Remarks at the General Electric Company Gas Engines Plant in Waukesha, Wisconsin

January 30, 2014

The President. Thank you! Hello, hello, hello! Well, it's good to be in Wisconsin. It's good to be in Waukesha. Now, I've always appreciated the hospitality that Packer Country gives a Bears fan. [*Laughter*] I mean, I remember when I was up here campaigning the first time, and there were some "Cheeseheads for Obama"—[*laughter*]—and I felt pretty good about that. Neither of us feel that good about our seasons, but that's okay. There's always next year.

We have three of your outstanding elected officials with us here today. We've got Congresswoman Gwen Moore; we've got the mayor of Milwaukee, Tom Barrett; and we have Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele. And we've got your former Governor, Jim Doyle. And it's also good to see—I had a chance to see backstage somebody who was a huge part of my economic team before she became chancellor of the University of Wisconsin–Madison: Dr. Becky Blank is here. And we just want to give Becky a big round of applause. She said she missed Washington, but she doesn't really. [*Laughter*] She was just saying that to be nice.

I'm so proud of Reggie, and I'm grateful for the terrific introduction. I want to thank Jim for showing me around the plant.

I have come here to talk with you about something that I spent a lot of time on in my State of the Union Address on Tuesday: the idea that no matter who you are, if you are willing to work hard, if you're willing to take on responsibility, you can get ahead; the idea of opportunity here in America.

Now, we're at a moment where businesses like GE have created 8 million new jobs over the past 4 years. And that's good news. Our unemployment rate is the lowest that it's been in more than 5 years. Our deficits have been cut in half. Housing is rebounding. Manufacturing is adding jobs for the first time since the 1990s. We sell more of what we make here in America to other countries than we ever have before.

Today we learned that in the second half of last year, our economy grew by 3.7 percent. Well, we still have more work to do, but that's pretty strong. And our businesses led the way. Over the past year, the private sector grew faster than at any time in over a decade.

And that's why I believe this can be a breakthrough year for America. After 5 years of hard work, digging ourselves out of the worst recession of our lifetimes, we are now better positioned in the 21st century than any other country on Earth. We've got all the ingredients we need to make sure that America thrives. And the question for folks in Washington is whether they're going to help or they're going to hinder that progress, whether they're going to waste time creating new crises that slow things down or they're going to spend time creating new jobs and opportunity.

Because the truth is—and you know this in your own lives, and you see it in your neighborhoods and among your friends and family—even though the economy has been growing for 4 years, even though corporate profits have been doing very well, stock prices have soared, most folks' wages haven't gone up in over a decade. The middle class has been taking it on the chin even before the financial crisis, too many Americans working harder than ever just to get by, let alone get ahead. And then, there are too many Americans who still are out of work here in Wisconsin and around the country. So we've got to reverse those trends if we're going to be serious about giving opportunity to everybody.

And that's why, on Tuesday, I laid out some new steps that we can take right now to speed up economic growth and strengthen the middle class and build ladders of opportunity into the middle class. Some of the ideas I presented I'm going to need Congress for. But America cannot stand still, and neither will I. So wherever I can take steps to expand opportunity, to help working families, that's what I'm going to do, with or without Congress. I want to work

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with them, but I can't wait for them. We've got too much work to do out there, because the defining project of our generation—what we have to tackle right now, what has driven me throughout my Presidency, and what will drive me until I wave goodbye—is making sure that we're restoring opportunity to every single person in America.

Now, this opportunity agenda that I put forward has four parts. First part is creating more new jobs: jobs in American manufacturing, American exports, American energy, American innovation. And by the way, this plant represents all those things. You've seen new jobs being built in part because we've had this amazing energy boom in this country. And the engines that are built here, a lot of them are being utilized in that new energy production. We're exporting a whole bunch of these engines overseas.

