

and their real sacrifices this week. Late Monday, a horrible blaze in Charleston, SC, claimed the lives of nine local firefighters. Details are still being investigated, but what we know now is these heroes died trying to save lives. We fear most were caught under a collapsed roof in the quick-spreading flames.

My heart goes out to the families, friends, and coworkers of these firefighters. These were courageous public servants. We will miss them dearly. They paid the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. In the aftermath, our State's low country must deal with the shock and sorrow of these losses. Our job as citizens is to never forget what they did and to try to turn the shock and sorrow into solemn remembrance and a commitment to help their families.

I also want to mention two other Charleston leaders who are struggling with this situation on the ground: Fire Chief Rusty Thomas, and city of Charleston Mayor Joe Riley. According to news reports, Chief Thomas stayed up Monday night meeting with many of the families of the victims. He was on the scene all night.

The police chief, Greg Mullen, said:

Chief Thomas is a true leader.

I could not agree more. Mayor Riley is no stranger when it comes to dealing with disaster. His leadership during the trying aftermath of Hurricane Hugo was instrumental in our quick recovery. His leadership will greatly aid the Charleston Fire Department now as they attempt to move forward.

Firefighters represent the best our country has to offer. I will never forget these hometown heroes and the tremendous sacrifice they made this week. For the families of those who lost loved ones in Charleston, our words are feeble comfort for them, but we will always honor the memory and sacrifice of these heroic public servants of South Carolina.

For the families and friends of firefighters who remain on the job today, we pray for them as the Psalmist did, that God would be their "refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble."

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President, today is a special day: one which is special to me and the nearly 2 million residents of the State of West Virginia. On this day in 1863 West Virginia entered the Union as the 35th State.

West Virginia is America. West Virginia is a place where people are proud of who they are and not what they have. It is a place where neighbor helping neighbor means something. Where community, faith, and family are not taken for granted.

The area now known as West Virginia was originally settled thousands of years ago by Native Americans. The 17th and 18th centuries saw the first pioneering European settlers who came across the Appalachians looking for an expansive new homestead. The 19th century saw America's darkest hour in the Civil War. But, it was in this con-

flict that Western Virginia separated from Virginia standing on its own, faithful the Union, and earning statehood. From that day to today, West Virginia has been an important part of America.

Our coal powers America. Our steel built America's cities from the ground up. Our timber built America's homes. Our chemical industry has improved the quality of life for all Americans. And yet today, it is another resource, West Virginia's most precious one, this is driving a new generation of West Virginians. West Virginia is home to some of the most pristine natural beauty in our Nation. Visitors from around the country—around the world—come to take in the majestic mountain vistas, explore our forests, celebrate our Appalachian heritage, fish, ski, and hit the links, and most importantly spread time with our people.

So, just who are these people? They have stout hearts, courage, and an unfaltering determination. These qualities are particularly evident in West Virginia veterans like Chester Merriman, the youngest person to serve in World War I at just 14 years of age, or Hershel "Woody" Williams, who received a Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II for his heroism during the Battle for Iwo Jima, epitomize how West Virginians have proudly served their country no matter when—from the Civil War to today's conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, there are more than 200,000 veterans living in the State giving West Virginia the highest per capita of any State in the country.

I could go on and on and say the same thing about West Virginia's coal miners, steel workers, loggers, and chemical plant workers all of whom are truly the hardest working, finest people you ever spend time with. I know because I have.

West Virginia is my home and I am proud of that. I feel genuinely blessed to have been able to serve the people of West Virginia for as long as I have. West Virginia Day has always been a day resonating deeply inside of me and my fellow West Virginians. Happy 144th Birthday West Virginia! I ask that you, my distinguished colleagues join us in our celebration.

EMPLOYEE FREE CHOICE ACT

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I am pleased to cosponsor the Employee Free Choice Act sponsored by Senator KENNEDY. Unions helped build our country. They have led the fight for critical worker safety and worker rights protections that all Americans now enjoy. They help raise wages for low- and middle-wage workers and can help close the gap from rising income inequalities.

