

Remarks of AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer
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I want to thank Sarah (Wartell) and David (Madland) for all they do to respond to the challenges this country's up against.

I'm convinced that, decades from now, when historians look back at these last eight years, they won't only see it as a time when our country's leaders lost their way, but also a turning point when we progressives found our voice.

The work of the Center has been fundamental to making that happen – and you ought to take a lot of pride in that.

It goes without saying that, with the passing of Ted Kennedy, these last few days have been sad ones, not only for those of us who had the opportunity to work with him over the years, but, I think, for everyone in this country.

We've all read a lot about how he was a great legislator – and, of course, he was.

And the reason why is that he was always, always guided by his values.

Progressive values.

Our values.

I remember, last year, at the Democratic convention in Denver, he said:

“There's a new wave of change all around us, and if we set our compass true, we will reach our destination -- not merely victory for

our party, but renewal for our nation.”

I’ve been thinking about those words a lot these last few days.

Because this is also an era of change for workers and their unions -- and we have the chance to make it a time of renewal for the American labor movement.

This is labor’s moment and, together, we can build the labor movement we need to create the America we want:

An America where young people aren’t robbed of the opportunity to go to college.

An America where older men and women never have to fear that they’ll live out their lives in poverty.

An America where you don’t have to worry whether the health insurance you have is going to pay for the health care you need.

An America where every job is a portal into the middle-class.

That’s the kind of America we want and it’s up to this generation of trade unionists to build a labor movement that can make it happen -- and we don’t have a moment to spare.

Not one moment.

Because the simple truth is that the middle-class in this country isn’t being squeezed ... we are being crushed!

Women and men – working parents – who ought to be living the American Dream instead are losing their health care, their pensions, their jobs, their homes, and their patience.

Today, there are nearly six times as many people looking for jobs as there are jobs to fill.

If all the construction workers who lost their jobs since last November

stood side by side, you'd have a line stretching from Washington to New York – and back.

And you know it's not just the private sector.

There's always that myth that, somehow public employees are immune from a recession.

Well, right now, just one month into the new fiscal year, 13 states are looking at budget shortfalls of \$26 billion.

And who's going to pay for it?

The same people who've been paying all along: The men and women who provide the public services that all of us depend on.

Well, I want to tell you something:

It wasn't the UAW, or AFSCME, or the Machinists, or the Teachers -- or any other union -- that was calling the shots up at Bear-Stearns, and Lehman Brothers, and AIG ...

And I can tell you for a fact that no one at the Fed or the Treasury Department ever picked up the phone and called the AFL-CIO for our advice ...

But even though it wasn't organized labor that got us into this mess, I'm here to tell you that we are the people who are going to lead America out of it!

There's no other way.

Because the bottom line is that you cannot rebuild this economy unless you raise workers' wages; and the fastest, the surest and the most effective mechanism for raising workers' wages is the collective bargaining process.

You know, increasing productivity only raises wages when workers

have bargaining power.

Take bargaining power out of the equation and you'll still generate wealth – but it won't get into the hands of the people who created it.

That's what's been happening over these last 30 years.

John Maynard Keynes understood the dangers of free market fundamentalism -- and I'm convinced that the President and most of the House and Senate understand it, too.

That's why they're backing the Employee Free Choice Act.

That's why the Center for American Progress was one of the first organizations to endorse it.

Because just as a growing labor movement built the first American middle-class, unions can build a new middle-class today.

That's why our message is: don't support the Free Choice Act because it's in labor's interest; support it because it's in your interest ... your children's interest ... your neighbor's interest ... support the Employee Free Choice Act because it's in America's interest.

But the challenge facing unions isn't just to change the way labor laws work; it's to change the way we work.

It's to reconfigure ourselves to respond to the needs of a new generation of working Americans

Tomorrow the AFL-CIO is releasing a new study we completed on the crisis facing young workers today.

What it's going to show is that, by every measurement, young Americans are in an economic a free-fall.

One example: men and women under the age of 35 and earning less than \$30,000 a year.

Today, 52 percent of them are living in their parents' homes!

Younger workers ought to have health care.

They ought to have paid sick leave and paid vacations

They ought to have pensions.

They ought to have union representation.

But when they look at unions too often what they see is a remnant of their parents' economy -- not a path to succeed on their own.

This is the issue that will decide the future of the American labor movement.

We all hear a lot about unions coming back into the AFL-CIO -- and that's a personal priority of mine -- but, ultimately, it won't matter how many unions are in the AFL-CIO if we fail to capture the imagination of millennials.

Now, we ought to be clear: the problem isn't that they have some deep-seated hatred of unions; they don't.

Earlier this year, Ruy Teixeira and David Madland did a study for American Progress that points out that support for unions is higher among younger Americans than it is for any other age group.

The problem isn't that that they dislike unions.

They think we do a lot of good things for our members; the problem is that they don't think we have much to offer them.

But that's not the way it has to be!

A few years back there was another Center study that was done by a friend of mine named Jim Grossfeld, it found that young workers -- white collar workers who really didn't want much to do with the labor movement -- sat up and took notice when they heard about unions:

Winning protection for telecommuters ...

and bargaining for portable health care ...

and standing up to protect professional standards.

