

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at the United States Steel Corporation Mon Valley Works—Irvin Plant in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania

January 29, 2014

Hey! hello, everybody. Well, thank you, Mario, for that great introduction and your leadership. You just don't come to the Steel City without coming to U.S. Steel. I just got a great tour and had a chance to see a little bit about how you guys build America every single day. And I could not be prouder to be here.

I brought a few friends with me. We've got America's Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew. We've got a couple of guys who wake up and go to bat for Pennsylvania workers every single day, Senator Bob Casey and Congressman Mike Doyle. We've got the mayor of West Mifflin, Chris Kelly, in the house. Pittsburgh's new mayor, Bill Peduto, is here. And we've got Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. And then we've got one of my good buddies who is always in my ear about working people—and I love this guy—the international president of the United Steelworkers, Leo Gerard, is here. And I also brought along our great friend, our former Ambassador to Ireland, and most importantly, chairman of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Dan Rooney in the house.

Now, most of all, it's great to be here with the men and women of U.S. Steel. This company helped build America, and over a hundred years later, you're still at it. You forge the pipes that transport cleaner burning natural gas. You manufacture the lightweight alloys that our automakers use to build fuel-efficient cars. You're part of one of the great turnaround stories of this economic recovery, the rebound of the American steel industry. And look, just every time I go to a steel plant, I remember, being a steelworker is hard work. But every single one of you is doing your part to make the country stronger.

And because of your efforts, businesses like U.S. Steel have now created 8 million new jobs over the past 4 years, 9,000 new jobs in the steel industry alone. Our unemployment rate is the lowest it's been in more than 5 years. Our deficits have been cut in half. Housing is rebounding. Manufacturing is adding jobs, not shrinking jobs, for the first time since the 1990s. We sell more of what we make here in America to other parts of the world than ever before. Business leaders are starting to realize that China is no longer the best place to invest and create jobs, America is—the U.S. of A.—which is why I said last night I believe this can be a breakthrough year for America.

After 5 years of hard work, after everything we did to dig ourselves out of the worst recession of our lifetimes, we're better positioned in this 21st century than any other country on Earth. And the question I posed to Congress yesterday is whether folks in Washington are going to help or they're going to hinder the progress we've been making, whether they're going to waste time creating new crises that slows down our economy or they're going to spend time creating new jobs and new opportunities?

And I don't know what their plans are, but I choose a year of action. Because too many Americans are working harder than ever just to get by, let alone get ahead. They still have the scars of the recession. But the truth is, the middle class have been taking it on the chin since way before the financial crisis hit. You know that. The economy now has been growing for 4

years. Corporate profits, stock prices, they've gone up, but folks' wages haven't risen in over a decade.

And that's why last night I laid out new steps we can take right now to speed up economic growth, strengthen the middle class, and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class. It's an opportunity agenda, because opportunity is what America is all about. And the agenda has four parts. Number one, more new jobs: jobs in American manufacturing, jobs in American energy, jobs in American innovation and technology. Number two, we've got to train more Americans with the skills that we need to fill those jobs. Number three, we've got to guarantee every child in America a world-class education. And number four, we've got to make sure hard work pays off.

Now, some of these ideas that I presented last night are going to require Congress to pass legislation. But America doesn't stand still. U.S. Steel hasn't stood still. I'm not going to stand still. So wherever I can take steps to expand opportunity for more families, regardless of what Congress does, that's what I'm going to do, because I am determined to work with all of you and citizens all across this country on the defining project of our generation, and that is to restore opportunity for every single person who is willing to work hard and take responsibility in this country. That's what I'm committed to doing.

Now, I've come to U.S. Steel today because I want to talk about the fourth part of that opportunity agenda, making hard work pay off for every single American: making sure jobs pay good wages, making sure affordable health care is there when you need it, making sure that after a lifetime of hard work you can retire with some dignity.

Today, women make up about half our workforce, but they still make 77 cents for every dollar a man makes. And as I said last night, that's wrong. In 2014, it is an embarrassment. Women deserve equal pay for equal work. They deserve to be able to have a baby without sacrificing a job. Moms and dads deserve to be able to take a day off for a sick kid or a sick parent. We've got to get rid of some of these workplace policies that belong back in the fifties, back in a "Mad Men" episode, I said. [*Laughter*] We've got to give every woman the opportunity she deserves, because when women succeed, America succeeds. And I'm really proud that there's a woman who is heading up this plant and doing some amazing work. So I was really glad to see that.

