



## Political Discussion in the Workplace: Small Talk or Big Problems?

By Nathaniel J. Torres

The 2008 presidential election is, and will likely continue to be, one of the most contentious presidential elections in decades. The historic uniqueness of this election season, combined with the around-the-clock news coverage of the election, will likely force employers to confront the challenging issue of setting limits on political dialogue at work.

For example, this election has seen an unprecedented focus on and media infatuation with such topics of the “black vote,” the “white vote,” and the “Hispanic vote,” as well as discussions on gender and the differences between “college-educated” voters and “blue-collar” voters. The constant discussion of these issues, combined with the diversity of the presidential candidates, ensures that the workplace will be forced to deal with this debate as well.

While political debate is often mere “watercooler” fodder and may even be a perfect forum to increase camaraderie and interaction between employees, this debate may also escalate into the display of campaign literature, the distribution of

politically oriented emails, or the posting of signs. And while many of these activities may not be intended to provoke or create conflict, they can easily be the source of arguments, disrupt workplace productivity, and possibly lead to formal complaints and divide the workplace.

One troubling scenario is a potential lawsuit arising from a heated political discussion that crosses appropriate boundaries. Interestingly, this year’s election at times has focused on issues of race, gender, national origin, and age, which are also all categories protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. The discussion of these topics is inevitable, creating the potential for inappropriate, off-hand, or thoughtless comments that could quickly descend into a verbal exchange that could be used to show a history of discrimination or an intolerant work environment.

Even if it is unlikely that political discussions in your workplace will descend to the level of litigation, there are certain steps that can be taken to avoid workplace conflict rooted in

political difference and to ensure continued productivity amidst a distracting political season.

### **CLEARLY ARTICULATE YOUR POLICIES**

Employers should provide clear and consistent policies informing their employees of what constitutes acceptable political activity in the workplace. Your policies should address the following topics:

#### *Restrict the display and distribution of political information*

You may prevent employees from using your email system, company bulletin boards, or work space to solicit and distribute non-work-related information.<sup>1</sup> The best way to do this is through a written policy that explicitly prohibits the solicitation and distribution of noncompany materials during work time.<sup>2</sup> Be sure to enforce this equally for all types of solicitation and distribution. Disciplining an employee for distribution of material on one issue, and not disciplining for another, may also lead to claims of discrimination. All policies must be applied equally.

#### *Limit political dialogue at work*

You can't, nor would you want to, stop an employee from conversing with a colleague about an issue that they both care about, even if not all of their colleagues agree with their position. Similarly, an employer

should not get involved in employees political activities during non-work time and in non-work areas, as these activities are generally considered protected activity. However, an employee's political activities in the workplace, and on work time, can quickly escalate into an argument or disrupt the workplace. For example, employees may be adamant about their position on a particular issue or insist that their co-employees share their views on a particular presidential candidate. As such, you may ask the employees to not discuss that particular topic inside the workplace on work time.<sup>3</sup> If appropriate, inform the employees that political discussion may be bad for business, make fellow employees uncomfortable, limit productivity, and could even be misconstrued or used as evidence to support a claim of discrimination or hostile work environment. For example, a heated discussion about John McCain, Sarah Palin, or Barack Obama could quickly derail into a shouting match that includes less thoughtful, offhand, and inappropriate comments regarding race, gender, or age.

#### *Ban campaign paraphernalia in the workplace*

You have the right to ask an employee to stop wearing a button, T-shirt, or sign if it interferes with worker morale or productivity.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, you can prohibit the

display of buttons, T-shirts, or signs of your employees if they interact with customers or clients. Again, this policy must be applied in a consistent manner, regardless of the message conveyed, to avoid any perception of discriminatory application in the policy.

Employers should anticipate that these policies will often be met with skepticism or be viewed as an encroachment on an employee's free speech rights. In anticipation of this, employers should remind their employees that the First Amendment does not empower employees to engage in speech that includes discriminatory statements regarding race, color, sex, national origin, or religion. And while Title VII does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of political affiliation, many states and municipalities have enacted such protections.

Again, consistent application of these policies is as important as making them clear. Disciplining or restricting the speech of an employee for one statement, while ignoring or allowing the speech of another, may be the basis for other discrimination claims. Both the policy and its implementation should be carefully evaluated.

### **SUPPORTING SUPERVISORS AND MANAGERS**

Just as employee political banter can descend into conflict or hostility,

the political activities of supervisors and/or managers must also be addressed by employers. Employers should discuss company policies regarding political activities with their supervisors and managers and also the role they would like to see their supervisors play in the implementation of these policies. For example, in a recent survey,<sup>5</sup> many employees have commented on feeling pressured to conform to their supervisor's political views. This can quickly lead to a feeling of unwanted compulsion, affecting worker morale and productivity. Because of this, it is imperative that supervisors be mindful of their own opinions, and in particular their expression of these opinions during a politically lively period. Remind your supervisors that statements about a presidential candidate's age, race, or gender could fuel or even support a claim of discrimination or hostile work environment.

