

Obama Pledges Renewed Focus on Labor Amid Econ 'Disaster' Jan 30 / 14:23

--White House Task Force Seeks to Reverse Bush Admin Labor Policies

By Matt Day

WASHINGTON (MNI) - Calling the financial crisis "a continuing disaster," and in the wake of grim new economic data Friday, President Barack Obama announced a renewed commitment to the middle class and a reversal of Bush administration policies toward labor.

"This isn't just an economic concept," Obama said of the recession. "This is a continuing disaster for America's working families."

U.S. GDP shrank at an annual rate of 3.8% in the fourth quarter of 2008, the worst drop since 1982, the Commerce Department reported earlier Friday. However, the figure was still better than the expected contraction of 5%. The economy contracted 0.2% in the fourth quarter of 2007.

As part of the administration effort to address the economic downturn, Obama introduced the White House Task Force on Middle Class Working Families, to be chaired by Vice President Joe Biden, and signed three executive orders changing the labor rules governing federal contractors.

"I also believe that we have to reverse many of the policies towards organized labor that we've seen these last eight years," Obama said.

"We need to level the playing field for workers and the unions that represent their interests," Obama said. "Because we know that you cannot have a strong middle class without a strong labor movement."

The executive orders will require federal contractors to offer jobs to current employees when contracts change and to inform employees of their rights under the National Labor Relations Act.

They also prohibit the reimbursement of contractors for expenses incurred in attempting to influence workers' decisions to form a union.

The first meeting of the Biden task force is scheduled for Feb. 27 in Philadelphia and will focus on green jobs. Jared Bernstein, Biden's chief economic adviser and a former economist with the labor-funded Economic Pol-

icy Institute, was named the task force's executive director.

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