

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at Laborfest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

September 1, 2014

The President. Hello, Milwaukee! Thank you! Oh, it's good to be back in Milwaukee. Give Chris a big round of applause for that great introduction.

Happy Labor Day, everybody! Happy Labor Day. Today is a day that belongs to you, the working men and women who make America the greatest country on Earth. So thank you to the working folks who are here today and the unions who have always had your back. Thank you to the Milwaukee Area Labor Council, to the Wisconsin AFL–CIO.

It's good to be back at Laborfest. I hope you don't mind, I brought a friend with me, somebody who is fighting for American workers every day: America's Secretary of Labor, Tom Perez, is in the house. And I just found out Tom's wife is from Milwaukee, so his father-in-law is here. So I just told his father-in-law he's doing a really good job, because you always want to make a guy look good in front of his father-in-law. [*Laughter*]

We've got some other friends I want to acknowledge. First of all, your Congresswoman, Gwen Moore, is here. Your mayor, Tom Barrett, is in the house. We've got one of my favorites, Mary Kay Henry from SEIU. Newly elected Lily Garcia from NEA. My pal—not a Packers fan, he's a Steelers fan, but he's a good guy anyway—Leo Gerard from USW, Steelworkers. Billy Hite from UA; Joe Hansen from UFCW.

To all the other labor leaders who are here, we are so glad to have you. And we're here because of the things all too often we take for granted. Anybody who's got a seat, feel free to sit down. Yes, I don't want anybody fainting; it's all hot out here. I might get you back up on your feet at some point.

But we're here to celebrate something that sometimes the American people take for granted: the 40-hour workweek, overtime pay, a minimum wage, weekends like this one. All that didn't happen by accident. It happened because America's workers organized for it, fought for it. History shows that working families can get a fair shot in this country, but only if we're willing to fight for it.

Now, the first time I came to Laborfest was—I was still a candidate back in 2008. And during that campaign, I promised, if you send me to the White House, I'd stand with you in that fight. Now, 2 weeks later, our financial system collapsed. A recession almost became a depression. And in the years since, our country has faced a choice. There are some folks who wanted to place an even bigger bet on top-down economics, the kind of economics that helped cause the crisis in the first place: more tax cuts for those at the top, fewer rules for big banks and corporations, this blind faith that maybe prosperity would finally trickle down on the rest of us if folks up at the top just kept on doing better and better.

But, you know what, Milwaukee, I didn't run for President to double down on top-down economics. I ran for President because I believed in bottom-up economics. I believed in middle-out economics. I placed a bet on you. I placed a bet on America's workers. I put my money on American workers and the belief that our economy grows best when everybody has got a shot, when folks who are willing to work hard can get into the middle class and stay into the middle class. And I've come back to Laborfest to say that because of your hard work, because of what we've been through together, that bet is starting to pay off.

America is stronger because of the decisions we made to rescue our economy and rebuild it on a new foundation asking the simple question: Is this good for ordinary Americans, is this good for working people, not just a few, for—but for everybody? And over the past 53 months, our businesses have created nearly 10 million new jobs. We're on a streak where, the last 6 months, we've created more than 200,000 jobs each month. That's the first time that's happened since 1997.

Construction is rebounding. Energy and technology are booming. American manufacturing is steadily creating jobs for the first time since the 1990s. Our businesses export more goods made right here in America to the rest of the world than ever before.

America is stronger because we saved the American auto industry and more than 1 million jobs that depend on the auto industry. Today, our workers are building more cars than any time since 2002. And by the way, they're really good cars. The auto industry is adding jobs at the strongest rate since the 1990s.

America is stronger because we invested in homegrown energy. The world's number-one oil and gas producer—it's not Russia, it's not Saudi Arabia, it's the U.S. of A. We are the largest producer. And for the first time in nearly 20 years, America now produces more oil than we buy from other countries. But we're also producing more clean energy, putting folks back to work. We've tripled the amount of wind power that creates energy. We've increased by 10 times the amount of solar power we create. And all of that is creating tens of thousands of good jobs all across the country.

America is stronger because we set our schools on a race to the top. We helped more middle class families afford college. Today, thanks to outstanding teachers, our high school graduation rate is at a record high. More young people are earning their college degrees than ever before.

America is stronger because we helped millions of responsible homeowners stay in their homes, and we got some of the biggest banks who sold deceptive mortgages to help make things right. They're ponying up billions of dollars to do right by folks who got cheated. We changed a Tax Code that was skewed too much to the wealthy at the expense of working families. We made sure, you know what, you guys have got to pay a little more. And as a consequence, we cut our deficits by more than half.