Similarly, if supervisors do choose to express their political positions or beliefs, remind them that employees often make certain assumptions about their supervisors based solely on their position on one issue. Also, employees may begin to interpret their supervisors' political positions as statements on morals or beliefs. As a result, supervisors' workplace

decisions may begin to be evaluated and judged as reflections of their political positions. Again, this can potentially put an unwanted and unnecessary strain on workplace relations and trigger unnecessary conflict, impacting morale and productivity in the workplace.

It may also be necessary to train your supervisors on how to best diffuse disagreement in the work environment, because it is likely that supervisors will have to make split-second decisions as to when to get involved in a potentially disruptive conversation or argument. Your supervisors must be aware of the difference between the healthy exchange of ideas and a potentially hostile environment. As a general rule, because political discussions can easily escalate into unproductive argument, remind your supervisors to immediately get involved in any discussion that even appears on the verge of escalation. They should err on the side of involvement because, often, a supervisor's "non-action" or silent response to a situation does not in fact display neutrality or impartiality. Rather, it may easily be interpreted as the exact opposite. An employee may interpret this silence as support for or acceptance of the views expressed. These assumptions and misinterpretations,

while potentially unfair, may paint a supervisor's prior or future work-related decisions with a tainted brush. Remind your supervisors that intervention at any early stage is likely the best approach to a potentially heated discussion.

In closing, as the presidential election season shifts into a new gear, reacquaint yourself, your supervisors, and your employees with your workplace policies while stressing the importance of creating a productive and politically tolerant work environment. Use your policies and procedures in a manner that fairly diffuses inappropriate political activity and is applied consistently without regard to the position presented. ■

<sup>1</sup> See *Republic Aviation Corp. v. National Labor Relations Board*, 324 U.S. 793, 803 n. 10 (1945).

<sup>2</sup> *California Employers Guide to Employee Handbooks & Personnel Policy Manuals*, Morrison & Foerster, § 2.25[3] (September 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See National Labor Relations Board, *Memorandum GC 08-10: Guideline Memorandum Concerning Unfair Labor Practice Charges Involving Political Advocacy* (Jul. 22, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Vault, *Politics in the Workplace: Survey 2007*, available at: [www.vault.com/surveys/politicsindex.jsp](http://www.vault.com/surveys/politicsindex.jsp).

Nathaniel J. Torres is an associate in our San Francisco, California office and can be reached at (415) 268-6220 or [ntorres@mof.com](mailto:ntorres@mof.com).

This newsletter addresses recent employment law developments. Because of its generality, the information provided herein may not be applicable in all situations and should not be acted upon without specific legal advice based on particular situations.

Editor: Lloyd W. Aubry, Jr., (415) 268-6558

#### San Francisco

Lloyd W. Aubry, Jr. (415) 268-6558  
laubry@mofo.com  
James E. Boddy, Jr. (415) 268-7081  
jboddy@mofo.com  
Karen Kubin (415) 268-6168  
kkubin@mofo.com  
Linda E. Shostak (415) 268-7202  
lshostak@mofo.com  
Eric A. Tate (415) 268-6915  
etate@mofo.com

#### Palo Alto

Christine E. Lyon (650) 813-5770  
clyon@mofo.com  
David J. Murphy (650) 813-5945  
dmurphy@mofo.com  
Raymond L. Wheeler (650) 813-5656  
rwheeler@mofo.com  
Tom E. Wilson (650) 813-5604  
twilson@mofo.com

#### Los Angeles

Timothy F. Ryan (213) 892-5388  
tryan@mofo.com  
Janie F. Schulman (213) 892-5393  
jschulman@mofo.com

#### New York

Miriam H. Wugmeister (212) 506-7213  
mwugmeister@mofo.com

#### Washington, D.C./Northern Virginia

Ann B. Stevens (703) 760-7336  
annstevens@mofo.com  
Daniel P. Westman (703) 760-7795  
dwestman@mofo.com

#### San Diego

Rick Bergstrom (858) 720-5143  
rbergstrom@mofo.com  
Craig A. Schloss (858) 720-5134  
cschloss@mofo.com

#### Denver

Steven M. Kaufmann (303) 592-2236  
skaufmann@mofo.com

#### London

Ann Bevitt 44-20-7896-5841  
abevitt@mofo.com

If you wish to change an address, add a subscriber, or comment on this newsletter, please write to:

Wende Arrollado  
Morrison & Foerster LLP  
12531 High Bluff Drive, Suite 100  
San Diego, California 92130  
warrollado@mofo.com

[www.mofo.com](http://www.mofo.com)

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## Disciplining Employees Involved in Political Advocacy Under the NLRA

This past summer the National Labor Relations Board general counsel Ronald Meisberg issued guidelines discussing a framework to analyze unfair labor practice charges being filed against employers disciplining their employees for acts of political advocacy. While employees have a right to engage in activities for their "mutual aid or protection," as protected by section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act ("NLRA"), according to the new guidelines this advocacy is only protected if there is a "direct nexus between the specific issue that is the subject of the advocacy and a specifically identified employment concern of the participating employees." Common activities that meet this test include employee complaints, written or oral, to regulatory bodies and employee appeals to legislative representatives addressing political topics directly impacting the employees work conditions.

