

Remarks to the AFL–CIO Executive Council

August 4, 2010

The President. Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. Thank you.

It is good to spend my birthday with some good friends. [Laughter] And as I look around the room, there are very few of you who I haven't, in some form or fashion, worked directly with on an issue, some of you dating back to when I was in the State legislature, some of you who I've worked with in the United States Senate, and all of you who I've had the opportunity to work with as President of the United States.

So I am grateful. And I want to first of all thank Rich, not only for inviting me here, not only for, I know, making clear my commitment to all of you during an earlier session today, but also for your outstanding leadership of the labor movement. And we very much appreciate everything that you do.

I want to thank Liz and Arlene for bucking up Rich all the time—[laughter]—and making him look good. This is a shared leadership, and we are very proud of them. I want to thank all the members of the executive council, all my brothers and sisters in the AFL–CIO.

Together, you are fighting for the hard-working men and women in this country after nearly 10 years of struggle. The middle class has been struggling now for about a decade, 10 years in which folks felt the sting of stagnant incomes and sluggish job growth and declining economic security, as well as at least 8 years in which there was a profound animosity towards the notion of unions.

It's going to take some time to reverse all that's been done, but we're on the right track. We're moving forward. And that's what I'm going to want to talk to you about briefly today.

I hope you don't mind me interjecting, though, a topic, because it's in the news right now and I want to make sure that all of you are aware of it.

One place in our country where people have faced particular struggles in the last few months is in the Gulf of Mexico, as a result of the BP oil spill. So it was very welcome news when we learned overnight that efforts to stop the well

through what's called a static kill appear to be working and that a report out today by our scientists show that the vast majority of the spilled oil has been dispersed or removed from the water. So the long battle to stop the leak and contain the oil is finally close to coming to an end. And we are very pleased with that.

Our recovery efforts, though, will continue. We have to reverse the damage that's been done. We will continue to work to hold polluters accountable for the destruction they've caused. We've got to make sure that folks who were harmed are reimbursed, and we're going to stand by the people of the region, however long it takes, until they're back on their feet.

Now, beyond the Gulf, many of those who've been hit hardest by the economic upheaval of recent years have been the people that you represent. For generations, manufacturing was the ticket to a better life for the American worker. But as the world became smaller, outsourcing, an easier way to increase profits, a lot of those jobs shifted to low-wage nations. So many who held those jobs went to work in the construction industry, as we had the housing boom. But when the subprime mortgage crisis hit, when those mortgages were called up on Wall Street, that bubble burst, leaving devastation everywhere.

So now we've got millions of our fellow Americans swept up in that disaster, hard-working people who've been left to sit idle for months and even years as their lives have been turned upside down.

And there's one last element to it, obviously. Having been plunged into a recession, it also means that teachers and firefighters and people who are providing public services each and every day are threatened because tax revenues at the State level and at the local levels have crashed. And so you have a perfect economic storm that's hit our middle class directly in every region, every segment of this country.

You know the stories; I don't need to tell you. You know what happens when a plant closes and hundreds of your members are suddenly

without work and an entire community is devastated. You know how hard it is for somebody who's worked his whole life to be unable to find a job. And that pain goes beyond just the financial pain. It goes to who they are as a person. It hits them in their gut. Having a conversation with your spouse and saying, you know, maybe we can't afford this house anymore; maybe we're going to have to give up on being able to save for our kids' college education—that goes directly to people's identities, to their cores. And this is something that all of you know all too well.

But I'm here to tell you, we are not giving up and we are not giving in. We are going to keep fighting for an economy that works for everybody, not just for a privileged few. We want an economy that rewards, once again, people who work hard and fulfill their responsibilities, not just people who game the system. And that's been at the heart of the economic plan that we put in place over the past year and a half.

And I want to thank the AFL–CIO for all you've done to fight for jobs, to fight for tax cuts for the middle class, to fight for reforms that will rein in the special interests, and to fight for policies that aren't just going to rebuild this economy, but are actually going to put us on a long-term path of sustainable growth that is good for all Americans.

Because of you, we've been able to get a lot done over the last 20 months. Together, we're jump-starting a new American clean energy industry, an industry with the potential to generate perhaps millions of jobs building wind turbines and solar panels and manufacturing the batteries for the cars of the future, building nuclear plants, developing clean coal technology. There are other countries that are fighting for those jobs, in China and India and in Germany and other parts of Europe. But the United States doesn't play for second place. As long as I'm President, I'm going to keep fighting night and day to make sure that we win those jobs, that those are jobs that are created right here in the United States of America, and that your members are put to work.

