

Obama to Tout American Manufacturing during WI Visit

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MADISON, Wis. (AP) — President Barack Obama will try to use his Wednesday visit to a Milwaukee padlock manufacturer to highlight an improving economy and showcase companies that are bringing jobs back to the U.S., even though the Wisconsin company's success isn't reflective of the state.

Master Lock, which Obama mentioned in his State of the Union address, is a good story for the president — especially in Wisconsin. It's a unionized company that recently brought back 100 jobs from China, and the state's Republican governor is being targeted for recall largely because of his proposal that effectively ended collective bargaining rights for most public workers.

However, in the face of national growth, Wisconsin has lost private sector jobs in each of the past six months. Democrats have been using that to hammer embattled Gov. Scott Walker, who promised during his 2010 campaign to create 250,000 jobs during his first term.

Obama's visit to Wisconsin will be his first in more than a year and a recognition that he must win the state, which he carried by 14 points in 2008 but where Republicans captured nearly every statewide office two years later. Wednesday also marks the one-year anniversary of the first widespread protests against Walker's union proposal.

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Walker has been making the case across the country that his recall election is a bellwether of how Obama will do in Wisconsin in the fall. In a fundraising letter his campaign sent to potential donors outside Wisconsin last month, Walker said a win would deliver a "devastating blow" to Obama's re-election efforts.

Walker planned to greet Obama at the airport Wednesday and be with him for the Master Lock visit. Walker's official office and his campaign said only that it was an honor to have Obama in Wisconsin.

But Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus lashed out at Obama during a conference call, calling the visit "yet another taxpayer paid funded campaign stop by the president, this time to our home in Wisconsin, to rehash really more of the same broken promises." Priebus formerly served as Wisconsin Republican Party chairman before taking over as RNC head last year.

Wisconsin Republican Party spokesman Ben Sparks said voters in 2010 "resoundingly rejected the Democrats' ongoing effort to move our state backward and they have no interest in four more years of the same failed policies."

Two years after Obama's presidential win, Republicans won majorities in both houses of the Wisconsin Legislature — which had been controlled by Democrats — and knocked off Democratic U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold. Republicans also picked up two of the state's congressional seats, giving them a five-to-three advantage.

Democrats have been trying to rebound since, and are using the citizen-driven recall petition drives to undo some of the Republican gains. Democrats picked up two seats in the state Senate through recall elections last year, and they are targeting four more Republicans this year.

A recent poll by the Marquette University Law School shows both Obama and Walker leading their potential challengers in Wisconsin. Obama was ahead of Republican Mitt Romney 48 percent to 40 percent, and Walker was ahead of potential Democratic candidates by either 6 or 7 percentage points. The telephone poll of 701 registered voters was conducted Jan. 19-22.

"Based on that data, it's perfectly possible that the state renders a split decision," said Charles Franklin, director of the poll and visiting professor of law and public policy. "Both races are likely to tighten as we get closer."

Franklin said it makes sense for Walker to tie his fate to Obama's since it would likely to help mobilize conservatives and tea party activists.

Democratic Party Chairman Mike Tate scoffed at the governor's claim that fighting off a recall would hurt Obama's chances in Wisconsin.

"Walker has given an enormous gift to Democrats and the progressive movement in Wisconsin, unifying it and readying it for the national conversation about the future of the middle class," Tate said.

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Recall organizers submitted an estimated 1 million signatures to recall Walker, and the state is currently verifying the names. A recall election would likely be held this spring of summer.

With so much emphasis on the state's economy in Walker's recall campaign, Obama will have to walk a thin line during his visit Wednesday to Master Lock.

"It is an interesting difficulty of Democrats wanting to talk about jobs being bad in the state and blame Walker, while Obama wants to talk about things turning around for his re-election," Franklin said.

Walker campaigned in 2010 on the promise to deliver 250,000 more jobs to Wisconsin over four years. And while jobs have declined each of the past six months, they are up by 13,500 since Walker took office.

However, Tate said Walker bears responsibility for Wisconsin's job losses since job growth is increasing nationally.

"These are not theoretical lapses, but a real body of work." Tate said.

Master Lock, founded in Milwaukee in 1921, employed more than 1,100 workers at its sprawling downtown Milwaukee complex when it announced in 1997 that it would begin importing locks from China. By 2003, the plant employed just 270 workers.

Early last year, the company's leaders said the business was operating at full capacity after bringing back jobs that had been outsourced. The plant now employs about 410 people, though it still operates factories in China and Mexico.

Master Lock became somewhat of a household name for its "Tough Under Fire" Super Bowl ads that ran for two decades starting in 1974. The ad shows the ubiquitous Master Lock padlock surviving a sharpshooter's bullet.

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