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Cabinet member slammed for labeling teachers' union 'terrorist'

By Michael Kuchta, Union Advocate editor — February 25, 2004

ST. PAUL — Minnesota Congresswoman Betty McCollum Tuesday called for the resignation of U.S. education secretary Rod Paige, who a day earlier labeled the nation's largest teachers union "a terrorist organization."

Paige made his comments Monday at the White House during a private meeting with a bipartisan group of governors. Paige later issued what he called an apology, saying he used "an inappropriate choice of words" in describing the 2.7 million-member National Education Association.

McCollum, in a statement on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, called Paige's statement "a hateful comment beneath the dignity of any cabinet secretary." It labels America's teachers "in effect, enemies of America," she said.

"This vile language was no joke. It was not insensitive. It was in fact a deliberate attack, an example of Neo-McCarthyism at its worst."

Following the pattern

Paige's comments are, indeed, just the latest in a series of statements and actions by the Bush administration attempting to portray unions and union membership as unpatriotic.

In January 2003, Adm. James Loy, head of the Transportation Security Administration, said the right to form a union is not compatible with the nation's war against terrorism. He then banned the nation's 57,000 airport security screeners from being able to join a union. Using similar arguments, the White House stripped 170,000 workers in the Department of Homeland Security of their right to union membership, and is attempting to do the same with 700,000 civilian employees at the U.S. Department of Defense.

Also in January 2003, House majority leader Tom DeLay sent a fund-raising letter that called the American labor movement "a clear and present danger to the security of the United States at home and the safety of our Armed Forces overseas."

Paige calls comment 'a bad joke'

Paige, in his official attempt to explain his “terrorist” comment, differentiated between individual teachers, whom he called “the real soldiers of democracy” and what he called “the NEA's high-priced Washington lobbyists” and “the obstructionist scare tactics” they use in opposing the No Child Left Behind Act. “I should have chosen my words better,” he said.

Paige told The Associated Press, “I was making what I now know was a bad joke.” Teachers union officials are not buying his explanation.

Reg Weaver, president of the NEA, called Paige’s comments “morally repugnant.”

“The organization and its members are one and the same,” said Judy Schaubach, president of Education Minnesota, which is affiliated with NEA. “Frankly, Secretary Paige’s comment is very insulting and alienating.... To respond to the legitimate criticisms of educators with name-calling is beyond offensive.”

Edward J. McElroy, secretary-treasurer of the nation’s other main teachers union, the American Federation of Teachers, said: “At a time when our nation faces the very real threat of terrorism, it is both unconscionable and irresponsible for any public figure, let alone a U.S. cabinet member, to undertake this kind of name-calling. There is no excuse for such crude and inflammatory hate speech.”

John Sweeney, president of the national AFL-CIO, said, “The Bush administration would like to label all those who disagree with it as ‘terrorists.’”

Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty was present during Paige’s remarks. His office did not immediately return phone calls seeking comment.

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