

Remarks at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain March 5, 2014

The President. Hello, Connecticut! Go Blue Devils! [Laughter] It is good to be back in Connecticut. I want to thank your wonderful Governor, Dan Malloy, for that introduction. I want to thank your president, Jack Miller, for inviting me here today.

We've got members of your student government behind me. You know, the—I couldn't help but notice your Student Government Association logo, which has a gavel and a pitchfork, which is pretty intense. [Laughter] And I wish some folks in Congress used the gavel more. [Laughter] Less pitchfork. [Laughter]

We also have some members of your non-student government. One of our finest members of our Cabinet, who just cares so much about working families and is working tirelessly every single day, Secretary of Labor Tom Perez is here. We've got all five of Connecticut's Representatives in Congress, including CCSU alum John Larson, in the house. Another proud CCSU alum, Erin Stewart, your mayor, is here, along with Mayor Segarra and the other mayors and legislators from all across Connecticut.

And today we're doing something a little different than usual. Usually, when I hit the road and talk with folks like all of you, I've got a Governor with me. But you are special. So we decided one Governor wasn't enough. [Laughter] So in addition to Governor Malloy, we've got Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, Deval Patrick of Massachusetts, Peter Shumlin of Vermont. This is like a Governor supergroup. [Laughter] It's like the Justice League of Governors. [Laughter] I'd call them the New England Patriots, but that name is already taken. [Laughter]

Audience members. We love you, Mr. President!

The President. I love you back! I love you. Now—but we can't just spend the whole day talking about how we love each other. [Laughter] That's not why I came. We are here today because each of us cares deeply about creating new jobs and new opportunities for all Americans. And we're at this interesting moment in

our economy. Our economy has been growing. Our businesses have created 8½ million new jobs over the past 4 years. The unemployment rate is the lowest it's been in over 5 years. Those are all things that we should be proud of.

But there are some trends out there that have been battering the middle class for a long, long time, well before this great recession hit. And in some ways, some of those trends have gotten worse, not better. The nature of today's economy with technology and globalization means that there are folks at the top who are doing better than ever, but average wages have barely budged. Average incomes have not gone up. Too many Americans are working harder than ever just to keep up.

So as I said at my State of the Union Address, we've got to reverse those trends. It is a central task for all of us to build an economy that works for everybody, not just for some. That's what every one of these Governors and Tom Perez believes in. That's what we got into public service for. I hope Dan and Peter don't mind me sharing this: While we were driving over here, they were talking about the fact that when they were growing up, both of them had dyslexia. And because of this—the incredible, fierce love of their parents, but also because there were some folks there to help them, they achieved these—made these extraordinary achievements. Now, I wasn't in the car with Deval, but Deval is a close friend of mine. He's got a similar story, grew up on the South Side of Chicago—

Audience member. Whoo!

The President. South Side! [Laughter] And came from a very modest background. But somebody gave him a chance. Me, Tom Perez, so many of us understand that at the heart of America, the central premise of this country is the chance to achieve your dreams if you work hard, if you take responsibility; that it doesn't matter where you start, it's where you finish.

And in America, we believe in opportunity for all. We believe that our success shouldn't

be determined by the circumstances of our birth. It's determined by each of us. But also by a society that's committed to everybody succeeding. So that it doesn't matter what you look like, where you come from, what your last name is, who you love, what matters is the strength of your work ethic and the power of your dreams and your willingness to take responsibility for yourself, but also for the larger society. That's what makes America the place that it is, why it continues to be a beacon, attracting people from all around the world, the idea that you can make it here if you try.

Now, there's been a lot of news about foreign affairs around the world over the last several days, but also for the last couple years. And one of the things that you see, a trend you see—it doesn't matter whether it's in Central Europe or in the Middle East or Africa—individuals want a chance to make it if they try. And what makes us special is, we already do that when we're at our best. But we've got some work to do to match up our ideals with the reality that's happening on the ground right now.

And the opportunity agenda that I've laid out is designed to help us restore that idea of opportunity for everybody for this generation: the generation of young people who are studying here and are about to enter the workforce. And it's got four parts. Part one is something that I know the seniors here are very interested in, which is more good jobs that pay good wages.

