

AMID LABOR ANXIETY, OBAMA MEETS WITH UNION LEADERS

By JIM KUHNHENN and SAM HANANEL - Dec 17, 2010

By The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two days after business executives had their turn at the White House, President Barack Obama met with union leaders who were still fuming about his decision to extend the Bush-era tax cuts for wealthy Americans.

Union officials declined to offer much in the way of detail, but the White House has been concerned about the harsh criticism from union leaders, and the meeting was seen as an effort to get the relationship back on track.

"We had a good conversation with President Obama about the economic crisis and the importance of the labor movement in rebuilding the economy and the middle class," AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said after the meeting.

Union officials were expected to be blunt with Obama about their unhappiness over the tax deal, a recent trade agreement with South Korea and the decision to freeze pay for federal workers. The meeting ended just minutes before Obama signed the tax bill into law.

Obama's ties with business leaders have been punctuated by sharp acrimony over issues such as health care, bonus pay and financial regulations. His standing with labor is bolstered by the long link between union leaders and the Democratic Party.

In a statement, the White House said Obama reiterated his commitment to working together with the labor community to support "policies that protect working Americans and support the rights of workers to organize and collectively bargain."

The trade deal has received support from the United Auto Workers because of provisions regarding auto exports, but most other unions have pledged to work against its passage in Congress.

A day earlier, Trumka criticized the deal with congressional Republicans to extend Bush-era tax rates for the highest wage-earners, arguing that money could have been used to invest in the creation of jobs. The deal included a union-sought extension of jobless benefits, but Trumka told his supporters that passage came "at a terrible price."

Union leaders also have complained about the president's plans for a tax system overhaul outlined by Obama's deficit commission. Leaders were expected to raise with Obama their desire to preserve the tax exclusion for employer provided health benefits.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said the meeting represented Obama's efforts to hear various points of view on how to speed up the economic

recovery and increase jobs. In addition to his more than four-hour meeting with CEOs on Wednesday, Obama held separate talks with a group of liberal and conservative economists.

Attending the meeting in addition to Trumka were United Food and Commercial Workers President Joe Hansen, National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel, United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees President Gerald McEntee, Service Employees International Union President Mary Kay Henry, UAW President Bob King, International Association of Fire Fighters President Harold Schaitberger, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers President Ed Hill, National Association of Letter Carriers President Fred Rolando, and International Union of Painters and Allied Trades President Jimmy Williams.

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