And yes, Milwaukee, America is stronger because millions more Americans have the peace of mind of quality, affordable health insurance that they can count on. [Applause] Yes, we did that.

So I just want everybody to understand, because you wouldn't always know it from watching the news—[laughter]—by almost every measure, the American economy and American workers are better off than when I took office. We're better off by almost every measure. But look, none of this progress has come easy. Every inch of it we have had to fight for. Every inch of it we've had to work against a lockstep opposition that is opposed to everything we do.

But it was worth it. Every gray hair is worth it. [Applause] Every gray hair is worth it, and at least I've still got some hair. [Laughter]

Audience member. And you look good!

The President. Oh, I look good—see, I like that. Thank you. Yes, whenever folks say—whenever they see me they say, you know what, you look okay, like they're surprised.

[*Laughter*] And then, sometimes, they say I look taller than I do on TV. [*Laughter*] I say, yes, I look—that's because the TV is small. It makes me look smaller. I'm—[*laughter*].

Look, it is thanks to the grit, to the resilience of working Americans that this country we love, it's recovered faster, it's come farther than almost any other advanced economy. For the first time in more than a decade, business leaders around the world, when you ask them, where do you want to invest, what's the number-one place to invest, they don't say China, they don't say Germany. They say the United States of America. And our lead is growing. U.S.A.!

Audience members. U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!

The President. So look, I'm saying all this just because sometimes, if you're watching TV or something, I mean, it's just kind of a whole downer. [*Laughter*] Now, we've got struggles. We've got work to do. But there are a lot of reasons to be optimistic about America.

More folks are working. The economy's growing stronger. The engines are revving a little louder. And the question now is, are we going to make the right decisions to accelerate this progress? Are we going to continue to focus on working families? Are we going to continue to make sure that a growing economy gives everybody rising incomes and wages? Are we going to make sure that we're helping the middle class and everybody who is trying to get into the middle class?

It's a good thing that corporate profits are high; I want American businesses to succeed. It's a good thing that the stock market is booming. A lot of folks have 401(k)s in there; I want them to feel good. But I also want to see the guy who's breaking his back on two 8-hour shifts so he's got enough money to send his kids to college, I want to make sure that guy is getting a break. I want to make sure he's getting some help. I want to see that woman who's worked for 40 years be able to retire with some dignity and some respect. That's how I measure progress, not just by how well the economy is doing overall, but how it's doing for folks who are working so hard, doing everything right, just want a fair shot, and didn't have anything handed to them in their lives, weren't born with a silver spoon in their mouths.

And the reason that's who I'm thinking about is because that's the family I grew up in. That's the family Michelle's family grew up in. This country gave me a chance. It gave Michelle a chance. I believe in the American Dream because I have lived it. And I ran for this office to restore it for everybody so no matter what you look like and no matter where you came from, no matter how you started, you can make it in America if you try.

So that's what's at stake right now. That's what's at stake: making sure the economy works for everybody. I've got a vision of an economy where opportunity is open to everybody who's willing to work hard. I want an economy where new, long-term investments in American energy and American infrastructure and American manufacturing and American innovation are unleashing new jobs in new industries right here in Wisconsin, right here in Milwaukee; an economy where our workers have the chance to earn new skills that lead to that good job, where our children graduate from school fully prepared for the global competition they're going to face.

I want an economy where your hard work pays off with higher wages and higher incomes and fairer pay for women and workplace flexibility for parents and affordable health insurance and decent retirement benefits. I'm not asking for the Moon, I just want a good deal for American workers.

Sometimes, when I talk about this stuff to some of my folks on the other side of the aisle, they're all, like, well, why are you stirring up class resentments? I'm not stirring up class resentment.

Let me tell you something, working families, they are fine that folks are rich. The average person, they're not looking for a yacht. They're not looking for their own plane. They're not looking for a mansion. They don't need to be vacationing in St. Bart's. All they're looking for is that if they work hard, they can pay the bills; that they can send their kids to school; they can retire with some dignity, maybe take a vacation once in a while, go to Wisconsin Dells or something. They ain't looking for nothing fancy. That's where Michelle and I used to take Malia and Sasha. We'd be in that water so long, fingers all pruned up. And there were a lot of little kids in there, which made you a little suspicious about the water. *[Laughter]* I'm just saying. *[Laughter]* That was not in the prepared remarks. Let me—*[laughter]*.

Now, most of the policies I'm talking about have two things in common: They're going to help more working families get ahead, and the Republicans who run our Congress oppose almost all of them.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Don't boo, vote! *[Applause]* Don't boo, vote! It's easy to boo. I want you to vote. Yes, don't boo, vote. They oppose almost everything. And I'm not making that up; I'm just telling the truth. It's just the facts.