Being a part of a union pays off for workers. For example, union cashiers earn 46 percent more than nonunion cashiers. Union food preparation workers earn 50 percent more than nonunion

food preparation workers. And union maids and housekeepers earn 31 percent more than nonunion maids and housekeepers. Overall, median weekly earnings for union workers are \$191 higher than those of nonunion workers, and this difference is even more significant for minority groups.

Union workers are also almost twice as likely to receive employer-sponsored health benefits and more than four times more likely to have a secure, defined-benefit pension plan than nonunion workers.

The rate of unionization in America is declining and with it workers' income. In 1973, 42.4 percent of workers in Michigan were in unions. By 2006, that number had fallen to just 19.7 percent of workers. As union membership declines, so has Michigan's real median household income, which fell 14.9 percent between 1999 and 2005.

The problem is not a lack of interest from workers. Fifty-three percent of U.S. workers state they would join a union if they could and 62 percent believe they would be worse off if unions did not exist.

The problem is the difficulties that are presented to those who seek to unionize a shop or industry. The current system does not adequately protect the workers that unionization campaigns are supposed to help and support. Workers are fired in 25 percent of private-sector union organizing campaigns. Seventy-eight percent of employers require that supervisors deliver antiunion messages to their employees. One-third of workers who unionize their workplace never even get a contract.

We have a duty to make sure that workers who want to join unions and unionize their workplace can do so, and that's what the Employee Free Choice Act will do.

The most significant provision in the bill allows for a union shop to be created through a process called a majority sign-up. Majority sign-up has been used for at least the past 70 years. In 2004, for example, about five times as many workers joined the AFL-CIO through a majority sign-up than those who were able to unionize through the National Labor Relations Board process. A majority sign up process results in less employer pressure and fewer delays than NLRB elections.

Currently, however, employers do not have to recognize employees that have a majority sign-up as a union, although many responsible companies, including Cingular and Kaiser Permanente, do. This bill would change that—if a majority of workers signs authorizations designating a union as their bargaining representative, then that union would be recognized as such.

Opponents of this bill have spread a great deal of misinformation about this provision. Many people believe the bill would take away an employee's right to a "secret ballot" union election. That is not true. This bill would still allow individuals the right to an NLRB

supervised election if at least 30 percent of employees want it. This bill also allows employees to form unions using another method as well.

The Employee Free Choice Act would also establish penalties for companies that coerce or intimidate employees and would provide for mediation and binding arbitration when the employer and workers cannot agree on a first contract. In short, it makes needed updates to our labor laws to better protect workers.

By allowing employees to form unions through a majority sign-up, we are supporting a worker's freedom to form a union and to bargain for better pay and better benefits. Experience has shown that this will be a good deal for the worker and a boost for America.

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, since joining this body in 1993, I have supported a number of initiatives to help the hard working men and women of this country, including increasing the minimum wage, supporting equal pay for America's workers, and promoting better trade policies. One piece of legislation that would help American workers is the Employee Free Choice Act, EFCA, and I am proud to be an original cosponsor of EFCA again this Congress. I commend my colleague, the senior Senator from Massachusetts, Senator KENNEDY, for his hard work on this legislation, as well as his longstanding dedication to improving the quality of life for America's working people.

One of the best things we can do for American workers is to remove obstacles that make it harder for them to form and join unions. As many of my colleagues will likely point out in the course of this debate, more than 60 million U.S. workers say they would join a union today if they could. Further, workers who belong to unions earn 30 percent more than nonunion workers, are 62 percent more likely to have employer-provided health care, and are four times more likely to have a pension. Better wages and better benefits help lift Americans out of poverty and into the middle class. Far too many Americans are working for wages that keep them at or below the Federal poverty line with little, if any, opportunity to bargain for better wages and benefits or advance to a better-paying position.

The Employee Free Choice Act would address some of the inequities in the current system of collective bargaining in the U.S. Many critics of this legislation focus on the card check provision, but there is much more to this legislation than just the method of voting. This bill provides for first-contract mediation and arbitration. Importantly, if an agreement has not been reached after 90 days of negotiations, either the employer or the employees can refer the dispute to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service for mediation. Clearly, under the ideal negotiation this would not be necessary, but it is an important option for employees to have in the collective bargaining proc-

ess. The bill also provides for stronger penalties for employer violations while employees are attempting to form a union. Employers who intimidate workers attempting to unionize should face appropriate consequences.

