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Remarks at the Greater Boston Labor Council Labor Day Breakfast in Boston, Massachusetts

September 7, 2015

The President. Hello, Boston! Well, everybody, have a seat. Everybody, have a seat. Happy Labor Day, everybody.

Audience members. Thank you. Happy Labor Day to you!

The President. This is a day where we celebrate the grit, the resilience, and the hard work of America's working families. Let me start by thanking your mayor, Mayor Walsh, who has stood up for working folks for a long time, since before he held this office. You've got two outstanding Senators: Elizabeth Warren in the house and Ed Markey. I brought along our Labor Secretary, Tom Perez, who's fighting for you every day. I know we must have some other Members of Congress here—I love them—and labor leaders who have devoted their lives to working Americans. Some of them caught a ride with me on the way over here. Mary Kay Henry from SEIU. Randi Weingarten from AFT. Arturo Rodriguez from UFW. Billy Hite from my hometown of Chicago, from UA. We've got Massachusetts AFL–CIO President, Steve Tolman. And give it up for Rich Rogers and everybody from the Greater Boston Labor Council for hosting this great breakfast.

It's always good to be back in Boston, especially when the weather is like this. [*Laughter*] But pretty soon fall is going to be in the air. Students coming back. Pats kick off on Thursday. Brady is free. [*Laughter*] And I've got a lot of good memories about this city. As we were driving up past the Commons, I was thinking about when I was a student here. The truth is, I was in the library most of the time, so I didn't get to have as much fun as I should have.

A couple years ago, I stood with you as you showed the world that no tragedy can compete with "Boston Strong." And then, there was that convention that you hosted back in 2004, before I had a motorcade—[*laughter*]—traffic from Logan was a little tougher back then, but you were kind enough to give a warm Boston welcome to an unknown State senator with a funny name.

And it's been 11 years since then. I have added a few gray hairs. I've earned every one of them. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. Woo! So handsome!

The President. Oh, see there—[*laughter*]—I'm sorry, what was that?

Audience members. You're handsome!

The President. There you go. [*Laughter*] See, now I really feel good.

But the words that I spoke that night in 2004 are the same ones that generations of Americans worked for and fought for. That's the belief that America is the most extraordinary of countries: a place only this country, where somebody like me could rise to the heights of political office; a conviction that no matter who you are or what you look like, or how much money you were born into, we can all make something of ourselves. We can clock in at a job that rewards our work with dignity and security. We can give our kids something better if we're willing to work for it, and instill in them the values of hard work and respect for other people,

and love of country, and the notion that here in America we're all in it together, that we are the United States of America. We're a Union.

And those are the beliefs that built this country. Those are the beliefs that built the strongest middle class the world has ever seen. But it wasn't just beliefs, it wasn't just words, that built the middle class in this country. You've got to say more than America is great and that's it. You've got to work for it. It's not enough just to say America is exceptional. You've got to prove it. You've got to work to keep it that way. And that's what generations of the labor movement have done. It was hard-working Americans who marched and organized to help working families get ahead. It was hard-working folks who demanded not simply a bigger paycheck for themselves, but more security for the folks working next to them too. They were the ones who were out in the cold on picket lines. They were the folks who were dealing with the Pinkertons. They were the folks who sometimes got beat or got fired for organizing; got threatened and stood up for an idea that everybody deserves a fair shake.

And those folks—your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents—they're the ones who gave us the 40-hour workweek. They're the ones who gave us overtime and the minimum wage and all kinds of things that folks now take for granted. It was those fights that gave us health insurance and Social Security and Medicare and retirement plans. All those gains are union-made. They're stamped with the union label. They're what we celebrate today.

And those values that built the middle class—working people's values, ordinary folks' values—that's what's guided me every day as President. I came in during the worst recession any of us have ever seen. And we've worked to rebuild our economy on a new foundation—to make it stronger for everybody. It's working folks who helped power our economy to 66 straight months of private-sector job growth—the longest streak on record. Five and a half straight years, 13.1 million new jobs overall. The lowest unemployment rate in 7 years.

It was working people, middle class values that restored the meaning of the word "Made in America," "Made in the U.S.A." We had an auto industry that was flat on its back when I came into office. Now we're on track to sell more cars and trucks this year than we have in more than a decade. American manufacturing had been declining for a decade, and then we came in and we nearly created 900,000 jobs in 5½ years. Fastest manufacturing growth that we've seen in a very long time.

When I came into office, business leaders said the best place to invest was in China. Well, they don't say that no more. [*Laughter*] Now the number-one place to invest is right here in the United States of America. That's because we've got the best workers in the world. That's progress.