But women hold the majority of lower wage jobs. And they're not the only ones who have been stifled by stagnant wages. The truth is, wages and incomes for the average working American haven't gone up. Even though the economy is more productive, even though it's grown over the last two decades, the average person's salary—what they're taking home, their paycheck—it hasn't really grown. Now, Americans understand, we all understand, some people are going to earn more money than others. And we don't envy anybody who achieves success through their hard work. That's what we want for our kids.

Michelle and I were talking. Michelle's dad was a blue-collar worker, worked at a water filtration plant in Chicago. Her mom was a secretary. My mom was a single mom. When we were growing up, we weren't worrying about what rich people were doing. We weren't going around saying, oh, man, we don't have caviar for lunch—[*laughter*—and we're not vacationing down in some fancy place. We don't begrudge success to other folks. But we did expect—and I think most Americans still expect—that if you work hard, you should be able to make it. You don't have to make it the way some folks make it, but everybody should have enough to feel some security.

And Americans overwhelmingly agree that nobody who works full time should ever have to raise a family in poverty. If you're doing your responsibilities and working hard, you should be able to pay the rent, buy food, look after your family.

Now, today, the Federal minimum wage doesn't go as far as it did even in the 1950s. That's why some States and cities are raising their minimum wages on their own. And I support their efforts. And as I mentioned last night, as a chief executive, I'm going to lead by example. In the coming weeks, I'm issuing an Executive order requiring Federal contractors, folks doing business with the Federal Government, pay your federally funded employees a fair wage of at least 10 bucks and 10 cents an hour, because if you cook our troops' meals or you wash their dishes, you shouldn't have to live in poverty.

Of course, if we're going to reach millions more, then Congress is going to have to get on board. There's a bill in Congress right now to wage—that minimum wage to 10 bucks and 10 cents an hour. And I told Congress, say yes to that. Give America a raise.

But that's not all we have to do to grow our middle class. Making work pay also means access to health care that's there for you when you get sick. Now, the good news is if you work here at U.S. Steel, I know you've got good benefits. And that's why I'm a strong supporter of unions, because they fought for those benefits.

But as everybody here knows—and I'll bet you've got friends and family who haven't been so lucky and don't have those benefits. And what the Affordable Care Act means is that no one can ever again be dropped or denied coverage for a preexisting like—condition like asthma or cancer. You can't be charged more if you're a woman. You can't be charged more just because forging steel might hurt your backs, make it hurt sometimes. And if you don't have health insurance on the job, you can actually get affordable health insurance.

So the days when folks are just on their own, out of luck, those days are over. More Americans are signing up for new private health insurance plans every day. We're signing folks up for Medicaid. And if you know somebody who isn't covered, call them up, sit them down, help them get covered at healthcare.gov by March 31. We are going to get all of America covered. That's one of my commitments.

And finally—and that's what this little desk here is about—there's another thing we can all agree on. If you've worked hard all your life, you deserve a secure retirement. Some of the folks I met before I came here on the tour, some of these folks have been on the job 15 years, 20 years. I think your roller has been on the job 38 years. Let me tell you something, if you work 38 years, at the end of it, you should feel like you're going to retire with some security.

And a retirement used to be a three-legged stool. You used to have a pension, then you had your Social Security, then you had your own private savings. Right? And you put that all together, and you could retire. But today, most workers don't have a pension in America. Just half work for an employer that offers any kind of retirement plan. Social Security check is critical, but oftentimes, that monthly check, that's not enough. And while the stock market has doubled over the last 5 years, that doesn't help somebody if you don't have a 401(k).

So what I've asked Congress to do is work with me to give more people more retirement security. Let's fix an upside-down Tax Code that right now gives the wealthiest Americans big tax breaks to save, but does almost nothing for middle class folks, doesn't give them the same kinds of tax advantages. That's not fair. And we need to give every American access to an automatic IRA on the job so they can save at work.