The manufacturing that's taking place here isn't just good for this plant, it has spillover effects throughout the economy. And what's also true is, is that manufacturing jobs typically pay well. We want to encourage more of them. And there's also innovation going on at this plant. So the engines that were built 25 years ago aren't the same as the engines we're building today.

So the first thing is, let's create more new jobs. Number two, we've got to train Americans with the skills to fill those jobs. Americans like Reggie, we've got to get them ready to take those jobs. Number three, we've got to guarantee every child access to a world-class education, because that's where the foundation starts for them to be able to get a good job.

And then, number four, we've got to make sure hard work pays off. If you work hard, you should be able to support a family. You may not end up being wildly rich, but you should be able to pay your mortgage, your car note, look after your family, maybe take a vacation once in a while—[*laughter*]—no, especially when it's kind of cold. [*Laughter*] Yeah, yeah, yeah. At the State of the Union, I was going to start out by saying, the state of the Union is cold. [*Laughter*] But I decided that was not entirely appropriate. [*Laughter*]

So on Tuesday, I talked about what it will take to attract more good-paying jobs to America, everything from changing our Tax Code so we're rewarding companies that invest here in the United States instead of folks who are parking profits overseas, to boosting more natural gas production. But in this rapidly changing economy, we also have to make sure that folks can fill those jobs. And that's why I'm here today.

I know some folks in Wisconsin can remember a time, a few decades ago, when finding a job in manufacturing wasn't hard at all. If you basically wanted a job, you showed up at a factory, you got hired. If you worked hard, you could stay on the job. But our economy is changing. Not all of today's good jobs need a 4-year degree, but the ones that don't need a college degree do need some specialized training. We were looking at some of the equipment here. It's $5 million worth of equipment. GE is going to be a little nervous if they just kind of put you there on the first day and say, here, run this thing—[*laughter*]—because if you mess up, you mess up. [*Laughter*]

So that's a challenge for workers, and it's a challenge for companies who want to build things here and want to bring jobs back from overseas. As one of the top executives here put it, Brian White, "If we're going to have a manufacturing base in this country, we've got to find a way to have manufacturing employees."

Now, the good news is that folks across Wisconsin have set out to do just that. This plant is a great example of that. That's why we're here, in addition to just, you seem like very nice people. [*Laughter*] But we're here because you're doing some really good stuff that everybody else needs to pay attention to. Together with a local high school, you started a youth apprenticeship program. So students spend 4 hours a day in the classroom, 4 hours on the shop floor. After 2 years, they leave with both a high school diploma and a technical certificate.

Then, you set up an adult apprenticeship program so that folks can earn while they learn. You're working with partners from the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership to Mayor Barrett's manufacturing partnership, to

more than 50 other employers, big and small, across the region in order to spot job openings months in advance and then design training programs specifically for the openings. You even helped set up a "schools to skills" program with a local business alliance to bring kids to factories and help inspire them to pursue careers in manufacturing.

And I just want to make a quick comment on that. A lot of parents, unfortunately, maybe when they saw a lot of manufacturing being offshored, told their kids, "You don't want to go into the trades, you don't want to go into manufacturing, because you'll lose your job." Well, the problem is that what happened, a lot of young people no longer see the trades and skilled manufacturing as a viable career. But I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree. Now, nothing wrong with an art history degree—[*laughter*]—I love art history. So I don't want to get a bunch of e-mails from everybody. [*Laughter*] I'm just saying, you can make a really good living and have a great career without getting a 4-year college education as long as you get the skills and the training that you need.

So back to what you guys are doing. All this work has paid off. It's one of the reasons why, over the past 4 years, you've grown your manufacturing workforce by nearly half. So what you're doing at this plant and across this region can be a model for the country, which is why I've asked Congress to fund more reliably proven programs that connect more ready-to-work Americans with ready-to-be-filled jobs. That's what we'd like to see from Congress.

