

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on Organized Labor in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
November 1, 2024

The President. Thank you. Hello, Philly! Thank you. Thank you, thank you, truly.

We owe—not only do we owe you the pension that was owed to you, but we owe you a lot more than that. You know, the reason this country is working is because the middle class is growing. The middle class built this country, and unions built the middle class.

Look, it's always great to be working with men and women of the great union movement. You know, Wayne Miller of the Sprinkler Fitters Local 692, who—thanks for hosting us today. Wayne, my staff said you even fed them. I don't know about you, but I'm worried about going home. *[Laughter]* And, Wendell Young, UFCW 1776. And, Bill Hamilton, president of Pennsylvania Conference of Teamsters.

I also want to thank the great champions of working people here. Brendan Boyle is a hell of a guy, man. He stuck with—*[applause]*. No. And Mary Gay Scanlon—who I tell you, I think I hurt her reputation, because you know what? I found out—you know, once you become elected President—I'm only the second Catholic ever elected. When I headed to Ireland, they did all this background stuff on me, where I'm from. Well, it turns out—I showed her today; I got in writing—we're related. *[Laughter]* I tell you what.

And, Madeleine Dean—where are you, Madeleine? She's back there. And, Donald Norcross—and Donald—*[applause]*. And our Acting Secretary of Labor, Julie Su, is doing an incredible job.

And the guy—if you're in trouble; you're in a foxhole, man, you want him with you—that guy right there. What's his name? *[Laughter]*

Audience member. Bobby!

The President. Bobby, good to see you, Bobby—you're great. I'm serious. He's always, always there.

Look, we know this simple truth, as I said: Wall Street and the—please, if you have seats, take them. *[Laughter]*

Look, I'm not joking around when I say that, you know, we talk—I come from Delaware. I represented Delaware for 36 years in the United States Senate. And by the way, for 36 years—each year, they list the poorest man in Congress.

[At this point, the President raised his hand.]

[Laughter] Oh, I'm not joking. Thirty-six years, I was listed, House and Senate, the poorest man in Congress.

Never felt myself poor, but I guess came from a typical middle class family. You're breaking your neck—my dad used to have an expression. He'd say: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. A job is about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about being treated with respect. It's about being able to look people in the eye. It's being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay,' and know it's real." That's what this is all about, man.

I'm so sick and tired—sick and tired—of the corporate notion of that it all—if corporations do well, we all do well. I want corporations to do well as long as their employees do well. But, man, the way it's working now and the way it's been working has not been working so well.

Look, and I—so I mean what I say. Wall Street did not build this country. They're not bad guys. They're just a little greedy sometimes, but they're not bad guys. But I mean, the middle class built the country. And it's not a joke. You guys built the middle class, for real. There would be no middle class—[*applause*]—not a—look, just since I've been elected—and I'm proud to be listed as the most pro-union President in American history. The middle class has grown. The middle class is growing. We have the best economy in the world right now because of you.

Thank you, John Dean and John Pishko—John—both Johns, for the introduction. And most of all, thanks for sharing your stories. Look, think about what they just described. You all understand it well, but the folks who may be listening don't quite understand it as much. It's a story of—so many union workers could tell about working for decades to raise a family, working for decades just—I remember my dad lost a pension.

We lived in a three-bedroom house, split-level home, and—down in Wilmington, Delaware, when they're—in a suburban area of Wilmington, when they were building, like 44—[*inaudible*]*—homes—the same kind of homes. They were a decent home, but we had four kids living there and a grandpop. And I remember how restless my dad was one night because my wall—my bedroom was up against his, when my—me and my three—two brothers were in that room. And I asked mom the next morning. I said, "What's the matter?" And she said: "Well, Dad, they just—he just lost his pension. He just lost his pension."*

But look, putting money away from paycheck to paycheck for a dignified retirement, knowing that when the time comes, that pension you've earned will be there is critical, just for peace of mind. It has phenomenal impacts on how marriages work and how families hold together when you have that knowledge, because there's so much pressure.

But then you retire and find out all those years of work and sacrifice were slashed through no fault of your own. None. Imagine what that does financially, emotionally, and to your dignity. It's wrong. It's just so—it's just simply wrong. It should have never happened. Never.

But then think about what it means to be made whole again, to have your lives, your pension restored, not only have—don't have to worry about it but about what you're going to be able to do. It matters. It matters.

Four years ago, Kamala and I inherited a pandemic that was raging, and the economy was reeling. So we went to work right away. We enacted the American Rescue Plan that did a lot more than just pensions. For—it's most significant economic relief packages in the history of America. Delivered immediate relief to folks that need it most.