So the message I want to deliver to our competitors and to those in Washington who've

tried to block our progress at every step of the way is that we are going to rebuild this economy stronger than before, and at the heart of it are going to be three powerful words: Made in America. Made in America.

That's why we're finally enforcing our trade laws, in some cases for the very first time. That's why we're fighting for tax breaks for companies that invest here in the United States as opposed to companies that are investing overseas or that keep their profits offshore. Because it is my belief—and I know it's the belief of this room—that there are no better workers than U.S. workers. There are no better workers than your members. And they are absolutely committed to making sure that America is on the rise again. And we are going to keep moving forward with them, not moving backwards, but moving forward with them.

As we rebuild our economy, we're going to rebuild America as well. Over the last 20 months, bulldozers and backhoes have been whirring in communities across the country, as construction crews from local companies repair roads and bridges, railways, and ports. That was part of our plan, and it's put hundreds of thousands of folks to work. But there's a lot more to do to rebuild our infrastructure for the 21st century and a lot more Americans who are ready and willing to do that work. So that too is an area where we've got to keep moving forward.

We're going to have to cut taxes for middle class families, and after a tough fight, we finally extended emergency unemployment assistance for folks who had lost their jobs. We passed the Fair Pay Act to help put a stop to pay discrimination. We've reversed the Executive orders of the last administration that were designed to undermine organized labor. I've appointed folks who actually are fulfilling their responsibilities to make sure our workplaces are safe, whether in a mine or in an office, a factory, or anyplace else. And we are going to keep on fighting to pass the Employee Free Choice Act.

With your help, we passed health reform, enshrining the idea that everybody in America should be able to get decent health care and shouldn't go bankrupt when they get sick,

health reform that is preventing insurers from denying and dropping people's coverage, that's lowering the price of prescription drugs for our seniors. It's going to make health care more affordable for everybody, including businesses, which means they can hire more workers.

Together, we passed Wall Street reform to protect consumers in our financial system and put an end to taxpayer bailouts and stop the abuses that almost dragged our economy into another Great Depression.

Now, the steps we're taking are making a difference, but the fact is—and Rich mentioned this—it took us nearly a decade to dig ourselves into the hole that we're in. It's going to take a lot longer than any of us would like to climb out of that hole. And I'd be lying to you if I thought that all these changes are going to be happening overnight. We've still got some tough times ahead. And your members obviously are bearing the brunt of a lot of those tough times.

But here's what we're not going to do: We're not going to go back to digging the hole. We're not going to go back to the policies that took Bill Clinton's surplus and in 8 years turned it into record deficits. We're not going back to policies that saw people working harder and harder, but falling further and further behind. We're not going back to policies that gave corporate special interests free rein to write their own rules and produced the greatest economic crisis in generations. We are not going back to those ideas.

Because as hard as it is out there right now for a lot of folks, as far as we've got to go, what's clear is that our Nation is headed in the right direction. Our economy is growing again instead of shrinking. We're adding jobs in the private sector instead of losing them. America is moving forward.

And we're moving forward largely without any help from the opposition party, a party that has voted no on just about every turn: no on making college more affordable, no on clean energy jobs, no on broadband, no on high-speed rail, no on water and highway projects. That doesn't stop them from showing up at the ribbon cuttings. It doesn't stop them from sending out press releases. They've even said no to tax

cuts for small businesses and 95 percent of working families. They just said no to a small-business tax cut again just last week.

As we speak, they've been trying to block an emergency measure to save the jobs of police officers and firefighters and teachers and other critical public servants across the country who may be laid off because of State and local budget cuts.

And as if that was not enough, now they're talking about repealing this and repealing that. I guess they want to go back to hidden credit card fees and mortgage penalties buried in the fine print. They want to go back to a system that allowed for taxpayer bailouts. They want to go back to allowing insurance companies to discriminate against people based on preexisting conditions. They would repeal the tax cuts for small businesses that provide health care for their employees. They want to go backwards; we want to move America forward.

And that's what the choice is going to be in this upcoming election, and all your members need to understand it. I know if you're talking to a lot of your locals, I'm sure they're feeling like, boy, change is not happening fast enough; we are still hurting out here. They're frustrated. They've got every right to be frustrated. And I am happy, as President of the United States, to take responsibility for making decisions now that are going to put us in a stronger position down the road. And they need to know that, that we're going to be working with you to make sure that we're putting ourselves in a position where folks are working and working for a good wage and good benefits.

