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Thursday, May 15, 2008

Decision 2008

## Obama pledges help for auto industry

### Edwards endorses candidate at Grand Rapids rally

Gordon Trowbridge, Charlie Cain and Mark Hornbeck / The Detroit News

**GRAND RAPIDS** -- Sen. Barack Obama's first visit to Michigan in nearly a year included a high-profile endorsement from John Edwards and a pledge to fight for a rebound in Michigan's battered auto industry.

"We are taking steps in the right direction, and American automakers are on the move," Obama told a friendly crowd in Warren, where he unveiled a manufacturing agenda that includes billions of dollars in potential aid for the Detroit car companies.

Later, at a packed Van Andel Arena in Grand Rapids, Obama vowed to make up for his long absence from the state. "We didn't have a chance to campaign here during the primary. I felt bad about it," said Obama, who removed his name from Michigan's ballot in the dispute over the January primary and hasn't appeared here since July.

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"I felt guilty. As a consequence, I decided to give you something special." Edwards -- a favorite of organized labor -- then strolled onto the stage to thundering cheers and an embrace from the Illinois senator.

"The Democratic voters of America have made their choice," Edwards said. "And so have I."

The endorsement is a blow to Sen. Hillary Clinton, who hoped her landslide victory Tuesday in West Virginia, and Obama's continuing troubles with working-class white voters, would somehow help overcome Obama's seemingly insurmountable lead in Democratic delegates.

"We respect John Edwards, but as the voters of West Virginia showed last night, this thing is far from over,"

said Clinton campaign chairman Terry McAuliffe.

Wednesday's daylong campaign swing came 10 months after Obama's last visit to Michigan, and a year after a May 2007 speech to the Detroit Economic Club in which Obama hammered Detroit's Big 3 automakers for failing to embrace fuel efficiency. That speech was seen by many in the industry as an unfair attack, and by many Michigan Democrats as a potential challenge for Obama if he became the party's nominee.

But at the Warren forum, Obama praised Ford Motor Co., Chrysler LLC and General Motors Corp. for making major progress, and in an interview afterward, told The Detroit News that his remarks a year ago had been misinterpreted.

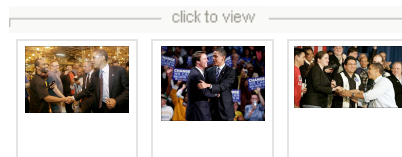
"It has gotten a bad rap in some cases, because I think people noticed me calling on the automakers to get out in front of change; but what they didn't notice was how committed I was to investing in the U.S. auto industry," Obama said. Since his address, he said, the carmakers have made many of the moves he advocated.

### Crowds are enthusiastic

The day's events were Michigan's first real experience with the wild enthusiasm and rock concert-style mass



Barack Obama meets workers at the Chrysler stamping plant in Sterling Heights on Wednesday. He proposes billions in aid for Detroit auto firms. (John T. Greilick / The Detroit News)



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rallies that have marked Obama's rise from underdog to likely Democratic nominee.

"Talking to him was one of the most amazing things. You have to believe everything he says," said Michael Dear, 20, of Clinton Township, who asked Obama about health care during the economic forum.

But it was in Grand Rapids' Van Andel Arena that the excitement hit fever pitch. Edwards' endorsement had been sought by Obama and Clinton ever since he left the race in February.

"Many of us black folks have a high regard for Sen. Edwards," said Don Williams, 71, a retired dean from Grand Valley State University. "It's nice to see him come forward and eliminate some of this foolishness with dragging out the nomination. It was almost Hillary's time. Let's move on."

Dave Blakeslee, 46, a social worker from Wyoming, was "thrilled" the Edwards endorsement happened in Grand Rapids.

"We've been starved for political attention here the last several months, especially since our primary didn't count," he said.

Grand Rapids police estimated that 15,000 gathered at the hockey arena, which has an official seating capacity of just under 11,000. People lined up all afternoon for the chance to hear Obama's 17-minute speech.

Much of Michigan's labor establishment had hoped to line up behind Edwards, the former North Carolina senator and 2004 vice presidential nominee who has been an active supporter of unions. David Bonior, a former congressman from Macomb County who managed Edwards unsuccessful campaign this year and has close ties to the UAW and other unions, endorsed Obama last week.

He vowed to join Edwards' campaign to cut poverty in half within 10 years. "That is a goal I will set as president of the United States. We can do this," Obama said.

## He tours Chrysler plant

Wednesday morning, Obama met with Chrysler President and Vice Chairman Jim Press before touring the Sterling Heights plant, which stamps metal parts for several Chrysler vehicles. Later, at the Warren forum, he delivered a speech that was well received by the auto industry as a departure from his past rhetoric.

"It's hopeful to see a tone that reflects a desire to better understand our industry and a willingness to help bolster our efforts in advanced technology," said GM spokesman Greg Martin.

Obama proposed:

- Using part of a \$10 billion venture-capital fund to establish a Michigan-based initiative aimed at moving environmentally friendly auto technology from the lab to the market. "This fund will help American companies build batteries for plug-in hybrid vehicles so we don't have to buy them from abroad," Obama said. "That's how we'll make sure American automakers continue to lead the world, and that's how we'll make sure that American manufacturers don't just survive, but actually thrive in this century."
- Spending part of a 10-year, \$150 billion commitment on clean energy job development to help domestic carmakers retool their factories and build alternative-fuel cars.
- Doubling funding for the Manufacturing Extension Partnership, a federal program that provides several kinds of assistance to manufacturers hoping to improve efficiency or technology. The Bush administration has tried repeatedly to kill the program or reduce its funding.

"I'm committing the kind of resources we haven't seen in decades here in Michigan," Obama told The News.

But he also emphasized that the carmakers must continue down the path to fuel efficiency.

"We're going to need to acknowledge that the competitive environment has changed," he said. "Oil prices over long term are not going to be going down, so the mix of cars that are sold are going to have to change."

## Candidate backs Jobs Fund

Obama praised Gov. Jennifer Granholm's 21st Century Jobs Fund, a state program aimed at creating new jobs in alternative energy and technology industries, telling his audience in Warren that he wants to expand the program to more states.

But Republicans sought to portray Obama and Granholm -- whose job approval rating is dismal -- linked in promoting economic policies that discourage growth. Michigan native Mitt Romney, who won the January primary here by promising help to the battered economy, told reporters Obama's plans would cost jobs.

"I think people in Michigan have found that the Granholm approach does not work for building the economy of the state," said Romney, who ran for the Republican presidential nomination and won the Michigan GOP primary largely by focusing on how he would fix its economic ills.

The Obama campaign also announced endorsements Wednesday from two Michigan superdelegates, Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano and University of Detroit-Mercy student Lauren Wolfe. Eric Coleman, an Oakland County commissioner, said he had also endorsed Obama.

*Detroit News Staff Writers David Shepardson, Christina Stolarz and Deb Price contributed to this report. You can reach Gordon Trowbridge at (202) 662-8738.*

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