Employee activities that meet this standard, are non-disruptive, and take place outside of work and in nonwork areas are protected by the NLRA. Similarly, an employer's discriminatory enforcement of valid workplace policies in an attempt to prevent an employee's activities may violate the NLRA. However, under the new guidelines, if an employee's activities are done while on duty, or require work stoppages, they may be subject to restrictions imposed by neutrally applied work rules and policies. For more information on this emerging area of the law, see National Labor Relations Board, *Memorandum GC 08-10: Guideline Memorandum Concerning Unfair Labor Practice Charges Involving Political Advocacy* (Jul. 22, 2008).

## Upcoming Speaking Engagements

The following is a list of upcoming employment and labor events in which Morrison & Foerster attorneys will be participating.

#### OCTOBER 2-3, 2008

*Employment Discrimination: Economic and Statistical Evidence*  
ERS Group Seminar  
James Boddy

#### OCTOBER 8, 2008

*Trade Secret Theft*  
North County Personnel Association Luncheon Meeting  
Craig Schloss

#### OCTOBER 29, 2008

*Noncompete Agreements and Other Post-Employment Restraints in California: What Now?*  
Practising Law Institute Seminar and Live Webinar  
David Murphy and Linda Shostak

#### NOVEMBER 11, 2008

*Complaint Investigations: How to Be Thorough and Avoid Legal Pitfalls*  
Business 21 Publications Webinar  
Daniel Westman

#### NOVEMBER 19, 2008

*Information Security and Data Privacy Summit 2008 — Understanding Risks and Emerging Issues*  
West Privacy Seminar  
Miriam Wugmeister

# Wage & Hour Update: Meal Periods After *Brinker*, Class Action Developments, and Other Current Issues



REGISTER ONLINE

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Wage and hour class actions continue to dominate all California litigation. The recent *Brinker* decision denying class certification of meal and rest period claims and off-the-clock work claims has now been applied to deny class certification in several cases. Nonetheless, employers should take steps to reduce their exposure to liability. *Brinker* itself provides guidance on complying with meal and rest period requirements. Beyond *Brinker*, other issues remain hot, including those involving independent contractors and exempt/non-exempt status. Now is the time to make sure that your wage and hour practices are in full compliance with applicable laws.

#### TOPICS INCLUDE:

- The latest developments in wage and hour class actions
- What *Brinker* portends for class actions
- What *Brinker* means for meal period compliance
- How to address exemption and independent contractor issues
- What you should know about recent case developments and statutes
- How a wage-hour audit can provide additional protection

#### FEATURED SPEAKERS INCLUDE:

Karen Kubin, Partner, Lead Counsel for *Brinker International* in *Brinker Restaurant Corp. v. Superior Court*  
Lloyd W. Aubry, Jr., Former California State Labor Commissioner

#### SAN FRANCISCO PROGRAM

**Tuesday October 14, 2008**

Four Seasons Hotel  
757 Market Street  
San Francisco, California

Registration: 8:00 am – 8:30 am  
Program: 8:30 am – 10:00 am

*Breakfast will be provided.*

#### SPEAKERS INCLUDE:

Karen Kubin, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP  
Lloyd W. Aubry, Jr., Of Counsel, Morrison & Foerster LLP

For additional questions, please email  
[bgabriel@mofo.com](mailto:bgabriel@mofo.com)

#### PALO ALTO PROGRAM

**Tuesday October 14, 2008**

Crowne Plaza Cabaña  
4290 El Camino Real  
Palo Alto, California

Registration: Noon – 12:30 pm  
Program: 12:30 pm – 2:00 pm

*Lunch will be provided.*

#### SPEAKERS INCLUDE:

Karen Kubin, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP  
Tom Wilson, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP

For additional questions, please email  
[tortiz@mofo.com](mailto:tortiz@mofo.com)

#### LOS ANGELES PROGRAM

**Wednesday October 15, 2008**

Morrison & Foerster LLP  
555 West Fifth Street, 34th Floor  
Los Angeles, California

Registration: 8:00 am – 8:30 am  
Program: 8:30 am – 10:00 am

*Breakfast will be provided.*

#### SPEAKERS INCLUDE:

Karen Kubin, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP  
Timothy Ryan, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP  
Janie Schulman, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP

For additional questions, please email  
[sknapp@mofo.com](mailto:sknapp@mofo.com)

#### SAN DIEGO PROGRAM

**Tuesday October 28, 2008**

Morrison & Foerster LLP  
12531 High Bluff Drive, Suite 100  
San Diego, California

Registration: 7:30 am – 8:00 am  
Program: 8:00 am – 9:30 am

*Breakfast will be provided.*

#### SPEAKERS INCLUDE:

Lloyd W. Aubry, Jr., Of Counsel, Morrison & Foerster LLP  
Rick Bergstrom, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP

For additional questions, please email  
[bforde@mofo.com](mailto:bforde@mofo.com)

#### MCLE ACCREDITED

This invitation is transferable and open to colleagues and guests. There is no charge to attend this seminar. Morrison & Foerster LLP (provider # 2183) certifies that this activity has been approved for MCLE credit by the State Bar of California in the amount of 1.5 hours.