

President Obama Tells AFL-CIO Convention Delegates: “We Cannot Afford to Go Back – We Must Move Forward”

On September 15, 2009 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, President Barack Obama addressed the AFL-CIO Convention. The following are excerpts from President Obama’s speech:

Being here with all of you is a reminder of what we’re trying to do in Washington and why I’m there in the first place. Because one of the fundamental reasons I ran for President was to stand up for hardworking families; to ease the struggles, lift the hopes, and make possible the dreams of middle-class Americans.

Brothers and sisters, when hardworking Americans succeed – that’s when organized labor succeeds. And when organized labor succeeds – that’s when our middle class succeeds. And when our middle class succeeds – that’s when the United States of America succeeds.



And the fundamental test of our time is whether we will heed this lesson; whether we will let America become a nation of the very rich and the very poor, of the haves and the have-nots; or whether we will remain true to the promise of this country and build a future where the success of all of us is built on the success of each of us.

That’s the future I want to build. That’s the future the AFL-CIO wants to build. That’s the future the American people want to build. And that’s the future we’ve been working to build from the moment I took office.

At the time, folks were fearing the collapse of our entire financial system. Our economy was shedding about 700,000 jobs a month. Our credit market

was frozen and folks couldn't get the home loans, car loans, and student loans they needed. What was a deep recession threatened to become a Great Depression.

That's why we acted boldly and swiftly to pass an unprecedented economic Recovery Act. It's a plan that didn't include any of the usual Washington earmarks or pork-barrel spending. But what it did include was a guarantee to uphold Davis Bacon and pay prevailing wages.

Because of the Recovery Act, we're keeping a campaign promise I made by giving 95 percent of working Americans a tax cut. We increased and extended unemployment insurance to 12 million Americans. And we are putting Americans to work across this country rebuilding our crumbling roads, bridges, and waterways with the largest investment in our infrastructure since Eisenhower created the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s. All in all, many middle class families will see their incomes go up by about \$3,000 because of the Recovery Act, helping them get back much of what they may have lost due to this recession.

So, while I know times are still tough for working people, while I know too many folks are still looking for work or worried they'll be the next ones let go, the Recovery Act is making a difference. We have stopped our economic freefall. That is something everyone can agree on.

But the fact is, the problems in our economy preceded this economic crisis. Just last week, a Census report came out showing that in 2008, before this downturn, family income fell to its lowest point in over a decade; and more families slid into poverty. That is unacceptable. And I refuse to let America go back to the culture of irresponsibility that made it possible; back to an economy with soaring CEO salaries and shrinking middle class incomes; back to the days when banks made reckless decisions that hurt Wall Street and Main Street alike. Going back to those days would be bad for unions, bad for the middle class, and bad for the United States of America.

We cannot afford to go back – we must move forward. That's why we need to build a new foundation for lasting prosperity. By creating the jobs of the future. By reforming our health care system. By laying down tough rules of the road to protect consumers from abuse; let markets function fairly and freely; and ensure that we never experience another crisis like this again.

That's how we'll build an economy that works for working Americans. That's how we'll help our children climb higher than we did. And that's how we'll grow our great American middle class.

We'll grow our middle class with policies that benefit you, the American worker – and I've set up a Middle Class Task Force to do just that, run by my outstanding Vice President, that scrappy kid from Scranton, Joe Biden.

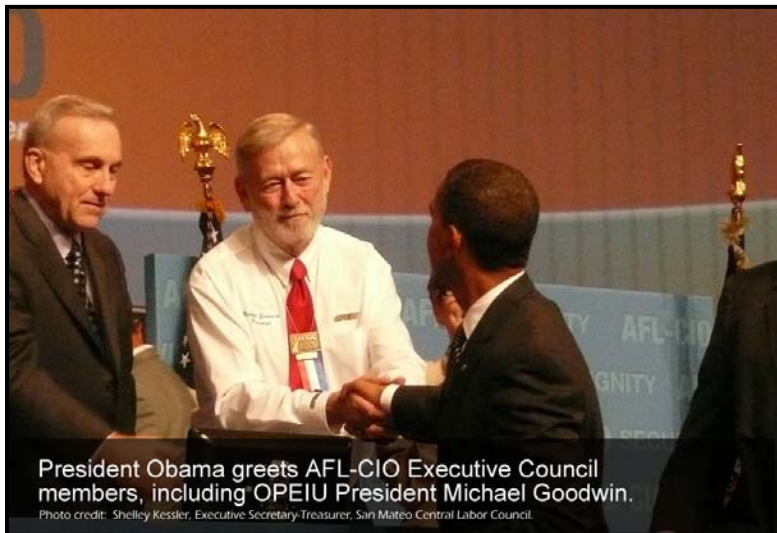
We'll grow our middle class by building a strong labor movement. That's why I named Hilda Solis, the daughter of union members, as our new Labor Secretary. Hilda and I know that whether we're in good economic times or bad, labor is not the problem – labor is part of the solution.

