

Vice President Joe Biden in Miami: We're committed to middle class

By Alfonso Chardy & Evan S. Benn

Vice President Joe Biden told a group of labor leaders Thursday at Miami Beach's Fontainebleau Resort that he and the president are committed to helping U.S. workers and the middle class.

"We will judge the success or failure of our administration based on whether or not the standard of living of the middle class has increased," Biden said to the AFL-CIO Executive Committee plus about a hundred other labor supporters.

"Neither one of us believes it can get better without you getting stronger."

Biden received a rousing ovation when he mentioned the Employee Free Choice Act that the Obama administration has proposed and took a swipe at corporate executives.

"It's just not right when the average CEO makes \$10,000 more every day than what the average worker makes every year," Biden said.

"We're not asking for anything we don't deserve. We just want to level the playing field again. I have a simple, basic belief: If a union is what you want, a union you're entitled to have."

Persuading Congress to pass the act is one of organized labor's top priorities. The proposed law would require companies to negotiate with a union if a majority of workers sign cards for that purpose. It also would allow for binding arbitration if the two sides were unable to reach an agreement on wages and working conditions. And it would increase the penalties for companies that violate labor laws by, for example, firing or harassing union supporters.

Supporters say the law would make a more level playing field between unions and employers, make it easier for workers to form a union, increase union membership and therefore increase wages. But business groups are fighting the law, saying it would create government intrusion into the private sector and that increased unionization would lead to hundreds of thousands of jobs being eliminated.

Biden spoke for about 45 minutes before taking questions from labor leaders in a conference room at the resort.

The union's executive council meetings are traditionally closed to the press, but "as part of its unprecedented commitment to transparency, Vice President Biden's office asked that a change to the policy be made so that a pool of print reporters would be allowed to cover the speech," spokeswoman Elizabeth Alexander said.

After the labor meeting, Biden was heading to a transit hub under construction near Miami International Airport, where he will highlight President Barack Obama's stimulus aid for transportation projects. On Friday, he will visit with Miami police officers downtown.

His visit Thursday to the Miami Intermodal Center is with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and Miami Mayor Manny Diaz.

The Miami Intermodal Center or MIC is a major rental car and transit hub being built just east of Miami International Airport that would connect all modes of transportation: airlines, rental cars, buses, Metrorail and commuter rail.

The rental car facility now under construction is scheduled to be completed in April 2010, said Ric Katz, the MIC's public affairs manager. The transit hub known as Miami Central Station is scheduled to begin construction either this year or next, he added.

The statement from Biden's office says the MIC is "just one example of the hundreds of transportation construction projects across the country" that will receive funds from the stimulus package.

The MIC itself did not figure during a recent special session of the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization at which local elected officials voted to recommend projects to be funded by the money the county expects to receive from the federal stimulus package.

Organization members, however, did vote to recommend that of the \$76 million the county expects to get in stimulus transit money it use part of the allocation to advance a project to extend Metrorail from the existing Earlington Heights station along the Airport Expressway to the MIC.

Katz said Biden and LaHood are expected to announce Thursday a \$2.1 million stimulus program contribution toward construction at the Miami Central Station of an inter-city bus facility for Greyhound.

Overall, Miami-Dade expects to get the largest portion of the stimulus package in South Florida -- more than \$260 million for roads, bridges, transit and transportation projects. Broward's share is expected to be about \$70 million.

Florida expects to receive about \$1.3 billion in stimulus money for transportation projects.

On Friday morning, Biden plans to visit the Miami Police Department, where he will be joined once again by Mayor Diaz and Miami Police Chief John F. Timoney.

The stimulus money includes allocations of more than \$4 billion for state and local law enforcement and other criminal and juvenile justice services.