But you have to remind them for the next 3 months, this election is a choice. You've got these folks who drove America's economy into a ditch. And for the last 20 months, we put on our boots and we got into the mud and we've been shoving that car out of the ditch inch by inch. And they've been standing on the side the whole time watching, telling us, "No, you're not pushing hard enough; you're not doing it the right way," not lifting a finger to help. And now we've finally got that car up on the blacktop there, about to drive, and they say they want the keys back. Well, you can't have the keys, because

you don't know how to drive. [Laughter] You don't know how to drive. You're not going to get the keys back. [Laughter] You're not going to get them back.

Somebody pointed out to me that when you're in a car and you want to go forward, you put it in "D." [Laughter] You want to go back in the ditch, you put it on "R." [Laughter] So I just want everybody to think about that.

All right, let me close by saying this. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit—not a few weeks ago, just a few days ago—I had the opportunity to visit a Chrysler plant in Detroit. This is a place obviously that's been harder hit than just about anywhere, not just during this financial crisis, but for a couple of decades now. The auto industry alone lost hundreds of thousands of jobs in the year before I took office. So we had to make a very difficult decision when I became President about whether to walk away from American automakers or help them get back on their feet.

And I decided we couldn't walk away from what could be a million middle class jobs. So we told the automakers that we would give them temporary assistance if they restructured to make themselves competitive for the 21st century. And most of the "just say no" crowd in Washington didn't agree with this decision. And let's face it: It was not popular in the polls. A lot of people weren't happy with that decision. But today, all three U.S. automakers are operating at a profit for the first time in more than 5 years. They've had the strongest job growth in more than 10 years; 55,000 workers have been hired. Instead of a planned shutdown, the plant that I was at is staying open this summer just to meet increased demand. They've even added another shift.

Now, just a few weeks before I visited that auto plant, 14 of its employees won the lottery. This is a true story. Now, you'd think they would have decided to retire, cash out, walk away. But most of them didn't. They're staying on their jobs. And the guy who bought the ticket was a guy named William Shanteau, took the money, and he bought his wife one of the Jeep Cherokees that they make at the plant. And then he bought a bunch of American flags for

his hometown because he loves his country, just like he loves the company that he works for and the workers that he works with and the union that represents him. And he's going to keep on showing up every day because he loves that plant, he loves his coworkers, and he loves the idea of making something right here in the United States that's worth something. He loves the idea of being productive and creating something of value for people.

That's the true character of our people. That's been the essence of the AFL-CIO. That's why even in these difficult times, I remain confident about our future, because of people like that, because of the workers that I meet all across this country, members of your unions who get up every morning and put in a hard day's work to build a company, build a future, support their families.

As Americans, they don't give up. They don't quit. I don't give up. I don't quit. The AFL-CIO does not give up. It does not quit. If we stand together, then I am absolutely confident that we are going to rebuild America, not just to where it was before this financial crisis, but stronger than it has ever been. That is a commitment that I am making to you. Thank you for the commitment that you've made to me. God bless you. Thank you, guys. [Applause] Thank you.

AFL-CIO President Richard L. Trumka. Mr. President, on behalf of our full executive council, first of all, let me thank you for sharing your special day with us, and let us wish you again a happy birthday.

Two, let us thank you for all that you've done for every working American out there. I know you're pressed for time—

The President. I'm a little disappointed there wasn't a cake, though. [Laughter] I'm going to have to talk to Secret Service about that.

Mr. Trumka. You've got to talk to those guys, because they nixed the cake.

The President. They're probably eating it right now. [Laughter]

Mr. Trumka. They are. They got it all over them. Do you see the guy back there—

The President. That's some good cake.

Mr. Trumka. He has a little bit on him—

The President. Had some frosting on his—I noticed that, all right. [Laughter]

Mr. Trumka. We know you only have time for one question. Mr. President, when I was a working coal miner, I understood from personal experience how my parents and my grandparents formed a union and changed coal mining from a life-threatening journey through poverty into reasonably safe and well-paid jobs. Now, so many Americans now work in bad jobs—jobs with no benefits, jobs with—that don't pay a living wage, jobs that aren't safe, jobs where they have no voice.

Now, we're going into a congressional election 3 months from today, and I think it's fair to say that workers' hopes for congressional action to protect workers' rights and to create jobs have been frustrated by a Republican minority that has filibustered every matter in front of them, every single thing that's been good for us.

I just want to ask you, what advice do you have for workers as the election approaches, particularly for workers who are trying to organize to have a voice on the job?

The President. Well, you guys don't need advice from me, but let me tell you what I see out there. We were hurt by this recession, badly hurt. This is going to take some time to recover. Unemployment is at unacceptably high levels.