We can't be satisfied with just recovering the jobs that were lost during the recession. We've got to rebuild our economy so it's creating a steady supply of good jobs today and well into the future, jobs in high-tech manufacturing and in energy and in exports and in American innovation. So that's job number one.

Job number two is training more Americans with the skills they need to fill those good jobs so that our workforce is prepared for the jobs of tomorrow. Part three: guaranteeing every young person in this country access to a world-class education, from pre-K all the way to a college education like the one you're getting here.

And that's why over the past 5 years, working with the outstanding congressional delega-

tion from Connecticut, we've been able to make sure that grant dollars are going farther than before. We took on a student loan system that gave billions of taxpayer dollars to the big banks, and we said let's use those to give more students directly the help they need to afford to go to college.

That's why we're offering millions of young people the chance to cap their monthly student loan payments at 10 percent of their income. So you need to check that out. Go to the website of the Department of Education and find out how you may be eligible for that.

And today, more young people are earning college degrees than ever before. Of course—and I know your president won't disagree with this—we've also got to do more to rein in the soaring costs of college and help more Americans who are trapped by student loan debt. The bottom line, though, is whether it's technical training, community college, 4-year university, no young person should be priced out of a higher education. [Applause] Shouldn't happen.

Now, there is a fourth part of this agenda. By the way, I just noticed, if you've got chairs, feel free to sit down. [Laughter] I know the folks here don't have chairs, but I don't want you—and if you're standing up, make sure to bend your knees so you don't faint, you know. [Laughter] All right, I just wanted to check on you. [Laughter]

Now, point number four, the fourth component of this opportunity agenda, is making sure that if you are working hard, then you get ahead. And that means making sure women receive equal pay for equal work. When women succeed, America succeeds. I believe that. You happy with that, Rosa? Rosa agrees with that. [Laughter]

It means making sure that you can save and retire with dignity. It means health insurance that's there when you're sick and you need it most. And you guys are doing a great job implementing the Affordable Care Act here in Connecticut. If any of you know a young person who is uninsured, help them get covered at healthcare.gov. The website works just fine now. [Laughter] They've got until March 31 to sign up, and in some cases, it's going to cost

less than your cell phone bill. So check it out, healthcare.gov.

And making work pay means wages and paychecks that let you support a family. [*Applause*] A wage, a paycheck that lets you support a family.

Now, I want to be clear about this because sometimes in our debates with our friends on the other side of the political spectrum, this may not be clear, so let me just repeat it once again. As Americans, we understand that some folks are going to earn more than others. We don't resent success, we are thrilled with the opportunities that America affords. Somebody goes out there, starts a business, invents a new product, provides a new service, that's what drives our economy. That's why this free market economy is the most dynamic on Earth. We're thrilled with that. Everybody agrees on that. But what we also believe is that nobody who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty. That violates a basic sense of who we are. And that's why it's time to give America a raise. It is time to give America a raise. [*Applause*] Now is the time. Now is the time.

A year ago I asked Congress to raise the minimum wage, the Federal minimum wage. Since that time, six States have passed laws to raise theirs, including right here in Connecticut. On January 1, tens of thousands of folks across this State got a raise, and Governor Malloy is working to lift their wages even higher. Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Washington State, other States, counties, cities across the country are working to raise their minimum wage as we speak.

The Governors here today—Governor Chafee of Rhode Island, Governor Malloy, Governor Patrick of Massachusetts, Governor Shumlin of Vermont—and a Governor who couldn't be here today, Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire—all are fighting to give hard-working folks in these great New England States a raise of their own. And they've formed a regional coalition to raise the minimum wage. If they succeed in their efforts, New England will have some of the highest minimum wages in the country.

And they're not stopping there. These four Governors are here to—in support of raising America's minimum wage, the Federal minimum wage, to \$10.10 an hour—\$10.10 an hour.