Now, I'm hoping that Congress goes along with this, but I'm not going to wait for Congress. I could do more with Congress, but I'm not going to not do anything without Congress, not when it's about the basic security and dignity of American workers. So here's what I'm going to do today. This is what this little table is set up for. I'm going to sign a Presidential memorandum that directs the U.S. Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew, to create a new way for working Americans to start their own retirement savings. And as soon as I sign this, Jack Lew will get the memo. He is right here. So I'm going to be able to just—here, here's your memo.

And we're calling it "MyRA." Not IRA, MyRA. And what it is, it's a new type of savings bond that we can set up without legislation that encourages Americans to begin to build a nest egg. And it's simple. Workers can contribute through automatic deductions in their paychecks, just like those of you who have an employer-sponsored pension fund can do. They can keep the same account even if they change jobs, so they can carry it over. It's safe. These accounts balance—account balances will never go down in value. They're backed by the full faith and credit of the United States Government. And it's affordable. So you can open an account with as little as \$25. You can contribute as little as \$5 at a time.

But what that means is, for those of you who don't have a 401(k) on the job, don't have a pension on the job, don't have a mechanism to start saving—especially younger workers—you can get started now. And in an emergency, you can withdraw contributions without paying a penalty. So it's a pretty good deal. And what I'm hoping is that working Americans will take a look, because I want more people to have the chance to save for retirement through their hard work. And this is just one step that we can take to help more people do that.

So this is the opportunity agenda that's going to help restore some sense of economic security in this 21st-century economy. We want jobs that are more plentiful. We want skills that keep you employable. We want savings that are portable. We want health care that's yours and that's not going to be canceled when you really need it. We want every American who works hard and takes responsibility to retire with dignity after decades of honest work. These are real, practical, achievable solutions to help shift the odds back a little bit in favor of more working and middle class Americans, so that if they work hard, they can get ahead, and they can leave something for the next generation.

And that's something that U.S. Steel knows a little bit about. For over a hundred years, people throughout the Mon Valley and across this country have been punching in at plants just like this one. You've been keeping the furnaces blasting, keeping the cold mill rolling, carrying on the tradition of hard work and determination. We've got two-, three-generation steelworkers at this plant right here. And I know for a lot of you, this is more than a job. This is a team. This is a family that you're proud to be a part of.

Now, Robin Birk is with me today. Decades ago, her granddad worked for Union Switch and Signal in Pittsburgh, making parts for railroads. Her dad worked for U.S. Steel for over 30 years, rising to plant manager. Robin's been a safety manager here for 23 years. And I want to share something Robin said. She said: "When I was growing up, I would think about what my grandfather and father did for a living, and I always thought my brother would be the one who got to work here. But it ended up being me. Women before me maybe didn't have that opportunity."

Now, Robin's dad Bernard, who just passed away a little more than a year ago, he was full of pride for this company. He used to say, "When we bleed, we bleed blue"—the color of U.S. Steel.

So that pride has run across generation. That's the pride that built this company. And that's the pride that built America. That's the spirit we all need today. That's the resilience, the grit, the determination, and the optimism that keeps the American Dream alive not just for this generation, but for future generations to come.

That's what I'm going to be fighting for this year, just like I was for the last 5 years, and for the next 3 years. And I expect all of you to join me in making sure that we deliver that promise to the next generation.

And now I'm going to sign this bill. Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

[At this point, the President signed the memorandum.]

It's done. I'm going to give it to Jack right now. Here's Jack Lew. I'm going to give it to him. We're going to get it started. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:05 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Mario Longhi, president and chief executive officer, U.S. Steel Corporation; Leo W. Gerard, international president, United Steelworkers; and Amy Smith-Yoder, plant manager, John Trainer, cold reduction mill roller, and Robin E. Birk, safety and industrial hygiene department manager, U.S. Steel Corporation Mon Valley Works—Irvin Plant. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : U.S. Steel Corporation Mon Valley Works—Irvin Plant in West Mifflin, PA.

Locations: West Mifflin, PA.

Names: Birk, Robin E.; Casey, Robert P., Jr.; Doyle, Michael F.; Fitzgerald, Rich; Gerard, Leo W.; Kelly, Chris; Lew, Jacob J.; Longhi, Mario; Obama, Michelle; Peduto, William; Robinson, Marian; Rooney, Daniel M.; Smith-Yoder, Amy; Trainer, John.

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