

Edwards vows to protect unions



By David Lienemann, Getty Images
John Edwards waves to the audience
after speaking at a rally in Des Moines.

By Tony Leys, Des Moines Register
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Former North Carolina Sen. [John Edwards](#) promised Monday that if he is elected president, he would help American workers join unions and protect their right to strike.

"The truth of the matter is, in order to grow and strengthen the middle class in this country, we have to grow and strengthen the organized labor movement," the candidate told hundreds of union supporters gathered at the Iowa State Fairgrounds.

Edwards, who had just marched in a Labor Day parade, took the stage in rolled-up sleeves and blue jeans. He delivered a vigorous, eight-minute speech, in which he ripped the Bush administration and vowed to help working people.

He promised to let people join unions simply by signing membership cards, and he said he would outlaw the use of replacement workers during strikes. "Nobody – nobody – will be able to walk through that picket line and take your job away," he said to cheers.

Edwards also renewed his criticism of President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. "Listen, we don't need a surge in Baghdad," he said. "We need a surge in New Orleans, where our people are hurting."

Edwards has worked relentlessly to pick up support from labor unions. At an event in Pittsburgh earlier Monday, he picked up endorsements from the United Steelworkers and United Mine Workers of America.

The campaign touted the Steelworkers as the largest private industrial union in the United States.

In a telephone interview from Pittsburgh, Steelworkers President Leo Gerard said all the Democratic candidates have strong labor views, but he said his union activists overwhelmingly favor Edwards. "They judged Sen. Edwards on his life's work – standing up for working people," he said.

The Steelworkers have 850,000 members, including about 7,000 in Iowa. The union's contributions will include campaign volunteers, he said.

The Steelworkers backed former Missouri Congressman Richard Gephardt in the 2004 presidential race. "We're looking to improve our track record," Gerard said with a laugh. Gephardt dropped out after finishing fourth in the Iowa caucuses that year.

Last week, Edwards snagged the endorsement of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. Other Democratic candidates also have union backing. New York Sen. Hillary Clinton has been endorsed by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and by the United Transportation Union. Connecticut Sen. Chris Dodd is backed by the International Association of Fire Fighters.