

THE HILL

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Campaigning in N.H., Obama targets Clinton

By Sam Youngman

MANCHESTER, N.H. — Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) had his sights on Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) during a Labor Day campaign swing here Monday.

Though he never named his front-running rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Obama repeatedly sought to portray her in a speech and other remarks as stuck in the politics of the past. Alluding to Clinton's new stump speech that emphasizes "change and experience," Obama retorted, "It's going to take more than just a change of parties to truly change."

Clinton and her husband, former President Bill Clinton, were in New Hampshire Sunday trying to spread the new message, and Obama targeted it in his speeches time and again Monday.

"There are those that tout their experience working the system in Washington," Obama told a crowd gathered here at Veterans Park. "The problem is, the system isn't working for us, and it hasn't in a long time."

Obama even took swipes at Clinton while bashing President Bush. He said the administration's "divisive" politics was not new to the city — "They didn't invent it. It was there before they got to Washington," Obama said.

Problems such as those surrounding healthcare have been around before Bush "through Republican and Democratic administrations," he added, apparently referring to Clinton's healthcare battles of the 1990s as first lady.

"We need to turn the page. We need to write a new chapter in American history," Obama said.

Seizing on the issue of experience, Obama talked at length about his work as a community organizer in Chicago and his work in the Illinois state Senate.

"To this bunch, only the time you spend in Washington counts," he said. "I think they're wrong about that."

To color his point, Obama added that Vice President Dick Cheney and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld both had long "résumés in Washington."

"Time served doesn't guarantee good judgment," Obama said. "A résumé says nothing about character."

Obama mentioned no fewer than three times that he was opposed to the Iraq war "from the start," each time drawing his largest applause from the crowd.

With Labor Day weekend serving as the traditional start of election season, Clinton's and Obama's efforts were a balance of their rock-star personas and the retail politics for which Iowa and New Hampshire are known.

Both candidates travel with Secret Service details, but they and the former president took great pains Sunday and Monday to work the crowds, shaking hands and signing autographs.

At an AFL-CIO breakfast Monday morning, Obama worked the room while state politicians spoke. He went from table to table chatting briefly with union members, and in a couple of instances, talking policy.

Obama spoke for some time to a table of union members about healthcare, avoiding specifics but seeking to convey a sense of compassion.

"It should be our No. 1 domestic priority," Obama told the table. "We're going to fight for you."

Obama stood in the room full of different union members as the only major Democratic candidate who has yet to receive an endorsement from any major labor union. He did, however, speak at both events about the importance of unions.

The labor union news of the day went to former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.). The former senator's campaign announced Monday morning, while Edwards was at a rally in Pittsburgh, that he has won the backing of the both the United Steelworkers and the United Mine Workers of America. Last week he announced he had secured the endorsement of the carpenters' union, and Clinton announced backing from the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the United Transportation Union.

As New Hampshire tradition demands, Obama also encountered an ornery issue advocate; this one compared the senator's position on the Pentagon's funding of "obsolete" weapons to that of Republican candidate and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

"Don't say that," Obama joked, adding that he would want to conduct a Defense Department review and would stop funding weapons that "don't work."

Obama's presence was also noted by Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), who, having won the International Association of Fire Fighters endorsement last week, was invited to sit at the head table with Gov. John Lynch (D) and state union officials.

In a good-natured dig at the Illinois senator, Dodd made light of Obama's short time in the Senate at the beginning of his speech. "You got to watch these junior senators all the time," he said.

At every stop, Obama continued to try and impress upon crowd members his message of hope.

"He is so naïve," Obama said, imitating critics. "He's a hope peddler. He's a hope monger. Well, I stand guilty as charged."