That's why we've begun reversing and replacing old anti-labor Executive Orders and policies with ones that protect your benefits; protect your safety; and protect your rights to organizing and collective bargaining. That's why the very first bill I signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Act to uphold the basic principle of equal pay for equal work. And that's why I stand behind the Employee Free Choice Act – because if a majority of workers want a union, they should get a union.

We'll grow our middle class by creating jobs for Americans who want one – not just any jobs, but jobs with good wages, jobs with good benefits. Jobs that give a person the satisfaction of knowing they'll meet their responsibilities to

themselves and their families. Jobs that are not just a source of income, but a source of self-respect. Every American deserves that much.

And we'll grow our middle class by finally providing quality, affordable health insurance in this country. Few have fought for this cause harder, and few have championed it longer than you, our brothers and sisters in organized labor. You're making phone calls, knocking on doors, and showing up at rallies – because you know why this is so important. You know this isn't just about the millions of Americans who don't have health insurance, it's about the hundreds of millions more who do; Americans who worry that they'll lose their insurance if they lose their job; who fear their coverage will be denied because of a pre-existing condition; who know that one accident or illness could mean financial ruin.



President Obama greets AFL-CIO Executive Council members, including OPEIU President Michael Goodwin.

Photo credit: Shelley Kessler, Executive Secretary-Treasurer, San Mateo Central Labor Council.

In fact, a new report from the Kaiser Family Foundation was released today showing that family premiums rose more than 130 percent over the last ten years, and now average over \$13,000 a year – the highest amount on record.

When are we going to stop this? When are we going to say enough is enough? How many more workers have to lose their coverage? How many more families have to go into the red for a sick loved one? We have talked this issue to death year after year, decade after decade. And I am here to say the time for bickering is over. The time for games has passed. Now is the time for action. Now is the time to deliver on health insurance reform.

The plan I announced will offer more security and stability to Americans who have insurance. It will offer insurance to Americans who don't. And it will slow the growth of health care costs for our families, our businesses, and our government.

Here is what you need to know. If you already have health insurance through your job, nothing in this plan will require you or your employer to change your coverage or your doctor. Let me repeat: Nothing in this plan will require you to change your coverage or your doctor.

What this plan will do is make your insurance work better for you. It will be against the law for insurance companies to deny you coverage because of a pre-existing condition. It will be against the law for insurance companies to drop your coverage when you get sick, or water it down when you need it most. They will no longer be able to place some arbitrary cap on how much coverage you can receive in a given year or a lifetime. We will place a limit on how much you can be charged for out-of-pocket expenses – because in the United States of America, nobody should go broke because they got sick.

And insurance companies will be required to cover, at no extra charge, routine checkups and preventive care, like mammograms and colonoscopies – because there's no reason we shouldn't be catching diseases like breast cancer or colon cancer before they get worse. That makes sense, it saves money, it saves lives.

So, that's what we'll offer folks who already have health insurance – more stability and more security. For the tens of millions of American citizens who don't have health insurance, the second part of this plan will finally offer you affordable choices. We'll do this with a new insurance exchange

– a marketplace where individuals and small businesses can shop for an affordable health insurance plan that works for them.

Because there will be one big group, these uninsured Americans will have the leverage to drive down costs and get a better deal than they get right now. That's how large companies and government employees get affordable insurance. It's how everyone in Congress gets affordable insurance. And it's time to give every American the same opportunity.

I've also said that one of the options in this exchange should be a public option. Let me be clear: it would just be an option. No one would be forced to choose it. No one with insurance would be affected by it. But what it would do is offer Americans more choices, promote real competition, and put pressure on private insurers to make their policies affordable and treat their customers better.

Now, when you're talking with your friends and neighbors, they might say, Well, that all sounds pretty good, but how are you going to pay for it? And that's a legitimate question. So, let me try and answer it. The plan I'm proposing will cost around \$900 billion over ten years. That's less than we've spent on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and less than the tax cuts for the wealthiest few Americans that Congress passed during the previous administration; wars and tax cuts that were not paid for and ballooned our deficits to record levels.

We will not make that mistake again. We will not pay for health insurance reform by adding to our deficits – I will not sign a bill that adds a dime to our deficits, either now or in the future.

We will pay for it by eliminating hundreds of billions of dollars of waste, fraud, and abuse, including subsidies for insurance companies that pad their profits but don't improve care. We'll also set up a commission of doctors and medical experts to encourage the adoption of common sense best practices that can further reduce costs and raise quality in the years ahead. That's how we'll pay for most of this plan – by using money that's already being spent, but spent badly.

So, don't pay attention to those scary stories about how your benefits will be cut. That will never happen on my watch. We will protect Medicare so it's a safety net our seniors can count on – today, tomorrow, and forever. Not a dollar from the Medicare Trust Fund will be used to pay for this plan – not a dollar.

These are the reforms I'm proposing. These are the reforms labor has been championing. These are the reforms the American people need. And these are the reforms I intend to sign into law.

Quality, affordable health insurance. A world-class education. Good jobs that pay well and can't be outsourced. A strong labor movement. That's how we'll lift up hardworking families. That's how we'll grow our middle class. That's how we'll put opportunity within reach in the United States of America.

