



Dean courts major union in key primary state

By Mike Recht 10/31/03

Democratic presidential contender Howard Dean courted local members of the state's largest AFL-CIO affiliate Friday on the eve of their state convention, seeking to chip away at Dick Gephardt's union popularity.

With many of the members wearing "Health Care" T-shirts, Dean focused on the issue and jobs during a reception held by Service Employees International Union Local 1984, his third appearance before them.

The local holds its annual convention Saturday in Concord, and plans a presidential preference poll. It could endorse a candidate sometime later in the year. Any endorsement has special significance because the local has 8,000 members in the state with the earliest binding primary.

Dean also is seeking the endorsement of the national SEIU, which could decide to support someone next week.

Spokeswoman Sara Howard of the national union has said Dean would get the backing if the union decides to endorse anyone.

The SEIU has 1.6 million members, and would be a major boost to Dean's effort to diversify his campaign.

Up to now, Gephardt has been the favorite of labor, picking up the endorsements of 20 major unions, but has been unable to get the support of the entire AFL-CIO.

"We'd love to have your help," Dean told the SEIU members. "We need your help."

He said his campaign has been considered a white collar effort, but that he also would

like to put together a coalition of middle class, blue collar workers disenchanted with President Bush.

He told them he would cut back on Bush's tax cut and use the money to provide health care for every American. The cost, coincidentally, would be \$87 billion, the same amount Bush is seeking to continue the peace effort in Iraq.

Earlier in the day, Dean used the child care issue to push his experience as governor of Vermont for 12 years. He is the only former governor among the nine Democratic hopefuls, and four of the last presidents have been governors.

"This is about actually getting programs that work," he told about 100 people at the "Every Child Matters" forum, which already has heard from Joe Lieberman, John Edwards, Wesley Clark and John Kerry.

Trying to distinguish himself from the others, "The difference is ... I've done it," he said of enhancing child care.

"You've got to put money on the table, which I did as governor. I know what it costs; I know what can be done."

He said his program for the country would only cost \$100 per child, a cost that eventually would save money by turning children away from crime and drugs as they grow up.

He criticized Bush's tax cut as a windfall for the wealthy that could have been used for education and child care programs.

"Imagine the embarrassment of having a president who puts together a program, 'No Child

Left Behind,' and leaves more children behind?" he said.

He repeated his previous contention that using one-third of Bush's tax cut would solve many of the child care problems in the country.

He said the program implemented in Vermont while he was governor resulted in health insurance for 96 percent of the children in the state. He also talked about Vermont's program of "welcome baby" visits to new parents, offering emotional and financial help that 91 percent of new mothers accepted. One of the results was a drop in the need for foster care, he said.

During his administration, dental clinics also were placed in schools, he said.

Abbie LaPlante of Litchfield, an early child education major at the New Hampshire Community Technical College in Concord, had not made up her mind on a candidate, but she liked what she heard on health care from Dean, enough that she wanted to hear what he had to say about other issues.

Trisha Hall, an elementary school teacher from Durham, already had heard three other candidates at the forum, and was leaning toward Kerry, until she heard Dean.

"Kerry knew what he was talking about, but when it comes down to making real hard choices, Governor Dean can do it," she said. She thought his ideas and his vision "are the things that are going to make a difference."

"I don't know if we can afford it, but we've never tried," she said.