But not a single—this is what's changed. I was in the Senate a long—I know I only look like I'm 40, but I'm a little older. [*Laughter*] But, all kidding aside, we used to have real differences in the—in the Senate. But at least when the critical things we'd have—we'd end up getting together. But not anymore. This is a different—this is a different deal we're working with.

Not a single, solitary Republican in the House or the Senate—not one—voted to help with the pensions. Not one single one.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. No, no. I just—it's not so much about—it's the way things have gotten. You know, it's like you either vote the right way of one guy wants it or you're in trouble. It's wrong. It's not who the hell we are. I believe a lot of those Republicans who voted no thought it was wrong, but they're afraid to vote the right way.

As part of the American Rescue Plan, Kamala and I worked like hell to include the Butch Lewis Act to protect the pension of millions of union workers and retirees from Pennsylvania and throughout Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin—all across America.

Simply put, the Butch Lewis Act is the most significant investment in pension security for union workers and retirees in over 50 years. And I might add, it's not enough. We've got to do a hell of a lot more, but I'll get to that in a moment. *[Laughter]*

And, again, every guy on the other team voted against it—every single one. Think about that.

Before the Butch Lewis Act became the law of the land, union workers and retirees faced cuts of up to 70 percent or more of the retirement benefits through no fault of their own—none. But now, because of what Kamala and I did in Congress and folks like Brendan Boyle and others—because of the labor leaders that are here, because of many of you—the pensions of millions of union workers and retirees are protected.

Food warehouse workers, truck drivers, scores of others don't worry anymore about their benefits being cut, because now they know, because of what we've done, they'll receive the full amount of their pensions they've worked hard for, and they'll receive it for decades to come.

Folks, look, for all those retirees whose benefits are already cut, as you heard today—and many of you, hopefully, benefited as well, they'll be made whole again—all the—all you lost will be made up. And those with benefits restored—and restored retroactively. But, folks, that's what I call a pretty big deal. Folks—*[applause]*.

So I came to North Philly today to announce major progress we made in implementing the Butch Lewis Act. But this morning the U.S. Department of Labor released a report which shows that since we passed the law in March of 2021, we've already protected the pensions for over 1.2 million—

Audience members. Yes. Yes!

The President. One-point-two million workers and retirees. And that includes over 65,000 workers and retirees across Pennsylvania alone.

For retirees whose benefits were cut or at risk of being cut, we've paid them back more than \$1.6 billion so far. That's about \$13,600 already paid back in the pockets of each retiree, and some are even more. It's a game changer.

Today I'm also announcing \$684 million from the Butch Lewis Act to restore pensions for an additional 29,000 members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union.

Audience members. Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe!

The President. You earned it. Don't—

Audience members. Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe!

The President. Don't thank me. Thank you. You shouldn't have to thank anybody. You shouldn't have to thank anybody.

Look, there are nearly 11,000 workers and retirees living right here in Pennsylvania.

For years and years, union workers have been driving trucks from factories to stores, bagging your groceries, constructing your buildings, your bridges, your roads. We need to do so much more for ironworkers, bricklayers, carpenters, laborers, plumbers, truck drivers, food workers, and more. These workers are working hard today, and they deserve a secure retirement they've earned for the rest of their lives.

Folks, look, we're just getting started. By the way, that little—that little, big bill we passed for, you know, dealing with infrastructure? A trillion three hundred billion dollars, that's what that bill is worth.

Remember the last guy, when he was President, he said we're going to have—we have retired—we have—he had—every week, we're going to have "Infrastructure Week."

Audience member. Yes. Joe got it done!

The President. Never—he didn't do a damn thing.

But you know, too many of them face painful cuts to the benefits they've worked so hard and counted on—some of you losing 40, 50, 70 percent of your pensions through your—no fault of your own. That's why the Butch Act—Lewis Act was so important to pass in the first place.

And when it comes to office—when we came to the—when I came into office, I was determined to restore and guarantee pensions that were earned and paid into. I was also determined to fundamentally transform the way the economy works for everyone.

You know, I've got so sick and tired of the—trickle-down economics. Remember, that's how it worked? The rich, if they do well, they'll pay their taxes, and it will trickle down, and we'll all benefit. Well, not a whole hell of a lot trickled down to my father's kitchen table. No, I'm not—this is—I'm dead—I'm dead earnest here.

To grow the economy, when we just sought out to change the way we did it—and if you notice—there's no reason why you would notice, but all the international economic publications are talking about it now. I decided we're going to grow the economy from the middle out and the bottom up.

When the middle class does well, everybody does well. The wealthy do well. Put workers first. Support unions. Invest in all of America, in all Americans. When we do these things, we do well.

That's what we're seeing. Sixteen million new jobs created just so far, the greatest job-creation record of any single Presidential term in American history; 1.6 million manufacturing and construction jobs.