In fact, they oppose stuff they used to be for. *[Laughter]*

Audience member. *[Inaudible]*

The President. No, it's true. I mean, they used to be for building roads and bridges and all that. Now, suddenly, no, we can't build roads. Well, why not? Because you oppose—because you proposed it. I am just telling the truth. The sky is blue today. Milwaukee brats are delicious. The Brewers are tied for first place. And Republicans in Congress love to say no. Those are just facts; they're facts of life. They say no to everything.

If we had a Congress that cared about policies that actually helped working people, I promise you we could get everything done that we've talked about doing. But until we have that Congress, it's up to us to fight for these policies.

So wherever I can, I've acted on my own. I acted on my own to make sure more women had the protections they needed to fight for fair pay on the workplace, because I think when women succeed, America succeeds. I was raised by a single mom, so I know how hard it is for a lot of women out there. And by the way, men, you should want your wife to get paid fair. She's bringing that money home. That's not a women's issue, that's your issue. That's money out of your family's pocket.

That's why I took action on my own to give millions of Americans the chance to cap their student loan payments at 10 percent of their incomes. I don't want young people saddled with debt when they're just starting out in life. That's why I acted on my own to make sure companies that receive Federal contracts, that they pay their workers a fair wage of at least \$10.10 an hour. If you work full time in America, you shouldn't be living in poverty, you shouldn't be trying to support a family on poverty.

And in the year and a half since I first asked Congress to raise the minimum wage, of course, the Republicans in Congress have blocked it, but more and more Americans are doing

their part to make it happen. This is why I stay optimistic, even with some of the nonsense that goes on in Washington. You've seen business leaders at companies like the Gap that raised base wages for tens of thousands of workers because they knew it was good for business. You've seen mayors across the country doing their part, and today, on Labor Day, the mayor of Los Angeles is announcing a plan to raise his city's minimum wage.

You've seen—here's a good story. Last month, the president of Kentucky State University, he gave himself a \$90,000 pay cut so that he could raise wages for his lowest paid employees. Thirteen States, District of Columbia—they've raised their minimum wages. Four more States are putting minimum wage initiatives on the ballot in November.

And you know what, here's the best part. You'll hear opponents, they'll say, well, minimum wage, they're going to kill jobs. Except it turns out, the States where the minimum wage has gone up this year had higher job growth than the States that didn't raise the minimum wage. That's the facts.

All across the country right now, there's a national movement going on made up of fast food workers organizing to lift wages so they can provide for their families with pride and dignity. There is no denying a simple truth: America deserves a raise. Folks are doing very well on Wall Street; they're doing very well in the corporate board rooms. Give America a raise.

And I think, eventually, Congress is going to hear them. We'll break those folks down. We'll just stay on them. We'll just keep at it. That's how I got Michelle to marry me. I just wore her down. [*Laughter*] Persistence, you just stay at it. Because the only thing more powerful than an idea whose time has come is when millions of people are organizing around an idea whose time has come. Millions of people are voting for an idea whose time has come.

I know it gets frustrating, though, when it feels like your voices aren't heard in Washington. I promise you I share that frustration. After all that unions have done to build and protect working Americans, I know it's frustrating when people have the gall to blame you for the problems facing working Americans. I know you've got some experience with that around here.

But you know what, if I were looking for a good job that lets me build some security for my family, I'd join a union. If I were busting my butt in the service industry and wanted an honest day's pay for an honest day's work, I'd join a union. If I were a firefighter or police officer risking my life and helping to keep my community safe and wanted to make sure I came home safely to my family, I'd join a union. I'd want a union looking out for me.

And if I cared about these things, I'd also want more Democrats looking out for me. I'm just saying. Because when the rest of the country is working to raise wages, but Republicans in Congress won't, it ain't right. Not only is it not right, it ain't right. [*Laughter*] When the rest of the country is working to open up more businesses, but Republicans in Congress block investments that would help more businesses grow, it ain't right. When unions and CEOs, when law enforcement and the evangelical community, when folks who usually don't agree on anything agree that we should be fixing our broken immigration system, but the Republicans in the House of Representatives have been sitting on a bill for more than a year, it ain't right.

So that's why we have to keep fighting. At the beginning of the last century, people fought against the idea of a 40-hour workweek, they fought against weekends, they fought against workplace safety laws. Eighty years ago, people fought against the idea of Social Security. Fifty years ago, people fought against the idea of Medicare. But guess what? We won those fights.