Trumka Elected AFL-CIO President

Goodwin, Wohlforth Re-Elected Vice Presidents of Executive Council

Delegates to the AFL-CIO Convention unanimously elected Richard Trumka to serve as President of the AFL-CIO, following the retirement of current President John Sweeney. Also elected at the Convention held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in September 2009 were incumbent Arlene Holt Baker for Executive Vice President and Liz Shuler for Secretary-Treasurer. All three were endorsed by the OPEIU.

OPEIU President Michael Goodwin and Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Wohlforth were also re-elected Vice Presidents of the Executive Council. Goodwin has served on the Council since 1995, and Wohlforth since 2005.

“We are pleased that the delegates have elected our candidate, Richard Trumka, for the AFL-CIO’s top leadership post,” said Goodwin. “His track record as head of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and as Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO is clear evidence of his ability to lead America’s labor movement.”

Goodwin added that Trumka has long been a friend of OPEIU and its members. “We have called on Rich in the past to assist us in initiatives involving OPEIU or one of its Local Unions, and he has answered that call every time! He has proven repeatedly that he understands the needs of working families. He appreciates the strong tradition of union solidarity, while at the same time he strives to bring innovation to the labor movement. Workers could not ask for a more determined advocate.

“We believe Richard Trumka is the best person to lead America’s labor unions. OPEIU looks forward to working with Rich to further the interests of our nation’s working families,” Goodwin concluded.

Trumka, who served four terms as AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer, has been a strong and powerful voice for workers all over North America. He was first elected to the position in 1995 as part of an insurgent campaign to reinvigorate the American labor movement and has continued that level of energy ever since.

AFL-CIO Convention Focuses on Key Issues

In addition to the elections, the AFL-CIO Convention focused on some key issues facing the labor movement today, including health insurance reform and the Employee Free Choice Act, as well as the importance of diversity within our leadership. The Convention also featured some high-profile speakers, including President Barack Obama and Senator Arlen Specter (D-PA).

Committees, staffed by leadership of the AFL-CIO unions, also considered important resolutions and constitutional amendments that will guide the policies and direction of the federation in the coming years, including three resolutions submitted by OPEIU. President Michael Goodwin served as Vice Chair of the important Finance Committee. Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Wohlforth served as a member of the Constitution and Bylaws Committee.

Important OPEIU Resolutions Passed

Three resolutions submitted to the Convention by OPEIU were unanimously passed by the delegates, which called for significant improvements for podiatrists and helicopter pilots.

OPEIU Resolution 37 to Prevent Discrimination called on the AFL-CIO and its member Unions to support the efforts of Doctors of Podiatric Medicine to be defined as physicians in Title XIX of the Social Security Act. Currently, they are defined as physicians in Title XVIII of the Social Security Act governing Medicare, but not similarly defined in Title XIX in the section of the Act governing Medicaid. The failure to recognize them as physicians allows states to prevent podiatrists from treating patients under Medicaid, thereby causing unnecessary interruption of ongoing care, resulting in potential harm and injury to patients.

In a recent victory for Podiatrists, the House Energy and Commerce Committee passed H.R. 1625 in June to amend Title XIX to ensure that podiatrists are defined as physicians. The measure has been referred to the full House.

Resolution 38 on Fairness for Specialty Medical Providers addresses the issue of capitation, wherein the stipulated amount for each patient paid to participating podiatrists from insurance companies is not sufficient to cover the financial risk of the patient's care. The Resolution calls on the AFL-CIO

and its member Unions to oppose any insurance plan that compensates doctors using a capitation system.



Region IV Vice President Becky Turner addressed the convention in support of Resolutions 37 and 38, saying, in part, that failure to recognize doctors of podiatry as physicians in Title XIX allows states to prevent podiatrists from treating patients under Medicaid, thus eliminating “the sole unionized

providers of these medical services from a government created, supported and financed national medical program serving the underprivileged.”

President Goodwin addressed the delegates in support of Resolution 39 on Helicopter Safety, calling on the AFL-CIO and its Transportation Trades Department to continue to monitor the FAA’s progress in establishing increased minimum safety standards in regards to training, maintenance, weather and rest periods for helicopter pilots and flight crews. He also told delegates of the FAA’s establishment of a new satellite-based Air Traffic Control (ATC) system that will go into effect in December, significantly improving safety, capacity and efficiency in tracking aircraft flying over the Gulf of Mexico.



Diversity Is Our Strength!

A Diversity Summit Conference was held on Sunday, September 13, 2009 preceding the AFL-CIO convention. OPEIU stood out as many delegates identified themselves as members of OPEIU. The theme of OPEIU was “Diversity Is Our Strength,” which was well received by those who attended.

Region III Vice President Green Lewis made a powerful address on the progress within OPEIU on diversity. Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Wohlforth served as a panelist and a strong advocate for achieving civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

OPEIU President Michael Goodwin was also honored at a reception following the conference for his work in support of LGBT.

