

Koch brothers to workers: Vote for Romney or 'suffer the consequences'

By Martha C. White

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As a contentious election season enters its final weeks, a flurry of communication from corporate leaders to rank-and-file workers strongly implies that voting for Obama could imperil their jobs and their financial stability.

Employees of a paper company owned by the outspoken billionaire Koch brothers received a mailing warning that they could “suffer the consequences, including higher gasoline prices, runaway inflation, and other ills” if they voted for candidates not supported by Koch-owned companies or its political fund-raising arm.

The company also provided workers with a list of those candidates it supports. At the top: Mitt Romney, according to media outlet *In These Times*, which broke the story. “The packet also included an anti-Obama editorial by Charles Koch and a pro-Romney editorial by David Koch,” it said.

“This is in no way an attempt to ‘intimidate’ employees,” Greg Guest, senior director of corporate communications at Georgia-Pacific, said in a statement on the site kochfacts.com.

“It’s free speech. On the other hand, while it’s maybe not directly intended to be intimidating, it can be intimidating,” said Izzy Kushner, president of consulting firm HR Impact and president of the Human Resources Association of New York.

Although the Koch brothers are known for their outspoken support of the GOP, “Our support is not based on party affiliation, and we support both Republicans and Democrats who support market-based policies and solutions,” Guest’s statement said.

“In the flyer sent to Oregon employees, all 14 Koch-backed state candidates were Republicans,” *In These Times* reported. A request for examples of Democratic candidates included on the list of Koch-supported candidates was not answered by press time.

In recent days, other reports have surfaced of company heads telling workers to vote for Romney in the upcoming election,

Last week, owner of Westgate Resorts David Siegel sent workers a pro-Romney email that said, “If any new taxes are levied on me, or my company ... I will be forced to cut back. This means fewer jobs, less benefits and certainly less opportunity for everyone.”

MSNBC program *Up w/ Chris Hayes* reported Sunday on a leaked email from Arthur Allen, president and CEO of ASG Software Solutions, that took a similar tone. “If the US re-elects President Obama, our chances of staying independent are slim to none. ... I don’t want to hear any complaints regarding the fallout that will most likely come,” he wrote. The company did not respond to the program’s request for comment.

And two weeks ago, in a letter to employees obtained by Michigan media outlet *MLive.com*, president and CEO of auto-parts manufacturer Lacks Enterprises Richard Lacks warned workers that sticking with the current administration would hurt them. “The more government takes the less there will be available to spread around to the working people of this company,” he wrote in reference to “talk of additional tax increases.”

“It is important that in November you vote to improve your standard of living and that will be through smaller government and less government,” he said.

On the other side of the political spectrum, nonprofit group Cause of Action called on the Office of Inspector General to investigate reports that two managers at the Federal Aviation Administration told attendees at a departmental meeting to vote for Democrats in presidential and Congressional races “in order to preserve the FAA budget and, consequently, their jobs and pay,” according to a letter it submitted to the OIG.

In the private sector, though, such instances skew pro-Romney. The candidate himself suggested that business owners adopt this practice during a virtual town hall meeting with the National Federation of Independent Businesses back in June.

“I hope you make it very clear to your employees what you believe is in the best interest of your enterprise and therefore their job and their future in the upcoming elections,” he said, telling the audience, “Nothing illegal about you talking to your employees about what you believe is best for the business, because I believe that will figure into their election decision, their voting decision.”

Some companies aren’t waiting until after the election to carry out their grim predictions. Darden Restaurants, parent company of Olive Garden and Red Lobster, started testing schedules with more part-time workers that would help it avoid costs for full-time employers under forthcoming provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

“Whatever the reason, more corporations do seem to be getting involved in the political process to a greater degree these days, said Jerry Glass, president of HR consulting firm F&H Solutions Group. “I think it’s a reflection of ... the polarization of the process,” he said. “This is a very decisive and divisive election.

"Messages like this are horrible for a corporate culture. It's a fear tactic," Kushner said, and it can make workers "feel uncomfortable that they're being directed about how to live."

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