And just like in the past, today, you've still got people fighting against the right for health care for everybody or the right to fair wages, or they even fight against equal pay for equal work. But we will win those fights too. I promise. And I know that because America is the story of progress. It can be slow, yes. It can be frustrating. Sometimes, you get half a loaf where you wanted the whole loaf. Sometimes, you might just get a quarter of a loaf.

But if you look at our history, the story is progress. And that's because there have always been Americans who have had the courage to march and to organize and to fight for themselves, but then also to fight for each other. And I'm asking you to do the same thing. I asked you the same thing back in 2008.

I'm asking you to believe not just in my ability to bring about the change we need, I'm asking you to believe in yours. I'm asking you to believe in you. Because even when our politics just ain't right, there's a whole lot that is right with America.

America is that dad who punches in every morning to put food on the table. America is the mom who's working the graveyard shift to provide for her kids. America is the child who dreams of being the first in his family to go to college. America is the teacher who stays after work and dips into her own pocket for supplies to help that child get there. America is the autoworker who thought she'd never make another car again, and now she can't make them fast enough. America is the construction worker who's helping build more homes and businesses to get solar panels on the top. America is on the move. [Applause] America is on the move.

America is not the party we belong to, but the values we share. America is hard work. America is responsibility. America is sacrifice. America is looking out for one another. Let's embrace some economic patriotism that says we rise or fall together as one Nation, as one people.

Don't reward companies that ship jobs and profits overseas; reward companies that are investing right here in Milwaukee. Let's make sure our fellow citizens have access to good childcare and preschool and college and health care. Let's make sure women get fair pay. Let's make sure working moms and dads can get a day off if their child is sick or their parents are having a tough time. Let's make sure nobody who is working full time is raising their family in poverty. These ideas are not un-American, they're how we built America—together.

I'll tell you, Milwaukee, the hardest thing in life is changing a stubborn status quo. And it's even harder when it seems like some of the folks in power, all they care about is keeping power. But there are plenty of folks who count on you to get cynical and not vote because you don't think you can make a difference. That's how they're going to stay in power. They believe you won't get involved. They believe you won't organize. They believe you won't vote. And that way, the special interests stay in power. And they will try to divide us, and they'll try to distract you, and they'll try to run the okey-doke on you and bamboozle you and hoodwink you. Don't buy it. Don't buy it.

Because despite the cynics, America is on the move. It's making progress. Despite all the opposition, there are workers who have jobs now who didn't have them before. There are families with health insurance who didn't have them before. There are students going to college who couldn't afford it before. There are troops who were in Afghanistan who are coming home.

Cynicism is fashionable these days, but cynicism didn't put anybody on the Moon. Cynicism never won a war, it never cured a disease, it never started a business, it never fed a young mind, it never built a road or a bridge.

Cynicism is a bad choice. Hope is the better choice. Hope is what gives us courage. Hope is what gave soldiers courage to storm a beach. Hope is what gives young people the strength to march for women's rights and worker's rights and civil rights and voting rights and gay rights and immigration rights.

Hope, the belief that there are better days ahead, the belief that together, we can build up our middle class and hand down something better to our kids, that's what built America. And America's best days are still ahead. I believe it. You need to believe it too. Let's get to work.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:49 p.m. in Henry Maier Festival Park. In his remarks, he referred to Christopher Harris, vice president, United Steel Workers Local 2–209; Ann M. Staudenmeier, wife, and L. William Staudenmeier, Jr., father-in-law, of Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez; Mary Kay Henry, international president, Service Employees International Union; Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president, National Education Association; Leo W. Gerard, president, United Steelworkers; William P. Hite, general president, United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States, Canada and Australia (UA); Joseph T. Hansen, international president, United Food and Commercial Workers; Mayor Eric M. Garcetti of Los Angeles; and Raymond M. Burse, president, Kentucky State University.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Laborfest in Milwaukee, WI.

Locations: Milwaukee, WI.

Names: Barrett, Thomas M.; Burse, Raymond M.; Garcetti, Eric M.; Garcia, Lily Eskelsen; Gerard, Leo W.; Hansen, Joseph T.; Henry, Mary Kay; Hite, William P.; Moore, Gwendolyne S.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Perez, Thomas E.; Staudenmeier, Ann M.; Staudenmeier, L. William, Jr.

Subjects: Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Civil rights : Wage equality; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, repayment options; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Energy : Domestic sources; Government organization and employees : Federal Government contracting policies, reform; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Holidays and special observances : Labor Day; Housing : Mortgage refinancing programs; Labor issues : Laborfest; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Wisconsin : President's visits.

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