

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks to the United Auto Workers Convention

February 28, 2012

The President. How's it going, UAW? It is good to be with some autoworkers today! All right. Everybody have a seat, get comfortable. Go ahead and get comfortable. I'm going to talk for a little bit.

First of all, I want to say thank you to one of the finest leaders that we have in labor, Bob King. Give it up for Bob. I want to thank the International Executive Board and all of you for having me here today. It is a great honor. I brought along somebody who is proving to be one of the finest Secretaries of Transportation in our history—Ray LaHood is in the house. Give Ray a big round of applause.

It is always an honor to spend time with folks who represent the working men and women of America. It's unions like yours that fought for jobs and opportunity for generations of American workers. It's unions like yours that helped build the arsenal of democracy that defeated fascism and won World War II. It's unions like yours that forged the American middle class, that great engine of prosperity, the greatest that the world has ever known.

So you guys helped to write the American story. And today, you're busy writing a proud new chapter. You are reminding us that no matter how tough times get, Americans are tougher. No matter how many punches we take, we don't give up. We get up—we fight back—we move forward. We come out on the other side stronger than before. That's what you've shown us. You're showing us what's possible in America. So I'm here to tell you one thing today: You make me proud; you make me proud.

Take a minute and think about what you and the workers and the families that you represent have fought through. A few years ago, nearly one in five autoworkers were handed a pink slip—one in five. Four hundred thousand jobs across this industry vanished the year before I took office. And then as the financial crisis hit with its full force, America faced a hard and once unimaginable reality that two of the Big Three automakers, GM and Chrysler, were on the brink of liquidation.

The heartbeat of American manufacturing was flatlining, and we had to make a choice. With the economy in complete freefall, there were no private investors or companies out there willing to take a chance on the auto industry. Nobody was lining up to give you guys loans. Anyone in the financial sector can tell you that.

So we could have kept giving billions of dollars of taxpayer dollars to automakers without demanding the real changes or accountability in return, that were needed. That was one option. But that wouldn't have solved anything in the long term. Sooner or later we would have run out of money. We could have just kicked the problem down the road. The other option was to do absolutely nothing and let these companies fail. And you will recall, there were some politicians who said we should do that. Some even said we should "let Detroit go bankrupt."

You remember that? You know. [*Laughter*] Think about what that choice would have meant for this country, if we had turned our backs on you, if America had thrown in the towel, if GM and Chrysler had gone under. The suppliers, the distributors that get their business from these companies, they would have died off. Then even Ford could have gone down as well. Production shut down, factories shuttered, once-proud companies chopped up and sold

off for scraps, and all of you—the men and women who built these companies with your own hands—would have been hung out to dry.

More than 1 million Americans across the country would have lost their jobs in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. In communities across the Midwest, it would have been another great depression. And then think about all the people who depend on you. Not just your families, but the schoolteachers, the small-business owners, the server in the diner who knows your order, the bartender who's waiting for you to get off. [*Laughter*] That's right. Their livelihoods were at stake as well.

And you know what was else at stake? How many of you who've worked the assembly line had a father or a grandfather or a mother who worked on that same line? How many of you have sons and daughters who said, "You know, Mom, Dad, I'd like to work at the plant too?"

These jobs are worth more than just a paycheck. They're a source of pride. They're a ticket to a middle class life that make it possible for you to own a home and raise kids and maybe send them—yes—to college. Give you a chance to retire with some dignity and some respect. These companies are worth more than just the cars they build. They're a symbol of American innovation and know-how. They're the source of our manufacturing might. If that's not worth fighting for, what's worth fighting for?

So no, we were not going to take a knee and do nothing. We were not going to give up on your jobs and your families and your communities. So in exchange for help, we demanded responsibility. We said to the auto industry, you're going to have to truly change, not just pretend like you're changing. And thanks to outstanding leadership like Bob King, we were able to get labor and management to settle their differences.

We got the industry to retool and restructure, and everybody involved made sacrifices. Everybody had some skin in the game. And it wasn't popular. And it wasn't what I ran for President to do. I—that wasn't originally what I thought I was going to be doing as President. [*Laughter*] But you know what, I did run to make the tough calls and do the right things, no matter what the politics were.

And I want you to know: you know why I knew, you know why I knew this rescue would succeed?