When we talk about the problems facing contingent workers they really listen: and for good reason – after all, a man or woman working as a temp or a freelancer today may as well be walking a tightrope without a net.

They know workers with unions make more money and have better benefits; they just don't think unions fit the way they work.

And you can't blame them because we haven't really focused on the way they work.

Well, we can't ask millennials to change the way they earn their living to meet our model for unionism; we have to change our approach to unionism to meet their needs.

One union that's pioneering in this is the Communications Workers.

They have an affiliate called WashTech.

It began as a grassroots movement of temps working at Microsoft in Seattle.

Now, thanks to the Internet, it has members from Boston to Silicon Valley and it's evolving into a dynamic, new union of tech workers dealing with problems ranging from job security and health care, to offshore outsourcing and visas.

But, you know we can't only address the needs of millennials where they work.

We need to address the fact that a lot of young people going to college today are drowning in a sea of debt by the time they come out.

There's a story that the writer Anya Kamenetz has posted on her blog about a young man named Robert Bowman in New York.

Maybe some of you know about this.

He grew up in foster care.

He worked his way through community college, college and law school.

He survived two accidents – one that nearly cost him a leg.

And, along the way he took out 32 separate student loans.

Over a four-year period his debt soared to \$400,000!

And, if that's not crazy enough, five appellate judges said he can't join the New York bar because he hasn't done enough to pay off his loans!

That's just one example, but there are tens of thousands of others.

Young people studying to be nurses, and teachers, and social workers, and engineers.

Going into college with dreams of good careers and graduating into bankruptcy!

Now, fighting to make college affordable may not be a traditional union issue; but if we care about the economic security of young workers it has to become one!

And that's just one piece of the equation.

Now, I'm not suggesting that the labor movement ought to abandon all its traditions.

But what I am saying is that nostalgia for the past is no strategy for the future.

Tradition should always have a vote; we just can't let it have a veto.

This is a critical moment for American workers, and we need to seize it.

And that doesn't only mean speaking to the interests of young workers.

We need a labor movement that tells American workers in no uncertain terms that racism – any kind of bigotry -- may serve somebody's interest, but it sure as hell isn't ours.

In 2009, 30 years after the death of A. Philip Randolph, labor is still haunted by the legacy of Jim Crow.

That's why, after the Free Choice Act becomes law, our first priority has to be launching a drive to organize this country's five million (4.8 million) poverty wage African American workers – and other minority workers and the women the labor movement left behind!

And there's more.

We need to be a labor movement that's ready to partner with every employer who respects workers and understands that their employees are an asset, not an expense.

But, we also need to be ready to push back against any CEO who thinks he has the right to earn a good living, but his employees don't.

In short, we need to be a labor movement with the strength to compel every company to live up to the responsibilities of corporate citizenship.

And, in that regard, I need to tell you that I know the Center has been working to try to bring Wal-Mart around on health care reform, but there should be no mistake on this point: Wal-Mart will never, ever be a friend of workers so long as it denies its own employees the right to the strength and the dignity that can only come with a UFCW contract!

And that's not all.

We need to be a labor movement that's organizing and mobilizing as never before to speak out for workers whether it's at the courthouse, the statehouse, or the White House.

Today, more than ever, we need to be a labor movement that stands by our friends, punishes its enemies, and challenges those who, well, can't seem to decide which side they're on.

I'm talking about the politicians who always want us to turn out our members to vote for them, but who somehow, always seem to forget workers after the votes are counted.

For example, legislators who don't understand that their job isn't to make insurance companies happy; it's to keep Americans healthy!

Legislators who say they're all for health care reform, but refuse to stand up for a public system that puts people before profits!

You know, to hear some of them, you'd think the objective isn't to come up with a health care plan that works; it's to write a bill Republicans will vote for.

I think they need to understand that that you can have a bill that guarantees quality, affordable health care for every American – or you can have a bill the Republicans will vote for.

But you can't have both!

We in the labor movement, we keep our promises – and we damned well expect the people we help elect to keep theirs!

What kind of labor movement does America need?

A movement that makes sense to a new generation of workers.

A movement that challenges old bigotries.

A movement with the strength to hold corporate America accountable.

A movement guided by progressive values and understands that if you fight for those values you may not always win, but if you refuse to fight you are always certain to lose!

Now, I know we want to have some time for discussion.

But when I began my remarks I mentioned Ted Kennedy.

Well, there was another Kennedy who touched my life.

It was his brother, Bobby.

It was around the time I first went to work in the mines.

I was a volunteer in his campaign and one day, by chance, I had the luck to meet him.

Some of you may recall that all through that year he'd often quote George Bernard Shaw and say that: "Some men see things as they are and ask why; I dream things that never were and ask why not?"

Well, you know something? That's who we in the labor movement are.

We're people who dream.

We dream of men and women working at jobs where they're treated with respect and paid what they've truly earned –

Jobs they look forward to going to every morning – not the kind they

can't wait to get away from every night.

We dream of a nation where it doesn't matter what your color is... or what sex or religion you are... or whether you're gay or straight or what country your family's from because here, in America, we think everyone ought to have a seat at the table.

We're people who dream of parents being able to look into their children's eyes again and being able to tell them that if they study and work hard they can achieve anything!

That's the America we dream of, and this is our moment to ask: why not?

Thank you.