But as I said before, we'd had challenges before the crisis hit. A lot of your membership had been hurting long before, partly because we just live in a more competitive world. There's nothing we can do about that; that's just the truth. But a lot of it also had to do with the fact that we put policies in place that were not good for working families. There's a reason why incomes, wages, were stagnant for average workers, even while the costs were going up. And part of it had to do with the fact that we had a philosophy that said that providing help to workers, allowing them to collectively bargain, allowing them to negotiate for better benefits, that that all was something of the past, instead of something we need for the future.

So on the one hand, I think everybody here understands we've got to be competitive in America. We've got to have competitive price structures. We've got to make the best products

possible. Workers have to be invested in trying to help the companies they work for succeed. With respect to public employees, we've all got to work together to make sure that whatever we're doing, whether it's as firefighters or as teachers or postal workers, whatever it is, that we're providing the best possible service. I think everybody understands that there's no operation in the United States of America that shouldn't be efficient and effective in doing what it does.

But it is my profound belief that companies are stronger when their workers are getting paid well and have decent benefits and are treated with dignity and respect. It is my profound belief that our Government works best when it's not being run on behalf of special interests, but it's being run on behalf of the public interest, and that the dedication of public servants reflects that.

So FDR, I think, said—he was asked once what he thought about unions. He said, "If I was a worker in a factory and I wanted to improve my life, I would join a union." Well, I tell you what. I think that's true for workers generally. I think if I was a coal miner, I'd want a union representing me to make sure that I was safe and you did not have some of the tragedies that we've been seeing in the coal industry. If I was a teacher, I'd want a union to make sure that the teachers' perspective was represented as we think about shaping an education system for our future.

And that's why my administration has consistently implemented not just legislative strategies, but also where we have the power through Executive orders to make sure that those basic values are reflected.

I'm not telling anybody anything you don't know. Getting EFCA through a Senate is going to be tough. It's always been tough; it will continue to be tough. We'll keep on pushing. But our work doesn't stop there. I mean, there's a reason why we nominated people to the National Mediation Board that would ensure that folks in the rail industry and in the air industry were going to end up having a better deal.

We are going to make sure that the National Labor Relations Board is restored to have some

balance so that if workers want to form a union, they can at least get a fair vote in a reasonable amount of time. And we don't want, by the way, Government dollars going in to pay for union busting. That's not something that we believe in. That's not right. That tilts the playing field in an unfair way.

So you're going to have an administration that's working alongside you. There are going to be times where we want to get something done and we can't get it done, at least not immediately, and we're going to just keep on at it. I think people have started to figure out I'm a persistent son of a gun. [Laughter] I just stay on things if I think they're the right thing to do. And we should be looking for opportunities, by the way, to make sure that the labor movement is, wherever possible, finding common ground with the business community, because I want America as a whole to be competitive.

One of the problems that we've had over the last decade is that so often the business community sees labor as the problem, and their basic attitude is, well, you know what, we'll just go to wherever we don't have any problems with labor and we can pay them the lowest wages and the fewest benefits, and then just ship the stuff back here, and our profits will be good. But over time, that hollows out America and hollows out our middle class. That makes us weaker, not stronger.

Now, on the other hand, when business and labor are working together, then we can compete against anybody and we can knock down trade barriers in other countries and we can start selling products around the world. And we make great products in this country. We've got the best workers in the world, the best universities in the world. We've got the most dynamic economy in the world. We have the freest market system in the world. And all those things

give us a huge competitive advantage if we're all working together.

So my bottom line is this: I'm going to continue to work with all of you on behalf of working families around the country, and I'm going to continue to reach out to businesses to try to make the argument that what's good for workers is going to be good for business. They're your customers as well as your workers. And if they've got a decent living standard, that's lifting the entire economy up. And they're going to be buying more products, and they're going to be buying more services. And all of us are going to be growing together. And the 21st century is going to end up being the American century, just like the 20th century was.

But we're not going to be able to do it when we're pitted against each other. And I'm actually confident that once we get through some of the political posturing and shenanigans that we've been seeing over the last several years, people are going to step back and say, you know what, the lesson we needed to learn out of hardship is: We're all in this thing together. We are all in this thing together.

That's what the union movement's always been about. We're stronger together than we are on our own. That is true within individual unions. That is true within industries; that is true for the country as a whole. And I hope that I will be your partner in trying to bring about that unity of purpose in the years to come.

All right. Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:15 a.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Elizabeth Shuler, secretary-treasurer, and Arlene Holt Baker, executive vice president, AFL-CIO.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Citizens Medals *August 4, 2010*

Thank you. Please, have a seat.

Thank you very much, Senator Burris, and hello, everybody. Welcome to the White House, I want to start by recognizing the

very proud Members of Congress who are joining us to help celebrate a few of their outstanding constituents. So thank you all for coming.