unions serving as their exclusive bargaining representatives.
- * Prevent federal contractors from being reimbursed for expenses meant to influence workers deciding whether to form a union and engage in collective bargaining.

"We need to level the playing field for workers and the unions that represent their interests," Obama said during a signing ceremony in the East Room of the White House.

"I do not view the labor movement as part of the problem. To me, it's part of the solution," he said. "You cannot have a strong middle class without a strong labor movement."

Signing the executive orders was Obama's second overture to organized labor in as many days. On Thursday, he signed the first bill of his presidency, giving workers more time to sue for wage discrimination.

"It's a new day for workers," said James Hoffa, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, who attended the ceremony with other union leaders. "We finally have a White House that is dedicated to working with us to rebuild our middle class. Hope for the American Dream is being restored."

Of the White House Task Force on Middle Class Working Families, Obama said, "We're not forgetting the poor. They are going to be front and center, because they, too, share our American Dream."

He said his administration wants to make sure low-income people "get a piece" of the American pie "if they're willing to work for it."

"With this task force, we have a single, highly visible group with one single goal: to raise the living standards of the people who are the backbone of this country," Biden said.

Obama set several goals for the task force, including expanding opportunities for education and training; improving the work-family balance; restoring labor standards, including workplace safety; and protecting retirement security.

The president and vice president said the task force will include the secretaries of commerce, education, labor, and health and human services because those Cabinet departments have the most influence on the well-being of the middle class. It also will include White House advisers on the economy, the budget and domestic policy.

Biden pledged that the task force will conduct its business in the open, and announced a Web site, <http://www.strongmiddleclass.gov>, for the public to get information. He also announced that the panel's first meeting will be Feb. 27 in Philadelphia and will focus on environmental or "green jobs."