Now, raising wages is not just a job for elected officials. In my State of the Union Address, I asked more business leaders to do what they can to raise their workers' wages, because profitable companies like Costco have long seen higher wages as good business. It's a smart way to boost productivity, to reduce turnover, to instill loyalty in your employees. And by the way, they do great. Their stocks do great. They are highly profitable. It's not bad business to do right by your workers, it's good business. [*Applause*] It's good business.

Two weeks ago, the Gap decided to raise its base wages, and that's going to boost wages for 65,000 workers in the United States. Last week, I read about Jaxson's; it's an ice cream parlor in Florida that's been in business since 1956. They just announced they would lift workers' wages to at least \$10.10 an hour, without cutting back on hiring. Two weeks ago, an Atlanta small-business owner named Darien Southerland wrote me to share a lesson his granny taught him: If you treat your employees right, they'll treat you right. Vice President Biden paid Darien's business a visit just yesterday. You've got to listen to your grandmother. [*Laughter*] That is some wise advice.

And I agree with these business leaders as well. So what I did as President, I issued an Executive order requiring Federal contractors: If you're doing business with the Federal Government, pay your employees a fair wage of at least \$10.10 an hour, which will be good for America's bottom line.

And let me tell you who was affected. I did—when I was signing the bill—or the Executive order, we had some of the workers who were going to be affected. You've got folks who are cooking the meals of our troops or washing their dishes or cleaning their clothes. This country should pay those folks a wage you can live on.

So this is good for business, it is good for America. Because even though we're bringing

manufacturing jobs back to the United States, creating more good jobs in education and health care and business services, there will always be airport workers, there are always going to be fast-food workers, there are always going to be hospital workers, there are going to be retail salespeople, hospitality workers, people who work their tails off every day. People working in nursing homes, looking after your grandparents or your parents. Folks who are doing all the hard jobs that make our society work every single day. They don't have anything flashy out there. And you know what, they're not expecting to get rich, but they do feel like, if they're putting in back-breaking work every day, then at least at the end of the month, they can pay their bills.

Audience member. I know that's right!

The President. They deserve an honest day's pay for an honest day's work.

Working Americans have struggled through stagnant wages for too long, so my goal is—and the goal of everybody on this stage—is to help lift wages, help lift take-home pay in any way we can. And that's why I've done everything I can to lift wages for hard-working Federal contractors. It's why I've asked business owners to raise their wages. It's why I'm supporting elected officials at the local level, Governors. What every American wants is a paycheck that lets them support their families, know a little economic security, pass down some hope and optimism to their kids. And that's worth fighting for. So—[*applause*].

But I want to make one last point. If we're going to finish the job, Congress has to get on board. [*Applause*] Congress has to get on board. And this is interesting. This should not be that hard, you'd think. [*Laughter*] Because nearly three in four Americans, about half of all Republicans, support raising the minimum wage. The problem is, Republicans in Congress oppose raising the minimum wage. Now, I don't know if that's just because I proposed it. [*Laughter*] Maybe I should say I oppose raising the minimum wage and they'd be for it. That's possible. [*Laughter*]

But right now there's a bill in front of both the House and the Senate that would boost

America's minimum wage to \$10.10. Ten—it's easy to remember: 10–10. Ten dollars, ten cents an hour. Just passing this bill would help not only minimum wage workers; it would lift wages for about 200,000 people just right here in Connecticut. It would lift wages for about 1 million New Englanders. It would lift wages for nearly 28 million Americans across this country. It would immediately raise millions of people out of poverty. It would help millions more work their way out of poverty, and it doesn't require new taxes, doesn't require new spending, doesn't require some new bureaucracy. And here's one last point: It turns out, what happens if workers got a little more money in their pockets?

Audience members. They spend it!

The President. They spend a little more money, which means that suddenly, businesses have more customers, which means they make more profits, which means they can hire more workers, which means you get a virtuous cycle—

Audience member. It's common sense!