While I understand that the vote on cloture on the motion to proceed to the Employee Free Choice Act may not be successful this week, this fight is far from over. Over the last 2 years, I have received over 1,500 letters, calls, and e-mails in support of this legislation from my constituents, and their voices mean a great deal. I support passage of this legislation for the hard-working Wisconsinites who deserve better from us. I am disappointed that more of my colleagues have not joined in supporting this bill, and I hope that they will rethink their opposition to this bill. I will continue working to pass this important legislation.

30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TRANS-ALASKA PIPELINE

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, on June 20, 1977—30 years ago to this day—oil began flowing through the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. This event represents an important milestone in Alaska's history and a watershed moment in our struggle to secure America's energy independence.

My distinguished colleague from Alaska, Senator LISA MURKOWSKI, spoke at length about the history of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline before we adjourned last night. As she so vividly illustrated, its creation was a monumental undertaking which required the hard work of countless individuals.

During the long political fight to allow this important project to proceed, members of the environmental lobby claimed the pipeline would devastate Alaska. History has proven these critics wrong—responsible development and attentive stewardship have ensured the continued protection of our State's wildlife and lands.

Even after the Arab oil embargo in 1973, the Senate remained closely divided on this matter. In fact, a tie vote on the authorizing legislation was not broken until Vice President Spiro Agnew cast the decisive vote in its favor. My own vote on that bill still ranks as one of the most memorable I have ever cast.

When construction began in 1974, this project was the largest ever financed by private capital. Engineers faced staggering challenges as they plotted a route across 800 miles of rugged terrain and three major mountain ranges. Various geographic hurdles also necessitated the construction of seven airfields, dozens of bridges, and a 360-mile-long road to connect Prudhoe Bay to Fairbanks.

Just more than 3 years after construction started, however, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline was ready to operate. Since then, more than 15.5 billion barrels of crude oil have been sent from Alaska's North Slope, through the

pipeline to Valdez, and on to refineries throughout the country.

The revenues generated by this production have had a tremendous impact in Alaska and throughout the United States. Over the past 30 years, North Slope oil production has added more than \$300 billion to the U.S. economy and reduced domestic oil imports by more than \$200 billion. Energy will always cost money, but instead of sending our dollars overseas, North Slope oil production—made possible by the Trans-Alaska Pipeline—has greatly contributed to economic growth here at home.

In Alaska, the economic effects of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline are even more apparent. Last year, revenues from oil production and transportation accounted for nearly 90 percent of the State government's total income—funds which were then used to help pay for our schools, our roads, and other important projects. North Slope oil revenue also provides the foundation for the permanent fund dividend, which will help assure the well-being of future generations of Alaskans.

When oil began to flow through the Trans-Alaska Pipeline in 1977, gasoline cost a mere 38 cents per gallon. Today, the nationwide average has soared to \$3.00 per gallon, and many experts predict this price will reach \$4.00 by the end of summer.

As those of us in the Senate continue to debate a comprehensive energy policy for our Nation, we must take note of the consequences of 30 years of oil production in Alaska. Instead of the ecological disaster many predicted, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline has been an economic lifeline for our Nation. It continues to prove we can balance environmental concerns with the production of our natural resources. I urge my colleagues to heed this lesson.

TRAVEL PROMOTION ACT

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I am pleased to speak in support of the Travel Promotion Act of 2007, which I introduced late yesterday with Senator INOUE and Senator DORGAN.

Our legislation has a simple purpose: To increase the number of foreign tourists who visit the United States.

To accomplish this goal, two complementary strategies must be undertaken: existing travel problems must be resolved, and fundamental improvements must be made to the manner in which we market our country to prospective tourists.

First, the efficiency of our border entry and screening processes must be improved. The Commerce Committee recently held two hearings on this issue, and industry leaders testified about the adverse effect September 11, 2001, has had on travel to the United States.

Heightened security measures implemented after 9/11, while necessary, continue to inconvenience many travelers. We heard witnesses describe the aforementioned difficulties international