And where is it written that America can't lead the world in manufacturing? I got so tick and sired [sick and tired; White House correction] of hearing that we can't—come on, man. [Laughter] No, I'm serious. Think about it.

We have the best workers in the world. That's not hyperbole. That's a fact.

When I decided to bring back the chips industry back—we invented that little chip that goes in all those computers. We invented it. We used to have 40 percent of the market. We got down to 4 percent of the market.

Well, guess what? I told my staff—and even they thought I was crazy. I said, "I'm going to South Korea. I'm going to sit down with them and make sure that they start—we start making this stuff home." I sat with Samsung. They invested \$15 billion coming back to the United States to build those chips here and build those factories here.

But over \$60 billion more is being—is being made here, and they're just getting started. We're just getting started.

These "fabs," they call them, they're as big as football fields. These fabs, you know what the average salary is? One hundred and ten thousand dollars a year, and you don't need a college degree. And we're just getting started.

This past week, we did—get very encouraging news about the economy. Inflation continues to drop. Remember they said, "Biden is going to get elected, there's going to be a recession"? Give me a freaking break. [Laughter]

We got it back down from close to 9-percent down to nearly 2 percent, which means people have more money in their pockets now than they did before the pandemic, and we're continuing to see economic growth.

Today, union workers are modernizing American infrastructure—roads, bridges, airports, ports, clean water, affordable high-speed internet—for every Pennsylvanian—not some, every. And thanks to the bipartisan infrastructure law, Pennsylvania has received \$18 billion so far for 2,000 projects—so far. And that includes a billion dollars for the city of Philadelphia in the few months since Mayor Parker has been in office. They already got a billion dollars to her.

Look, folks, I signed an Executive order to make sure large Federal construction projects use project labor agreements that are negotiated—[*applause*—not a joke—negotiated between union and companies before the construction began, because your—we make sure construction is top notch, on time, and on budget.

And by the way—by the way—employers are starting to figure it out. Not a joke. I told you about Samsung. When the guy said, "Why are you coming to—back to the—why are you coming to United States," he said, "Two reasons: One, you have the best workers in the world." I—not a joke—"the most qualified workers in the"—people think—I wish union would start talking about what it takes to get—to become whatever you decide to be, whether anything from electrician to whatever. You have to do somewhere between 4 and 5 years of apprenticeship. It's like going back to school, man, like going to college. But people don't know it. People don't know it.

We've got to talk more about it so people who aren't in unions understand just how damn qualified you are and how hard you worked to get to where you are.

You know, "Buy American" used to be the law of the land. By the—by that, is—look, the way it works—supposed to work, back in the thirties, when they were trying to bust unions or prevent them from coming into being in the first place, but they passed a law under Roosevelt, which said that if you're going to have—you're going to try—if you're going to form a union, you can't do the following things to try to break the union.

But there was a provision in there and that no—that nobody paid attention to. It said: "And when the President spends money given to him by the Congress to do something for the country, he has to use American products, and he has to buy—use American workers." Nobody did it. [*Applause*] No, not a joke.

Well, every damn penny I've been sent by the United States Congress has been gone to use American product and American workers. Every one. Not a joke. It's why we're growing so well. Federal projects helping build American roads, bridges, highways are now being made with American products, built by American workers, creating good-paying American jobs.

In fact, we're requiring those kinds of projects to pay Davis-Bacon wages average—for every single family out there.

Look, folks, many of those jobs don't require a college degree, but they—look, in fact, we extended the registered apprenticeship program. Remember when the corporations said: "Don't worry, we'll take care of training them. We'll take care of apprenticeships"? Give me a break. [*Laughter*]

So what'd we do? We decided we were going to make sure they were available. The result being over a million apprentices since we've come into office—a million new apprentices have come—[*inaudible*].

And like I said, a lot of folks don't realize an apprenticeship is like earning a college degree. In an apprenticeship, you train for 4 or 5 years. They're some of the best workers in the world.

Kamala and I have already believed—always believed that National Labor Relations Board should be pro-labor. But those of you involved in leading unions, you know what it's been under the last guy: anti-labor people put on the Labor Relations Board. Not anymore, not anymore.

That's why we have—one of the most significant things we've done is appoint National Labor Relations Board members who actually believe in unions and believe in your right to organize.

As I said, I'm honored to be considered the most pro-union President in American history, and I'm proud to be the first President to walk a picket line. And Kamala is proud to have walked a picket line as well. The other guy looks to—for picket lines to cross, but we've always had your back. *[Laughter]* We've always had your back.

Look, let me close—I don't want to get going here. *[Laughter]*

Audience member. Go get them, Joe!