Now, we're entering into political season. I'm so glad I'm not on the ballot. [*Laughter*] But it's political season. It starts earlier and earlier, and so now we're starting to hear a lot about middle-class values. Everybody wants to talk about the middle class. But some folks seem confused about what exactly that means. So let me provide a refresher course.

For me, for us, middle class values means providing tax cuts to 98 percent of Americans, but then asking the top 2 percent to pay a little bit more. That's helping middle class families. For us, middle class values means protecting Main Street from another crisis with the toughest Wall Street reforms in history that your Senators helped to make happen. It means reforming student loans and increasing Pell Grants so every kid can afford a college education. And we've got to keep working to make 2 years of community college free for everybody who's willing to work for it. It means helping 16 million Americans gain the security of health insurance,

because nobody in America should have to live in fear of going broke just because they or somebody in their family got sick. That's what it means to us to have middle class values.

And we know we've got more work to do to make sure more families feel the gains of this recovery. But the fact is that the verdict is in. Middle class economics works. Looking out for working people works. Bottom-up economics works. Middle class–out economics works. When you make sure everybody gets a fair shot and a fair shake and you're fighting for decent wages for workers and making sure they've got decent benefits, when you reward people who are playing by the rules, that's how everybody does better. That's how America gets ahead. That's how it's always been in this country.

Unfortunately, there are some folks in Washington—and some folks who are trying to get to Washington—who don't want to face these facts. No matter whether we're supporting working families or signing up folks for health care or anything else that we do, we keep on hearing back from them: "Oh, you're going to destroy jobs. You're going to destroy business. You're going to crush freedom. You can't have a minimum wage for people; it's bad for business, bad for jobs. You can't provide people health care; it's going to destroy the economy."

In their world, the only way to help the country grow and help people get ahead is to cut taxes for millionaires and billionaires and loosen up rules on big banks and polluters, and then you just wait, and then you look up at the sky, and prosperity will come raining down on us—[*laughter*]—from the top of the whatever high rise is in your city. But that's not how the economy works. That's not how working people get ahead. And that mindset, that ideology is what's been shrinking wages and increasing inequality and wrecking the economy for a long, long time. And we're fighting to reverse it. But these folks are pretty stubborn. I will give them credit; they don't let facts or evidence get in the way. [*Laughter*] They really don't.

And as I said, that—they're—Republicans in Washington are trying to rebrand themselves as the party of the middle class. I'm glad they're doing it, really. I mean, I want them to start rethinking their positions on issues. I'd love to work with them on stuff. But you can't just talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk. You can't talk middle class and then do things that hurt the middle class. You can't say you care about working people and then do things that hurt working people.

I'll give you an example. Right now Republicans in Washington have the chance to prove they really care about working families. Congress has to pass a budget by the end of this month, or they risk shutting down the Government for the second time in 2 years. Now, everybody knows the world economy is pretty volatile right now. Our economy is a relative bright spot. We're doing better than just about everybody else. So a shutdown would be completely irresponsible. It would be an unforced error, a fumble on the goal line. It would be like a ground ball slipping through somebody's legs. [*Laughter*] You guys have won a couple since that time, so I can make that joke. If you hadn't had so many World Series wins, I wouldn't make that joke.

Point is, it doesn't have to happen. Congress can pass a budget that does away with this so-called sequester that just lops things off whether it's good or not for the economy, harms our military, hurts working people. We could instead invest in working families, invest in our military readiness, invest in our schools, rebuild our roads, rebuild our ports, rebuild our airports, put people back to work right now. I'll sign that budget. I'm ready to work with them.

But so far at least, instead of hearing about how we can all move together, what we're hearing from those folks is threats that they might shut down the Government over things that

don't even have to do with the budget. Try to stop the budget in order to force us to do something that would restrict women's health care, for example. That's not a good idea. And you're seeing all kinds of mindless proposals that would harm our military readiness and cut job training, cut Head Start, cut preschools, cut K-through-12 education.

They're still talking about repealing Obamacare. I mean, they've taken 56 votes to repeal this thing. Everybody says it's working. It's working better than even I expected—[*laughter*]—and costing less. And they're still talking about repealing. And what we're seeing from them is this constant war against unions, a constant attack on working Americans, by weakening worker protections, undermining workplace safety, gutting your ability to save for retirement, preventing you from forming a union.