The President. It's common sense. That's what I'm trying to say. That's all I'm trying to say. [*Laughter*] Common sense, exactly. That's all. It's just common sense. That's all it is. It's common sense. [*Applause*] Common sense. It's just common sense. That's all I'm saying. [*Laughter*]

Now, right now Republicans in Congress don't want to vote on raising the minimum wage. Some have actually said they just want to scrap the minimum wage. They—one of them said, "I think it's outlived its usefulness. . . . I'd vote to repeal the minimum wage." One of them said it's "never worked." Now—some even said it only helps young people. Now—as if that's a bad thing; I think we should want to help young people. [*Laughter*] I'd like to see them try putting themselves through college on a low-wage work-study job. But actually—or I'd like to see them supporting a family making less than \$15,000 a year.

But here's the truth about who it would help. Most people who would get a raise if we raise the minimum wage are not teenagers on their first job. Their average age is 35. A majority of lower wage jobs are held by women.

These Americans are working full time, often supporting families, and if the minimum wage had kept pace with our economy's productivity, they'd already be earning well over \$10 an hour. Today. Instead, it's stuck at \$7.25. Every time Congress refuses to raise it, it loses value because the cost of living goes higher, minimum wage stays the same. Right now it's worth 20-percent less than it was when Ronald Reagan took office. And since—over the last year, since I asked Congress to do something and they didn't do it, that was an equivalent of a \$200 pay cut for the average minimum wage worker, because it didn't keep pace with inflation. That's a month of groceries for the average minimum wage worker. That's 2 months' worth of electricity. This is not a small thing, this is a big deal. It makes a big difference in the lives of a lot of families.

So Members of Congress have a choice to make. It is a clear choice: Raise workers' wages, grow our economy, or let wages stagnate further, give workers what amounts to another pay cut. Fortunately, folks in Connecticut have really a good delegation, so your Senators and Representatives are already on board. They're all on board. They're fighting the good fight. But anybody who is watching at home, you deserve to know where your elected official stands. So just ask them, "Do you support raising the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour?" If they say yes, say, "Thanks." [Laughter] "Great job." We need encouragement too, elected officials. [Laughter] If they say no, you should be polite—[laughter]—but you should say, "Why not?" Ask them to reconsider. Ask them to side with the majority of Americans. Instead of saying no, for once, say yes. It's time for \$10.10. It's time to give America a raise.

I want to close by sharing a story of a guy named Doug Wade, who is here today. Where's Doug? I'm going to embarrass Doug. Stand up. There's Doug, right here. Doug had a chance to meet Secretary Perez in Hartford last week. Doug is the president of Wade's Dairy down in Bridgeport. So his great-grandfather Frank—is that right? Frank?—started the family business in 1893—1893. One of the secrets to their success is that they

treat their employees like part of the family. So Doug pays his own workers fairly.

But he goes a step further than that. He writes editorials, he talks to fellow business leaders, he meets with elected officials to make the case for a higher minimum wage for everybody. And keep in mind, Doug spent most of his life as a registered Republican. This is not about politics, this is about common sense. It's about business sense. And Doug, we were talking backstage, Doug showed me a paystub because he—it describes his own story. When he was flipping burgers back in 1970, his employer paid him the minimum wage, but it went 25-percent farther than it does today. So Doug speaks from experience when he says that "Things like the minimum wage raise the bar for everybody." And he's still got that paycheck. And it looks like the paycheck I got when I was working at Baskin-Robbins. [Laughter]

The point that Doug and his family and his business represents is, we believe in hard work, we believe in responsibility, we believe in individual initiative, but we also come together to raise the bar for everybody; to make sure our fellow citizens can pursue their own dreams as well; that they can look after their kids and lift them up. We look out for each other. That's who we are. That is our story.

There are millions of Americans like Doug, and like all of you, who are tired of the old political arguments, ready to raise the bar a little higher. Let's move this country forward. Let's move it up. Let's go further. That's what I'm going to do as President as long as I have the honor of serving in this office, and I need your help. Let's go out there and give America a raise. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:20 p.m. in the William H. Detrick Gymnasium. In his remarks, he referred to Reps. Joe Courtney, Rosa L. DeLauro, Elizabeth H. Esty, and James Himes; Mayor Pedro E. Segarra of Hartford, CT; Darien J. Southerland, chief strategy officer, BG Ad Group; Rep. Joseph L. Barton; and Sen. Marco A. Rubio. He also referred to Executive Order 13658, which is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.