

Obama Turns Back To Job Creation

Jim Kuhnhenn, Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. (AP) — Beset by a grim employment picture, President Barack Obama on Monday pledged to ease the way for businesses to expand hiring and offered assurances to an anxious public that he is focused on creating jobs — the top political issue heading into the 2012 election and the Achilles heel of his presidency.

"The sky is not falling," Obama said. But the president, in a state that he narrowly won in 2008, could not ignore dismal recent economic reports.

"Our economic challenges were years in the making," he told workers at an energy-efficient lighting plant in Durham, "and it will take years to get back to where we need to be."

Obama called for educating more high-technology workers, announcing a plan to train 10,000 new American engineers every year through a public-private partnership. He also held a high-profile meeting with top CEOs who make up his advisory jobs council, offering encouragement for several ideas, including a plan that could create an estimated 114,000 jobs by increasing energy efficiencies in commercial and apartment buildings.

The visit to North Carolina, which was to be followed by fundraising stops in Miami later Monday, illustrated the political high stakes for Obama. By focusing on jobs, Obama provided a counterpoint to his Republican critics, particularly the seven 2012 presidential hopefuls who met in New Hampshire Monday evening for a debate and drew sharp contrasts with his approach on the economy.

"Today, the single most serious economic problem we face is getting people back to work," the president said. "We stabilized the economy, we prevented a financial meltdown, and an economy that was shrinking is now growing. ... But, I'm still not satisfied. I will not be satisfied until everyone who wants a good job that offers some security has a good job that offers security."

The stop in North Carolina was the first in a two-day trip with major political implications. Obama was attending three fundraisers later Monday in Miami, burnishing his profile in the crucial battleground of Florida. On Tuesday he planned a rendezvous with an important Hispanic constituency on the island of Puerto Rico. Voters of Puerto Rican descent make up a significant bloc in Florida.

Eager to rekindle enthusiasm for his presidency, Obama told political donors that "big changes don't happen overnight" as he tapped low- and high-dollar contributors in Miami.

Obama spoke to 80 wealthy supporters who paid \$10,000 each to meet him at the

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home of former Samsonite CEO Steve Green, who was ambassador to Singapore under President Bill Clinton. Obama also attended a fundraiser at the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, where about 900 supporters awaited him. A third, more intimate event attracted about 40 donors who paid the maximum allowed, \$35,800.

The money raised goes to the Obama Victory Fund 2012, which splits the proceeds between the Obama campaign and the Democratic National Committee.

At the Arsht Center, a member of the audience stood and shouted, "Keep your promise, stop AIDS now!" before the crowd drowned him out with cheers of "Obama, Obama!"

Obama seemed to acknowledge the complaint, saying, "The reason we're here today is because our work is not done."

Republicans dismissed Obama's efforts on the economy.

"Photo-ops with business leaders only reinforce that no one in this administration has ideas to create the private sector jobs our economy desperately needs," said Brendan Buck, spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

Before his remarks to workers at Cree Inc., the president met with his jobs council, a group headed by General Electric chairman and CEO Jeff Immelt. The group aired concerns about everything from difficulty getting small-business loans to regulatory burdens on airlines, and the president pledged to do what he could to help as his administration aims to breathe life into the faltering economic recovery.

At one point, Obama and the CEOs discussed the need to streamline contact permit approvals and poked fun at what had been the administration's pitch for the \$800 billion economic stimulus program Congress approved in 2009. "Shovel-ready was not as shovel-ready as we expected," Obama said.

Obama's options are limited after that massive amount of spending. The administration and Congress are now focused on cutting long-term spending, the price for increasing the government's borrowing authority. The government says it will exceed its \$14.3 trillion debt ceiling on Aug. 2.

Obama tried to make real for people what's at stake in that debate. He argued for smart decisions on what to cut and how, sending a message to Republicans who say they won't agree to raise the debt limit unless Obama and Democrats agree to enormous spending cuts and no tax increases.

Obama agrees on the need for spending cuts overall, but wants to increase spending in some areas, such as education and clean energy technology like the LED lighting the Durham plant creates, spending that he says creates jobs.

"So the American people need to know that over the next month, as we focus on making sure that we have a balanced thoughtful resolution to this problem, this isn't to the exclusion of worrying about jobs," the president said, "but is actually

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in service of making sure businesses have enough confidence about the investment environment so that they can start getting off the sidelines and putting more money to work and hiring more people."

Obama said the economy had made "great strides" from where it stood in 2008. But he said that even though jobs were being created they weren't being created fast enough. Job growth slowed sharply in May, with the private sector adding just 54,000 jobs.

At the same time, unemployment increased a 10th of a percentage point in April and again in May, bringing the joblessness rate to 9.1 percent. After voicing cautious optimism over the past several months that the recovery was beginning to take hold, Obama is now taking a different tack.

The May unemployment report, which showed the private sector adding just 54,000 jobs, "showed that job creation has not moved as quickly as we'd like," Obama told the CEOs.

In unveiling his jobs council proposals in North Carolina, Obama chose a state with the 10th highest unemployment rate in the country and the state where he won his narrowest victory in the 2008 presidential campaign.

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