I mean, this is a party that says it wants to rebrand itself. I'm going to quote them here. They said they want to be "the party of the American worker and the party of higher wages." Well, that's great. But think about it. They oppose raising the minimum wage. They're doing everything they can to bust unions. And then, they want to claim to be the party of the American worker. I—take a look at some of the folks who want to be their standard bearer in the next election. I won't quote—I won't say their names, but you can kind of attach the quote to their names. So one candidate, he is bragging about how he destroyed collective bargaining rights in his State.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. And says that busting unions prepares him to fight ISIL. [*Laughter*] I didn't make that up. That's what he said. Really? A whole bunch of them are hoping to make "right to work" the law of the land. They think that's the answer to economic prosperity. You had one who blamed unions for the women's pay gap. Think about that. So what if there were no unions, then suddenly women are all going to be paid equal? These are the same folks who fought against equal pay legislation in Congress.

And then there was the guy—these guys are running for office; they're running for the Presidency—who said a union deserves a punch in the face. [*Laughter*] Really? Tell me how you really feel. It reminds me of something our old friend Ted Kennedy used to say: "What is it about working men and women that [they] find so offensive?" Why are they so mad about folks just trying to make a living, keep a roof over their heads, and go to work every day, look after their families, rebuild their community? Why are you mad about that? These are the folks who built America. These are the folks that allowed businesses to prosper. Why are you attacking ordinary people who are just out there trying to do their jobs?

I've said it before. I'll say it again: If I were looking for a good job that lets me build some security for my family, I'd join a union. If I wanted somebody who had my back, I'd join a union. I've—I travel a lot, I've been to countries that don't have unions, that prohibit unions. That's where you've got, still, child labor. That's where you have terrible exploitation, and workers are constantly being injured and hurt, and there are no protections. And no—and that's true for everybody because there's no union movement. Even Brady is happy he's got a union. [*Laughter*] They had his back. So you know if Brady needs a union, we definitely need unions. [*Laughter*] So—because the fact of the matter is, even kids understand this: You're stronger when you stand together.

And job—and a job is about more than a paycheck. Employees are more than just cogs in a wheel. They're moms and dads with dreams for their kids. They're folks who pick up the extra shift to help out another worker who's in a jam. They're folks who are trying to save for

retirement after years of sacrifice. Folks who clock in every morning and stay late to make sure the job is done right and then donate some of that hard-earned money to their church or their YMCA. There's a pride and there's a dignity inherent in any job, whether you've got the security of a union or not. But a union will help express that dignity and that sense of voice in what you do every single day.

And I believe that all workplaces should reflect the worth and the dignity of our working families. And that's why we fought for worker safety. That's why we fight for the right to organize. That's why we're hosting a White House Summit on Worker Voice next month—to make sure that working Americans share in the blessings of this country—and why people who aren't in unions right now need to understand why unions are so important. It's why last summer we hosted a Working Families Summit to talk about issues like higher pay and fairer pay and childcare and workplace flexibility and paid leave. These things aren't just good for working women and working families, they're good for business too. They're good for the economy as a whole.

Now, the good news is, for the past couple of years, working in concert with great Members of Congress like Ed and Elizabeth, we've taken steps to address some issues facing working families. And we've had the cooperation of Governors and mayors in a lot of places. Seventeen States, about 30 cities, have answered the call to raise the minimum wage. I raised wages for Federal contractors. In June, we proposed action to protect a worker's right to overtime, extending protections to as many as 5 million Americans who weren't getting a fair shake when it came to overtime rules. It's a pretty straightforward proposition: If you're working harder and longer, you should get paid for it.

I believe that you should be able to talk openly about how much you get paid to make sure everybody is getting paid the same. That's how we know if there's unfairness in the workplace. That's something Lilly Ledbetter had to deal with and helped contribute to the pay gap. So last spring, I acted to combat pay secrecy. Working with Tom Perez, we are finalizing a rule this week that makes sure that what people are getting paid is out there so you know if you're getting cheated. If you find out you're getting shortchanged, you shouldn't live in fear of getting fired because you raise your voice. You should be able to press your claim.

And I believe that working Americans should have the basic security of paid leave. Right now we are the only advanced nation on Earth that does not guarantee paid maternity leave. Think about that. You had one study found that nearly one in four working moms return to work within 2 weeks of childbirth. Think about that. Now, for the men in the audience in particular, think about that. We wouldn't even go to work if we had to carry around somebody for 9 months. The human race would evaporate. We couldn't even take it. [*Laughter*] And then, the notion that after you had that baby, you had to go back to work 2 weeks later.

Only 12 percent of our private sector workers have access to paid family leave. We've got millions of people who can't care for a loved one with a serious illness without losing a paycheck or risking their job. And there's a good proposal out there—the FAMILY Act—that would deal with some of these issues. I'm calling on Congress: Take a cue from the rest of the world, work together in a bipartisan fashion, find a way to make paid leave—paid family and medical leave—a reality for all Americans. That's something we should be doing. It's past time to do it. It will be good for business, not bad for business.