Of course, there are a lot of folks who do not have time to wait for Congress. They need to learn new skills right now to get a new job right now. So that's why here today at GE, I'm making it official: Vice President Biden, a man who was raised on the value of hard work and is tenacious, is going to lead an across-the-board review of America's training programs. We've got a lot of programs, but not all of them are doing what they should be doing to get people filled for jobs that exist right now. And we've got to move away from what my Labor Secretary, Tom Perez, calls "train and pray." You train workers first, and then you hope they get a job. We can't do that, partly because it costs money to train folks. And a lot of times young people, they take out loans, so they're getting into debt, thinking they've been training for a job, and then, suddenly, there's no job there.

What we need to do is look at where are the jobs and take a job-driven approach to training. And that's what you're doing here in Wisconsin. So we've got to start by figuring out which skills employers are looking for. Then we've got to engage the entire community. We've got to help workers earn the skills they need to do the job that exists. And then, we've got to make sure that we're continually following up and upgrading things, because companies are constantly shifting their needs.

So what we're going to do is, we're going to review all of Federal job training programs, soup to nuts. And then we're also going to be supporting local ones. I've asked Vice President Biden and top officials in the Federal Government to reach out to Governors, mayors, business leaders, labor leaders, Democratic and Republican Members of Congress. Let's find what programs are working best, and let's duplicate them and expand them.

And later this year, I'm going to ask Tom Perez, my Secretary of Labor, to apply those lessons as we conduct the next round of a national competition we're going to set up, challenging community colleges to partner with local employers and national industries to design job-driven training programs. And we're going to have at least one winner from every State. And we're going to invest nearly $500 million in the partnerships that show the most potential. So we're putting some real money behind this.

Now, we know that we've got to start training our younger workers better and that a worker's first job can set them on an upward trajectory for life. So we should do something as a country that you're doing right here, and that is, create more apprenticeship opportunities that put workers on a path to the middle class. Part of the problem for a lot of young

people is, they just don't know what's out there. If you've never worked on a plant floor, you don't know what's involved, you don't know what it is. If you don't have a dad or a mom or an uncle or somebody who gives you some sense of that, you may not know how interesting the work is and how much you can advance.

So while we redouble our efforts to train today's workforce, we've got to make sure that we're doing everything we can to expand apprenticeships. And I'm going to call on American companies all across the country, particularly manufacturers, to set up more apprenticeship programs.

And we've got to make sure that once folks are through training, once they get a job, that the hard work pays off for every single American. I talked about this in my State of the Union. Incomes, wages have not gone up as fast as corporate profits and the stock market have gone up. And that's a problem for the economy as a whole, because if all the gains are just at the top, ordinary folks aren't doing better, then they're not shopping. They're not buying new cars; they're not buying new appliances; they're not buying the new home. And that depresses the entire economy. When there's money in the pockets of ordinary folks, everybody does better, including businesses.

Now, today, women make up half our workforce. They're making 77 cents for every dollar a man earns.

Audience member. That's wrong!

The President. That's wrong. Who said that? That's wrong. It's wrong. [*Applause*] It's an embarrassment. So I mentioned on Tuesday, women deserve equal pay for equal work. Women deserve to have a baby without sacrificing her job and should be able to get a day off when the kid gets sick. Dads need that too.

We've got to give women the opportunity—every opportunity that she deserves. As I said on Tuesday, when women succeed, America succeeds. And by the way, when women succeed, men succeed. Because I don't know about all the guys here, but when Michelle is doing good and happy, I'm happy too. [*Laughter*] I'm just saying. But also, just the economics of it, because we now live in a society where if you've got two breadwinners, that sure helps make ends meet. So if a woman is getting cheated, that's a family issue for the whole family, not just for her.

