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## Unions launch vote drive

UAW, AFL-CIO seek Beshear victory

By Joseph Gerth

[jgerth@courier-journal.com](mailto:jgerth@courier-journal.com)

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Ford Motor Co. introduced the slogan "Quality is Job 1" nearly 20 years ago.

Yesterday at the United Auto Workers union hall just down the road from Ford's Louisville Assembly Plant, beating Gov. Ernie Fletcher was the top priority.

Hundreds of Jefferson County union members came to hear AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Richard Trumka launch the unions' get-out-the-vote efforts they hope will push Democrat Steve Beshear to victory.

"This is the beginning of the end for one of the sorriest chapters in the history of Kentucky," Trumka said. "Because it's the beginning of the end for Ernie Fletcher."

Beating Fletcher is a priority of the unions because of positions he has taken over the years that they view as anti-union.

Fletcher overturned an executive order that allowed state employees to enter into collective bargaining with the state, and says he wants to do away with a state law that requires paying the prevailing wage to workers on state projects.

And he has pushed for a bill that would have allowed people to work in union shops but not join or pay union dues. Those who support the law call it "right to work." Union backers, who say it's an effort to break unions, call it "right to work for less."

Jason Keller, a spokesman for the Fletcher campaign, said Kentucky is hurt by policies that he said keep companies from locating in the state. By opening businesses to non-union employees and doing away with the prevailing wage, he said, it helps Kentucky with economic development.

"Kentucky is currently on the no-call list (for businesses looking to expand), and 50 percent of companies will not consider a move to Kentucky," Keller said. He also charged that Beshear is "pandering" to unions.

Bill Londrigan, president of the Kentucky AFL-CIO, said the unions expect to be more active this year fighting Fletcher than they have been in past elections.

They'll be walking neighborhoods around the state for the next six weekends, visiting union homes and urging voters to go to the polls.

Tomorrow, they'll start airing their second ad on radio stations in rural Kentucky criticizing Fletcher and Republican attorney general candidate Stan Lee.

They've distributed nearly 200,000 leaflets to union members, and a group formed by the AFL-CIO called Working Families for Kentucky mailed out a four-page attack ad that focuses on Fletcher's record on education.

The push in Kentucky comes as labor unions try to regain the clout they wielded in past years. But for decades, union influence has been on the wane as the percentage of Americans who belong to unions has fallen and as a sizeable number of union members took conservative positions on issues like abortion, gun control and gay rights.

Between 1983 and 2006, the number of union workers in Kentucky fell from 223,715, or 17.9 percent of the work force, to 172,106, just 9.8 percent of the work force, according to a study by professors at Florida State University and Trinity University.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of U.S. workers represented by labor unions fell from 14.9 percent in 1995 to 12 percent last year.

Terry Thurman, the international vice president of the UAW, urged the union members at yesterday's rally not to fall prey to what he said was the Republican Party's use of "guns, God and gays" in the election.

"This election is not about whether somebody is going to take your guns away from you," Thurman said. "This election is about whether you're going to have money to buy bullets to put into your guns."

Trumka said in an interview that the union has turned the corner.

In 2002, 76 percent of union workers nationally backed the candidates endorsed by their labor unions -- a record, he said.

"And we hope to do better this year," he said.

Reporter Joseph Gerth can be reached at (502) 582-4702.