And while we're at it, pass a national policy for paid sick days as well. Right now about 40 percent of private-sector workers—44 million people in America—don't have access to paid sick leave. You've got parents who have to choose between losing income or staying home with

their sick child. You have victims of domestic violence or sexual assault who can't seek medical attention or counseling because they might have their pay docked. Let's face it, nobody wants a waiter who feels like they have to come to work when they're coughing or contagious. But if they don't have sick leave, what are they going to do? They've got to pay the rent. That's not good for anybody.

Now, unfortunately, only Congress has the power to give this security to all Americans. But where I can act, I will. And by the way, I just did. As we were flying over here, I signed a new Executive order requiring Federal contractors to allow employees who work on our contracts to earn up to 7 paid sick days a year. This will give about 300,000 working Americans access to paid sick leave for the first time.

And it builds on the growing momentum of people who are answering the call on paid leave across the country. Right now you've got dozens of cities—Pittsburgh, Philly, Atlanta—who have adopted paid sick leave or paid family leave policies. You've got companies like Hilton; and Johnson and Johnson; and others that are expanding paid leave. Microsoft, Facebook requiring it from their contractors and vendors. And we've seen that many companies, including small businesses, support these policies because they understand it helps with recruitment and retention. It helps you keep good employees. One study in Connecticut shows that three-quarters of companies are on board with their State's paid sick leave law.

And here in Massachusetts, you're already ahead of the game. Last fall, folks easily approved paid sick leave throughout the Commonwealth. In May, Mayor Walsh signed an ordinance allowing for up to 6 weeks of paid parental leave for city employees. You all should be proud of what you're doing for working families in this State.

But that's not a new story here in Massachusetts. You all have always been a little ahead of the curve. Almost two centuries ago, there were the "Mill Girls" up in Lowell, the Nation's first union of working women. Folks in Boston helped lead the way to an 8-hour workday. Generation by generation, from the textile and trolley workers to the hotel and parking workers of today, hard-working men and women like all of you in this Commonwealth have stood up for working families.

And what's been true in Massachusetts has been true all across the country. You understand that we're stronger together than when we're apart. When we are together, we carry each other up to heights we can't reach on our own. And that's what we honor every day on Labor Day. And whenever I'm with you, I'm optimistic about America, because while I know that it's not going to happen in 1 day or 1 month, won't even be completed under two terms of one President, I know working together we're going to build a better future for ourselves and our kids, and for working families all across the country. I have seen it. You have seen it. And now we've just got to keep working to make it a reality for every single working person in America.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless this country we love. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:20 a.m. at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel and Towers. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas E.P. Brady, quarterback, National Football League's New England Patriots; Gov. Scott K Walker of Wisconsin, former Hewlett-Packard Chief Executive Officer Cara Carleton "Carly" Fiorina, and Gov. Christopher J. Christie of New Jersey, in their capacity as 2016 Republican Presidential candidates; and Lilly Ledbetter, former employee, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company plant in Gadsden, AL. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; and Executive Order 13706.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Greater Boston Labor Council, Labor Day breakfast in Boston, MA.

Locations: Boston, MA.

Names: Brady, Thomas E.P.; Christie, Christopher J.; Fiorina, Cara Carleton "Carly"; Henry, Mary K.; Hite, William P.; Ledbetter, Lilly; Markey, Edward J.; Perez, Thomas E.; Rodriguez, Arturo S.; Rogers, Richard M.; Tolman, Steven A.; Walker, Scott K.; Walsh, Martin J.; Warren Elizabeth A.; Warren, Elizabeth A.; Weingarten, Randi.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Budget, Federal : Government programs, spending reductions; Business and industry : Domestic investment, promotion efforts; Civil rights : Wage equality; Economy, national : Financial regulations, strengthening efforts; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Income inequality; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : School improvement and renovation; Education, Department of : Funding; Elections : 2016 Presidential and congressional elections; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job training and assistance programs; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Health and medical care : Women's health issues; Holidays and special observances : Labor Day; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor issues : Overtime pay regulations, modernization efforts; Labor issues : Paid family and sick leave; Labor issues : Unions :: America Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO); Labor issues : Unions :: Labor movement and organized labor; Labor issues : Workplace flexibility, improvement efforts; Labor issues : Workplace safety, improvement efforts; Labor, Department of; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Massachusetts : 2013 Boston Marathon bombing; Massachusetts : Greater Boston Labor Council; Massachusetts : President's visits; New Jersey : Governor; Social Security and retirement : Social Security program; Sports : Baseball; Sports : Football; Syria : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts; Wisconsin : Governor.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500600.