Audience member. How did you do it? [*Laughter*]

The President. You want to know? It wasn't because of anything the Government did. It wasn't just because of anything management did. It was because I believed in you. I placed my bet on the American worker. And I'll make that bet any day of the week.

And now, 3 years later, that bet is paying off. Not just paying off for you, it's paying off for America. Three years later, the American auto industry is back. GM is back on top as the number-one automaker in the world, highest profits in its 100-year history. Chrysler is growing faster in America than any other car company. Ford is investing billions in American plants, American factories, plans to bring thousands of jobs back to America.

All told, the entire industry has added more than 200,000 new jobs over the past 2½ years—200,000 new jobs. And here's the best part: you're not just building cars again, you're building better cars.

After three decades of inaction, we're gradually putting in place the toughest fuel economy standards in history for our cars and pickups. That means the cars you build will

average nearly 55 miles per gallon by the middle of next decade, almost double what they get today. That means folks, every time they fill up, they're going to be saving money. They'll have to fill up every 2 weeks instead of every week. That saves the typical family more than \$8,000 at the pump over time. That means we'll cut our oil consumption by more than 2 million barrels a day. That means we have to import less oil while we're selling more cars all around the world.

Thanks to the bipartisan trade agreement I signed into law, with you in mind, working with you, there will soon be new cars in the streets of South Korea imported from Detroit and from Toledo and from Chicago.

And today—I talked about this at the State of the Union, we are doing it today. I am creating a trade enforcement unit that will bring the full resources of the Federal Government to bear on investigations, and we're going to counter any unfair trading practices around the world, including by countries like China. America has the best workers in the world. When the playing field is level, nobody will beat us. And we're going to make sure that playing field is level.

Because America always wins when the playing field is level—and because everyone came together and worked together—the most high-tech, fuel-efficient, good-looking cars in the world are once again designed and engineered and forged and built, not in Europe, not in Asia, right here in the United States of America.

I've seen it myself. I've seen it at Chrysler's Jefferson North Plant in Detroit, where a new shift of more than 1,000 workers came on 2 years ago, another 1,000 slated to come on next year. I've seen it in my hometown at Ford's Chicago assembly, where workers are building a new Explorer and selling it to dozens of countries around the world.

Audience member. I'm buying one too!

The President. There you go. [*Laughter*]

I've seen it at GM's Lordstown plant in Ohio, where workers got their jobs back to build the Chevy Cobalt, and at GM's Hamtramck plant in Detroit, where I got to get inside a brandnew Chevy Volt fresh off the line, even though Secret Service wouldn't let me drive it. But I liked sitting in it. It was nice. I'll bet it drives real good. [*Laughter*] And 5 years from now, when I'm not President anymore, I'll buy one and drive it myself. Yes, that's right.

Look, I know our bet was a good one because I had seen it pay off firsthand. But here's the thing. You don't have to take my word for it. Ask the Chrysler workers near Kokomo, who were brought on to make sure the newest high-tech transmissions and fuel-efficient engines are made in America. Or, ask the GM workers in Spring Hill, Tennessee, whose jobs were saved from being sent abroad. Ask the Ford workers in Kansas City coming on to make the F-150, America's best-selling truck, a more fuel-efficient truck. And you ask all the suppliers who are expanding and hiring, and the communities that rely on them, if America's investment in you was a good bet. They'll tell you the right answer.

And who knows, maybe the naysayers would finally come around and say that standing by America's workers was the right thing to do. Because, I've got to admit, it's been funny to watch some of these folks completely try to rewrite history now that you're back on your feet. The same folks who said, if we went forward with our plan to rescue Detroit, "you can kiss the American automotive industry goodbye." Now they're saying, we were right all along. [*Laughter*]

Or, you've got folks saying, well, the real problem is—what we really disagreed with was the workers—they all made out like bandits, that saving the auto industry was just about paying back the unions. Really? I mean, even by the standards of this town, that's a load of you know what. *[Laughter]*

About 700,000 retirees had to make sacrifices on their health care benefits that they had earned. A lot of you saw hours reduced or pay or wages scaled back. You gave up some of your rights as workers. Promises were made to you over the years that you gave up for the sake and survival of this industry, its workers, their families. You want to talk about sacrifice? You made sacrifices. This wasn't an easy thing to do.

