

Look For The Union Libel

George De Stefano (February 15, 2009)



The GOP and Big Business Smear Organized Labor

Italian American conservatives often claim that liberals and leftists are anti-Italian “elitists” who have contempt for our “family values” and ethos of “hard work.” As this tiresome ditty goes, liberals are always ready to make excuses for misbehavior by members of racial minorities while having no qualms about defaming Italian Americans.



It's a fatuous claim, and, one that overlooks the fact that there are many Italian Americans who hold liberal and left-wing views. Big surprise: I'm one of them.

I'd be lying if I said that there have never been instances of anti-Italian bias by liberals. Bill Clinton's infamous description of Mario Cuomo as looking like a character from "The Godfather" comes to mind.

But

Clinton's slur pales next to the stunt pulled by Brad Dayspring, the spokesman for right-wing Republican Congressman Eric Cantor. The fourth-term Virginia representative was one of the targets of an advertisement by the public workers union AFSCME that criticized the Hooverite GOPers who have opposed President Obama's economic recovery plan. Cantor has coined the phrase, "Just say 'no' to the stimulus."

Cantor's flack Dayspring, infuriated by the AFSCME ad, sent out an e-mail containing a video clip that depicted union members as foul-mouthed Mafia goons. The video is of a genuine AFSCME ad from the 1970s to which a voice-over has been added. The voice is unmistakably meant to be that of an Italian American, but a specific type - a "Paulie Walnuts voice," as MSNBC commentator Keith Olbermann noted.

(For the uninitiated, Paul "Paulie Walnuts" Gualtieri was the mobster with the silver-streaked hair played by Tony Sirico on "The Sopranos.")

As actual footage of union members at work appears, the "gavone" voice says [warning: bad language coming]: "On your way to work tomorrow, instead of sitting around with your finger up your ass, look around. There's a union out there called AFSCME and they're busting their balls doing a lot of shit work you take for granted. For example, we pick up your fucking garbage."

"We don't take shit from nobody," the voiceover concludes. "You got that, asshole? AFSCME -- the fucking union that works for you."



The video actually has been circulating on the Internet for two years; it wasn't created by Eric Cantor's office. But the fact that Cantor's spokesman would distribute it, to the journalism website Politico, calling it "my response" to the anti-GOP AFSCME ad, speaks volumes about Republican contempt for working class people.

Dayspring has since apologized for the video, which he called "inappropriate." His mea culpa included some disingenuous boilerplate about the Republicans being aware that "people are hurting in these trying times." Yes, and you can be sure that the GOP will do its best to block the pain relief, as they tend to the interests of "the haves and have-mores," as the recently departed Dubya liked to say.

Let's look at another bunch of conservatives peddling the "organized labor = Mafia" slander. An outfit called the Coalition for a Democratic Workplace has been running TV and Internet ads against the Employee Free Choice Act, a labor- and Democrat-backed bill that would make it easier for unions to win recognition in workplaces. The ads feature Vince Curatola, the actor who played the gangster John "Johnny Sack" Sacrimone on "The Sopranos." Trading on his mob persona, Curatola likens the Employee Free Choice Act to Cosa Nostra-like intimidation.

Curatola should be ashamed of himself, but evidently he's beyond shame. The so-called Coalition for a Democratic Workplace is nothing but a front for business and industry lobbying groups and right-wing organizations like Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, the Council for Citizens Against Government Waste, and Americans for Limited Government. It includes the Retail Industry Leaders Association, whose most prominent member is the notoriously anti-union Wal-Mart chain.

In the ads, Curatola parrots the Coalition's line that the Employee Free Choice Act would eliminate secret ballots in workplace votes on unionization. What the Act actually would do is bring fairness to



the current system, which is skewed against workers. The bill, which has been endorsed by President Obama, would allow workers to choose their own union formation approach, whether through majority sign-up or through a National Labor Relations Board election.

Currently, union campaigns that precede elections can drag on for months, as management often fires union supporters while propagandizing against unions, in sessions with individual workers and in large meetings. Labor organizers are barred from the workplace while management does its utmost to persuade workers that unions are bad for them. If the Employee Free Choice Act is passed, organizers will try to get a majority of workers to sign union cards before corporations can begin their anti-union campaigns.

It's ironic, no outrageous, that Republicans and their corporate allies would liken organized labor to La Cosa Nostra. If anyone has engaged in organized thuggery against the interests of working class people, it's that crowd. But there is, of course, a history of gangsters being entangled with unions, both here and in Italy - as corrupters of them. Mobbed-up union bosses and their associates have served their own interests, and those of management, at the expense of workers, destroying union democracy and even murdering honest, progressive unionists, like Pete Panto, a New York longshoreman, and Placido Rizzotto, a Sicilian organizer of agricultural laborers.

The Republican Party and big business have been waging class war against working people for decades now. With the election of Barack Obama and his appointment of a progressive, Hilda Solis, as Secretary of Labor, they're terrified that they, at long last, will start losing battles. Hence their escalating propaganda war against unions and their members. Given the mounting public outrage against them and the disasters they've created, they've certainly got good reason to be scared.



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