

The President's Weekly Address

September 3, 2016

Hi, everybody. Before you fire up the barbecue for the long weekend, I want to talk a little bit about the reason we get to celebrate Labor Day, and that's the labor movement that helped to build this country and our middle class.

For generations, every time the economy has changed, hard-working Americans marched and organized and joined unions to demand not simply a bigger paycheck for themselves, but better conditions and more security for the folks working next to them too. Their efforts are why we can enjoy things like the 40-hour workweek, overtime pay, and a minimum wage. Their efforts are why we can depend on health insurance, Social Security, Medicare, and retirement plans.

All of that progress is stamped with the union label. All of that progress was fueled with a simple belief: that our economy works better when it works for everybody.

That's the spirit that's made the progress of these past 7½ years possible. We've rescued our economy from another depression, cut our unemployment rate in half, and unleashed the longest string total job growth on record. And we've focused on making sure that the gains of a growing economy don't just flow to a few at the top, but to everybody.

That's why we took action to help millions of workers finally collect the overtime pay they've earned. It's why I issued a call to raise the minimum wage, and when Congress ignored that call, 18 States and the District of Columbia, plus another 51 cities and counties went ahead and gave their workers a raise. It's why the very first bill I signed was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act why we gave paid sick days to Federal contractors, why we've fought for worker safety and the right to organize.

And we've made good progress. For a few years after the recession, the top 1 percent did capture almost all income gains. But that share has been cut by almost half. Last year, income for everybody else grew at the fastest pace since the 1990s. And another 20 million Americans know the financial security of health insurance.

I'm the first to say we've got more work to do in the years ahead. I know we're in the heat of a more raucous political season than usual, but we can't get so distracted by the latest bluster that we lose sight of the policies that will actually help working families get ahead. The truth is, that's what's caused some of the frustration that's roiling our politics right now: Too many working folks still feel left behind by an economy that's constantly changing.

So as a country, we've got some choices to make. Do we want to be a country where the typical woman working full time earns 79 cents for every dollar a man makes or one where they earn equal pay for equal work? Do we want a future where inequality rises as union membership keeps falling or one where wages are rising for everybody and workers have a say in their prospects? Are we a people who just talk about family values while remaining the only developed nation that doesn't offer its workers paid maternity leave, or are we a people who actually value families, and make paid family leave an economic priority for working parents?

These are the kinds of choices in front of us. And if we're going to restore the sense that hard work is rewarded with a fair shot to get ahead, we're going to have to follow the lead of all

those who came before us. That means standing up not just for ourselves, but for the father clocking into the plant, the sales clerk working long and unpredictable hours, or the mother riding the bus to work across town—even on Labor Day—folks who work as hard as we do. And it means exercising our rights to speak up in the workplace, to join a union, and above all, to vote.

That's the legacy we celebrate on Labor Day. And I'm confident that's the legacy that we'll build upon in the years ahead.

So thanks, everybody. Happy Labor Day, and enjoy the long weekend.

NOTE: The address was recorded at approximately 11:10 a.m. on August 26 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for broadcast on September 3. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 2, but was embargoed for release until 6 a.m. on September 3.

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