

Mitchell says his race, Act 10 don't define his campaign

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State firefighters union head Mahlon Mitchell says he's more than the union candidate or the black candidate in the Dem race for governor.

Mitchell became a statewide figure as part of the opposition to the 2011 law that effectively ended collective bargaining for public employees and ended up as the Dem candidate for Lt. gov in 2012.

But he told a WisPolitics.com luncheon in Madison this week that Act 10 or his race isn't defining his candidacy.

Mitchell instead stressed this contest is about "a lot more than Act 10" for him, saying it's instead about wages, economic development, education, health care for all, infrastructure and transportation.

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As the leader of the firefighters union since January 2011, Mitchell also touched on the firefighters' and police officers' response to the bill when it was first proposed.

"As firefighters, we respond to emergencies," he said. "In our opinion that was an emergency that we had to respond to. People were under attack, and there was a definite conquer-and-divide going on. And we decided that we were not going to let that happen to us."

Still, he said that should he be elected governor, one of the first things he would do is set up wage commissions for the private sector to foster conversations about "lifting everyone's wages," not just for union members.

As for the public sector, Mitchell said he wanted to ensure municipalities and their employees had the ability to talk once a year about wages, hours and working conditions.

And he pushed back on the state GOP for labeling him a “union boss,” saying that the term is one the right uses “to defame us and make us look bad.”

“If a union boss is being the person that represents men and women running into burning buildings, men and women responding to medical emergencies, or teachers that teach our kids — our greatest commodity — or men and women that actually take care of our sick and injured by way of being a nurse or a CNA or an RN. If we’re talking about police officers who respond and protect us everyday, then if that’s what a union boss is, then I guess I am,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell is also known for becoming the first African-American leader of the state firefighters union, as well as the union’s youngest president. He was 35 when he took over. He turns 43 on Feb. 24.

And should he become governor, he would break another barrier and become the state’s first African-American leader. Only one African American has been elected statewide in Wisconsin — Vel Phillips as secretary of state in 1978.

But Mitchell downplayed the historic significance of his candidacy, saying he thinks it’s “more important to be a good governor than to be a black governor.”

“My point is: yes, history is important, but I’m not running to be the black governor; I’m running to be governor of the state of Wisconsin,” Mitchell said, adding people across the state — black, white, Hispanic and others — feel they’ve been forgotten and “those are the people that I’m running for.”

And he noted he hadn’t sought to be the first black president of the firefighters union, adding he didn’t “get into the fire service because I wanted to be a black firefighter.”

“I ran and I wanted to be a firefighter, because I wanted to help people,” he said. “Not just black people, not just white people, I wanted to help everybody.”

Still, he said the “elephant in the room” at past events he’s spoken at is whether the state’s ready for an African-American governor.

But he pointed to Barack Obama's 14-percentage-point margin of victory over Sen. John McCain in 2008 and Obama's 7 percent win over former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in 2012.

Those wins, Mitchell said, proves a candidate's success "depends on your message and how you convey that message."

"My point is and my correlation is that when you look at President Obama and his message and how inspired and the energy and passion that he brought, that's what got people out to the polls and got people to vote. And that's what we're trying to do in this campaign," he said.