Let me tell you, I keep on hearing these same folks talk about values all the time. You want to talk about values? Hard work, that's a value. Looking out for one another, that's a value. The idea that we're all in it together and I'm my brother's keeper and sister's keeper, that's a value.

They're out there talking about you like you're some special interest that needs to be beaten down. Since when are hard-working men and women who are putting in a hard day's work every day, since when are they special interests? Since when is the idea that we look out for one another a bad thing?

I remember my old friend Ted Kennedy. He used to say, what is it about working men and women they find so offensive? *[Laughter]* This notion that we should have let the auto industry die, that we should pursue antiworker policies in the hopes that unions like yours will buckle and unravel, that's part of that same old "you are on your own" philosophy that says we should just leave everybody to fend for themselves, let the most powerful do whatever they please.

They think the best way to boost the economy is to roll back the reforms we put into place to prevent another crisis, to let Wall Street write the rules again. They think the best way to help families afford health care is to roll back the reforms we passed that's already lowering costs for millions of Americans. They want to go back to the days when insurance companies could deny your coverage or jack up your rates whenever and however they pleased. They think we should keep cutting taxes for those at the very top, for people like me, even though we don't need it, just so they can keep paying lower tax rates than their secretaries.

Well, let me tell you something. Not to put too fine a point on it—they're wrong. *[Laughter]* They are wrong. That's the philosophy that got us into this mess. We can't afford to go back to it. Not now.

We've got a lot of work to do. We've got a long way to go before everybody who wants a good job can get a good job. We've got a long way to go before middle class Americans fully regain that sense of security that's been slipping away since long before this recession hit. But, you know what? We've got something to show. All of you show what's possible when we pull together.

Over the last 2 years, our businesses have added about 3.7 million new jobs. Manufacturing is coming back for the first time since the 1990s. Companies are bringing jobs back from overseas. The economy is getting stronger. The recovery is speeding up. Now is the time to keep our foot on the gas, not put on the brakes. And I'm not going to settle for a country where just a few do really well and everybody else is struggling to get by.

We're fighting for an economy where everybody gets a fair shot, where everybody does their fair share, where everybody plays by the same set of rules. We're not going to go back to an economy that's all about outsourcing and bad debt and phony profits. We're fighting for an economy that's built to last, that's built on things like education and energy and manufacturing—making things, not just buying things, making things that the rest of the worlds want to buy. And restoring the values that made this country great: hard work and fair play, the chance to make it if you really try, the responsibility to reach back and help somebody else make it too, not just you. That's who we are. That's what we believe in.

I was telling you, I visited Chrysler's Jefferson North Plant in Detroit about a year and a half ago. Now, the day I visited, some of the employees had won the lottery. Not kidding. They had won the lottery. Now you might think that after that, they'd all be kicking back and retiring. [Laughter] And no one would fault them for that. Building cars is tough work. But that's not what they did. The guy who bought——

Audience member. What did they do?

The President. Funny you ask. [Laughter] The guy who bought the winning ticket, he was a proud UAW member who worked on the line. So he used some of his winnings to buy his wife the car that he builds because he's really proud of his work. Then he bought brand new American flags for his hometown, because he's proud of his country. And he and the other winners are still clocking in at that plant today, because they're proud of the part they and their coworkers play in America's comeback.

See, that's what America is about. America is not just looking out for yourself. It's not just about greed. It's not just about trying to climb to the very top and keep everybody else down. When our assembly lines grind to a halt, we work together and we get them going again. When somebody else falters, we try to give them a hand up, because we know we're all in it together.

I got my start standing with working folks who'd lost their jobs, folks who had lost their hope, because the steel plants had closed down. I didn't like the idea that they didn't have anybody fighting for them. The same reason I got into this business is the same reason I'm here today. I'm driven by that same belief that everybody—everybody—should deserve a chance.

So I promise you this, as long as you've got an ounce of fight left in you, I'll have a ton of fight left in me. We're going to keep on fighting to make our economy stronger, to put our friends and neighbors back to work faster, to give our children even more opportunity, to make sure that the United States of America remains the greatest nation on Earth.

Thank you, UAW. I love you. God bless you. God bless the work you do. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park. In his remarks, he referred to Robert T. King, president, United Auto Workers; and William Shanteau of Curtice, OH, a worker at the Chrysler Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit, MI, who purchased a winning Powerball lottery ticket in June 2010, and his wife Lisa.

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