Now, women hold a majority of lower wage jobs. But they're not the only ones who are getting stifled by stagnant wages. As Americans, we all understand some folks are going to make more money than others. And we don't actually envy their success. When they're worked hard, they make a lot of money, that's great. Michelle and I were talking; Michelle's dad was a blue-collar worker, worked at a water filtration plant down in Chicago. Mom was a secretary. My mom was a single mom. They never made a lot of money. They weren't worrying about what the rich and famous were doing. They weren't going around saying, well, I don't have a fur coat and a Ferrari. They just wanted to make sure that if they were working hard, they could look after their family.

And that's how I think most Americans, that's how we all feel. Americans overwhelmingly agree, nobody who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty. They shouldn't have to do it.

So this is why I've been spending some time talking about the minimum wage. Right now the Federal minimum wage doesn't even go as far as it did back in 1950. We've seen States and cities raising their minimum wages on their own, and I support these efforts, including the one that's going on right here in Wisconsin. As a chief executive, I'm going to lead by example. I talked about this on Tuesday. I'm going to issue an Executive order requiring Federal contractors to pay the federally funded employees a fair wage of at least $10.10 an hour. Because if you're a cook or washing dishes for our troops on a base, you shouldn't have to live in poverty.

Of course, to reach millions more people, Congress is going to need to catch up with the rest of the country. There's a bill in Congress right now to raise the Federal minimum wage to $10.10—the 10–10 bill. It's easy to remember: 10–10. And they should say yes to it. Give America a raise.

Making work pay also means access to health care that's there when you get sick. The Affordable Care Act means nobody is going to get dropped from their insurance or denied coverage because of a preexisting condition like back pain or asthma. You can't be charged more if you're a woman. Those days are over. More Americans are signing up for private health insurance every day. So if you know somebody who isn't covered—the great thing about this shop is, because of strong union leadership and GE is a great company, most of the folks who work here, they've got good health insurance. But you've got friends, family members, maybe kids who are older than 26—because if they're younger than 26, they should be able to stay on your plan, thanks to the law that we passed, but if they don't have health insurance right now—call them up, sit them down, help them get covered at healthcare.gov by March 31.

So these things are all going to help advance opportunity, restore some economic security: more good jobs, skills that keep you employed, savings that are portable, health care that's yours and can't be canceled or dropped if you get sick, a decent wage to make sure, if you're working hard, it pays off. These are real, practical, achievable solutions to help shift the odds back in favor of more working families.

That's what all of you represent, just like the Americans who are on this stage. Several of these folks graduated from one of your training programs last year, including Reggie. And as you heard Reggie say, he feels like he "won the Super Bowl of life." But just like the real Super Bowl, success requires teamwork. So as they earned the skills that put them on the path to the middle class, Reggie and folks in the program had to look out for each other. They had to help each other out. Sometimes, if one of them slipped, they had to come together and make sure nobody missed a beat.

And that's the attitude it's going to take for all of us to build the world's best trained workforce. That's the attitude it's going to take to restore opportunity for everybody who's willing to work hard. And it won't be easy, and sometimes, some folks will slip, but if we come together and push forward, everybody as a team, I'm confident we're going to succeed. We've seen it here in Wisconsin. We can make sure it happens all across the country.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless America. Thank you. And now I'm going to sign this Executive order to make sure we've got everybody trained out there.

[*At this point, the President greeted event participants.*]

Audience member. Obama!

The President. Hey, I hear you out there.

[*The President continued to greet event participants.*]

Audience member. Obama!

The President. Hey, hey, nice to see you.

[*The President signed a memorandum on job-driven training for workers.*]

The President. Ready to go. There you go. All right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:27 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to former Deputy Secretary of Commerce Rebecca M. Blank; Reginald Troop, employee, Jim Flemming, plant manager and global supply chain manager, and Brian White, integration leader, General Electric Power and Water's Distributed Power. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson. The memorandum is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks at McGavock High School in Nashville, Tennessee
January 30, 2014

The President. Hello, Raiders! Thank you. Hello, everybody. Hey! Well, it is good to be in Nashville! And it's good to be here at Big Mac.