The President. We owe you so much. I really mean it. The country owes you so much.

Let me close with this. When I was being raised in Scranton, where my dad taught me something that always stuck with me—and I mentioned to you before—that a job is a lot—about a lot more than a paycheck, and it really is. Think about it. Think about what it is. It's about your dignity. It's about how you treat it. It's about how people look at you. Look up to you, not down at you. It's about your place in the community. It's about being able, as I said, to look your kid in the eye and say, "Honey, it's going to be okay," and mean it—mean it.

That's the value set I learned here in Pennsylvania, the value set that's at the core of the labor—at the core of the Americans' labor market—union market—a movement made up of extraordinary people like you. And I'm not just trying to be nice, man. I'm not running again. *[Laughter]* You're stuck with me. And the one thing I don't think anybody can argue is, I never haven't done what I've said I'm going to do.

So—and like someone we honor today, Butch Lewis, joining us today is his wife Rita. Rita, where are you? Come on up here. Come on up here.

Rita and Butch are childhood sweethearts. Butch played baseball—drafted by the Pirates, by the way, out of high school.

Come over here for a minute. We'll walk over there in a minute.

Audience member. Rita!

The President. And he enlisted in the Army instead, Special Forces Army Ranger, served in Vietnam, earned a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. Came back home to Rita, settled in Cincinnati, and became a Teamsters trucker and then president of his Local. Known as an honorable, honest, decent, labor leader—that's who he was.

Butch faced severe cuts in pensions and became a fierce advocate of protecting those pensions for fellow workers. He died almost 9 years ago. And, Rita, you've carried on his legacy ever since then. This is a woman who didn't stop.

Together with Democrats in the Congress, the Butch Lewis Act I signed into law now protects pensions for millions of American workers, and it matters.

Rita, can you please join me over here?

Can you all hear me from here?

Audience members. Yes.

The President. I'll holler—[*inaudible*].

[*A White House aide read the citation, and the President presented the medal to Rita Lewis.*]

The President. Now, this is on the verge of being inappropriate. [*Laughter*] But I'm going to pin this on you. [*Inaudible*]

Ms. Lewis. Thank you so much. I'm so grateful. My husband would be so happy.

The President. He's looking.

Ms. Lewis. You believed in us. [*Inaudible*]—you never gave up on us.

The President. [*Inaudible*]

[*The President dropped the backing piece of the medal.*]

Ms. Lewis. Oops!

The President. What am I doing here? Hang on.

Ms. Lewis. I don't know. [*Laughter*] Do you want me to help you?

The President. Yes, I want—see if you can put it on.

Ms. Lewis. [*Laughter*] Okay. I can't see through these tears. I don't know if I can.

The President. I tell you what, I'm not getting fresh. [*Laughter*]

Ms. Lewis. Oh, I know you're not. You never would.

But I've never had a President get fresh with me before. That would be a first. [*Laughter*]

[*The President pinned the Citizens Medal on Ms. Lewis.*]

The President. There you go.

Ms. Lewis. Thank you so much. Thank you, everyone.

The President. Folks, my dad had another expression. He used to say, for real, "Remember, Joey, family is the beginning, the middle, and the end."

Thank you all for being loyal to one another, not forgetting where you come from, and sticking with those you need to help.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:37 p.m. at the UA Local 692 Sprinkler Fitters union hall. In his remarks, he referred to Wayne Miller, business manager/financial secretary, Sprinkler Fitters Local 692; Wendell Young, IV, president, and John Dean, member, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 in King of Prussia, PA; Reps. Brendan F. Boyle, Mary Gay Scanlon, Madeleine C. Dean, and Donald W. Norcross; former Rep. Robert A. Brady; John A. Pishko, retired member, International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 249 in Pittsburgh, PA; Vice President Kamala D. Harris; former President Donald J. Trump; Lee Jae-yong, vice chairman, Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.; and David M. Prouty and Gwynn A. Wilcox, members, and Jennifer A. Abruzzo, General Counsel, National Labor Relations Board. He also referred to his brothers James B. and Francis W. Biden and sister Valerie Biden Owens. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 4.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Organized labor in Philadelphia, PA.

Locations: Philadelphia, PA.

Names: Abruzzo, Jennifer A.; Biden Owens, Valerie; Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Boyle, Brendan F.; Brady, Robert A.; Dean, John; Dean, Madeleine C.; Hamilton, William; Harris, Kamala D.; Lee Jae-yong; Lewis, Rita; Miller, Wayne; Norcross, Donald W.; Parker, Cherelle L.; Pishko, John A.; Prouty, David M.; Scanlon, Mary Gay; Su, Julie A.; Trump, Donald J.; Wilcox, Gwynn A.; Young, Wendell, IV.

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