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‘Listening tour’ hears little about labor

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Annoyance is understandable when members of Congress talk about jobs but barely touch on unions, and when “working across the aisle” seems less creative than submissive.

That compliant attitude hides behind notions of cooperating and keeping an open mind. But as my grandpa said, “You shouldn’t have such an open mind that you can hear the wind whistling through your head.”

On Nov. 20, Democrats’ “Make It in America” listening tour stopped at the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce, where U.S. Reps. Cheri Bustos (Illinois), Steny Hoyer (Maryland) and Jimmy Panetta (California) heard from business people. Since it ostensibly was to listen, maybe it can be forgiven that labor was barely an afterthought. However, failing to represent workers who want to bargain collectively is alarmingly similar to the Clintons’ “New Democrat” betrayal of labor in the years before Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992.

“Clinton and his allies turned their backs on the labor movement that had made their careers possible, largely in hopes of discouraging anti-union companies from funding potential rivals or to undermine potential rivals on the Left,” says University of Arkansas professor Michael Pierce.

“Social and cultural concerns became the defining issues in electoral politics, and the economic needs of workers fell off the Democratic agenda,” Pierce writes for the Labor and Working-Class History Association.

The “labor movement was the target,” he said. Clinton said “he was a ‘different kind of Democrat,’ scolding trade unionists for outdated economic ideas, and for the first time since the 1930s, the Democratic presidential nominee refused to embrace the labor movement and the politics of class.”

Decades later, the Democratic Party now says it’s pushing for policies to spur job growth; “Make It in America” is about “revitalizing jobs and manufacturing,” according to Hoyer.

That’s not wrong; it’s incomplete.

Launched in 2010, “Make It in America” helped Congress pass 19 related measures, Democrats say. But besides ending tax loopholes that let companies transfer jobs overseas, few address workers’ rights. Instead, “Make It In America’s” victories helped manufacturers, protected patents, established grants for veteran job-training, increased investments in adult education, encouraged support for women entrepreneurs, and twice supported the Export-Import Bank.

“House Democrats’ ‘Make It In America’ plan has always been about identifying our economic challenges and addressing them by seizing new opportunities,” said Hoyer, the House Minority Whip. “In spite of the progress that has been made, too many Americans feel left behind and believe that no one in Washington is listening to their concerns.

“Families live in constant fear of an unexpected expense that will mean economic catastrophe,” Hoyer’s said.

Again, that’s true, but it misses the important part unions play in the economy.

At “Make It in America” Congressional hearings in 2015, Bustos’ testimony foreshadowed Hoyer’s recent summary of economic problems: “A mismatch between the skills that workers have and the skills employers need; entrepreneurs who find it difficult to secure the capital needed to take their ideas to the next level; and hard working families playing by the rules who feel the American dream slipping farther from their reach,” she said.

And Bustos last month once more expressed her commitment to reaching across party lines to enact laws in Washington.

In Illinois, affordable college and expanded vocational training were addressed by speakers.

The right to form and operate labor unions?

Crickets.

Hoyer and Bustos in a visit to Peoria last summer promoted the Export-Import Bank, the credit agency set up as a chartered government corporation in 1934, when its assignment was to facilitate overseas buyers for U.S. products by making loans to influential borrowers at below-market interest rates. Ex-Im borrows billions of dollars from the U.S. Treasury to make loans or credit lines to foreign buyers of U.S. products; guarantee loans to banks that lend to foreign buyers and U.S. exporters; and insure against losses on loans.

Supporters say Ex-Im’s assistance to companies would be hard to get on the private market and helps make trade deals that can boost hiring. Illinois corporations such as Boeing, Caterpillar and Deere & Company are among the companies that benefit from Ex-Im, which has been criticized by conservatives and progressives.

Conservative interests such as the Cato Institute criticized Ex-Im for essentially picking winners and losers in the global economy, and progressive economist Dean Baker said below-market loans “raise the cost of capital to other firms.”

Foes also doubt that such industrial giants cannot get financing elsewhere.

“It is just one more example of how the rich and powerful have no interest in the free market when circumventing how the market works to their benefit,” Baker added.

Is anyone on Capitol Hill truly listening?