

Remarks by President Obama at the Building and Construction Trades Department Conference

Written by Press Release
Monday, 30 April 2012 18:37

Washington, DC--(ENEWSFP)--April 30, 2012 - 10:38 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Hey! Hello, everybody! (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you.

AUDIENCE: Four more years! Four more years!

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you very much. Everybody, please have a seat. (Applause.) Thank you, guys. Everybody, take a seat. Well, thank you, Sean, for that outstanding introduction.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Four more years! Four more years!

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughter.) I'll take it. Thank you. Thank you.

Well, it is good to be back among friends. The last time I was here we -- was Saturday night. (Laughter.) And they tell me I did okay. But I want to not only thank Sean for his extraordinary leadership; I want to acknowledge all the other presidents who are on stage for what they do each and every day on behalf of not just their members, but on behalf of all working people. I'm proud of that. (Applause.)

I want to thank my good friend, Tim Kaine, who is here and is a friend of labor -- (applause) -- the next United States senator from the great Commonwealth of Virginia.

And obviously, we come here at a time where -- I just want to repeat my condolences to everybody in the building and construction trades on the passing of Mark Ayers. Mark was a tremendous leader. He was a good friend. His commitment to the labor movement and to working people will leave a mark for years to come. And my thoughts and prayers are with his family. But I know that Sean is going to do an outstanding job, and we wish him all the best in

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his future endeavors. So congratulations. (Applause.)

So it's good to be back in front of all of you. It's always an honor to be with folks who get up every day and work real jobs -- (laughter) -- and every day fight for America's workers. You represent the latest in a long, proud line of men and women who built this country from the bottom up. That's who you are. (Applause.) It was workers like you who led us westward. It was workers like you who pushed us skyward. It was your predecessors who put down the hard hats and helped us defeat fascism. And when that was done, you kept on building --highways that we drive on, and the houses we live in, and the schools where our children learn. And you established the foundation of what it means to be a proud American.

And along the way, unions like yours made sure that everybody had a fair shake, everybody had a fair shot. You helped build the greatest middle class that we've ever seen. You believed that prosperity shouldn't be reserved just for a privileged few; it should extend all the way from the boardroom all the way down to the factory floor. That's what you believe. (Applause.)

Time and again, you stood up for the idea that hard work should pay off; responsibility should be rewarded. When folks do the right thing, they should be able to make it here in America. And because you did, America became home of the greatest middle class the world has ever known. You helped make that possible -- not just through your organizing but how you lived; looking after your families, looking out for your communities. You're what America is about.

And so sometimes when I listen to the political debates, it seems as if people have forgotten American progress has always been driven by American workers. And that's especially important to remember today.

The last decade has been tough on everybody. But the men and women of the building and construction trades have suffered more than most. Since the housing bubble burst, millions of your brothers and sisters have had to look for work. Even more have had to struggle to keep the work coming in. And that makes absolutely no sense at a time when there is so much work to be done.

I don't have to tell you we've got bridges and roads all over this country in desperate need of repair. Our highways are clogged with traffic. Our railroads are no longer the fastest in the

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world. Our skies are congested, our airports are the busiest on the planet. All of this costs families and businesses billions of dollars a year. That drags down our entire economy.

And the worst part of it is that we could be doing something about it. I think about what my grandparents' generation built: the Hoover Dam, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Interstate Highway System. That's what we do. We build. There was a time where we would never accept the notion that some other country has better roads than us, and some other country has better airports than us. I don't know about you, but I'm chauvinistic. I want America to have the best stuff. I want us to be doing the building, not somebody else. (Applause.) We should be having -- (applause) -- people should be visiting us from all over the world. They should be visiting us from all over the world and marveling at what at what we've done.

That kind of unbridled, can-do spirit -- that's what made America an economic superpower. And now, it's up to us to continue that tradition, to give our businesses access to the best roads and airports and high-speed rail and Internet networks. It's up to us to make sure our kids are learning in state-of-the-art schools. It's our turn to do big things. It is our turn to do big things.

But here's the thing -- as a share of the economy, Europe invests more than twice what we do in infrastructure; China about four times as much. Are we going to sit back and let other countries build the newest airports and the fastest railroads and the most modern schools, at a time when we've got private construction companies all over the world -- or all over the country -- and millions of workers who are ready and willing to do that work right here in the United States of America?

American workers built this country, and now we need American workers to rebuild this country. That's what we need. (Applause.) It is time we take some of the money that we spend on wars, use half of it to pay down our debt, and then use the rest of it to do some nation-building right here at home. (Applause.) There is work to be done. There are workers ready to do it, and you guys can help lead the way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We can do it!

THE PRESIDENT: We can do it. We've done it before. And the truth is, the only way we can do it on a scale that's needed is with some bold action from Congress. They're the ones with

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the purse strings. That's why, over the last year, I've sent Congress a whole series of jobs bills to put people to work, to put your members back to work. (Applause.) Again and again, I've said now is the time do this; interest rates are low, construction workers are out of work. Contractors are begging for work, and the work needs to be done. Let's do it. And time after time, the Republicans have gotten together and they've said no.

AUDIENCE: Booo --

THE PRESIDENT: I sent them a jobs bill that would have put hundreds of thousands of construction workers back to work repairing our roads, our bridges, schools, transit systems, along with saving the jobs of cops and teachers and firefighters, creating a new tax cut for businesses. They said no.

AUDIENCE: Booo --

THE PRESIDENT: I went to the Speaker's hometown, stood under a bridge that was crumbling. Everybody acknowledges it needs to be rebuilt.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Let him drive on it! (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Maybe he doesn't drive anymore. (Laughter.) Maybe he doesn't notice how messed up it was. (Laughter.) They still said no.

There are bridges between Kentucky and Ohio where some of the key Republican leadership come from, where folks are having to do detours an extra hour, hour and a half drive every day on their commute because these bridges don't work. They still said no. So then I said, well, maybe they couldn't handle the whole bill in one big piece. Let's break it up. Maybe it's just too much for them.

So I sent them just the part of the bill that would have created these construction jobs. They

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said no.

AUDIENCE: Boo --

THE PRESIDENT: We're seeing it again right now. As we speak, the House Republicans are refusing to pass a bipartisan bill that could guarantee work for millions of construction workers. Already passed the Senate. Ready to go, ready to put folks back to work. Used to be the most -- the easiest bill to pass in Washington used to be getting roads and bridges built, because it's not like only Democrats are allowed to use these things. Everybody is permitted. (Laughter.) Everybody needs them. (Applause.)

So this makes no sense. Congress needs to do the right thing. Pass this bill right away. It shouldn't be that hard. It shouldn't be that hard. Not everything should be subject to thinking about the next election instead of thinking about the next generation. (Applause.) Not everything should be subject to politics instead of thinking about all those families out there and all your membership that need work -- that don't just support their own families, but support entire communities.

So we're still waiting for Congress. But we can't afford to just wait for Congress. You can't afford to wait. So where Congress won't act, I will. That's why I've taken steps on my own. (Applause.) That's why I've taken steps on my own and speeded up loans and speeded up competitive grants for projects across the country that will support thousands of jobs. That's why we're cutting through the red tape and launching a lot of existing projects faster and more efficiently.

Because the truth is, government can be smarter. A whole bunch of projects at the state level sometimes are ready to go, but they get tangled up in all kinds of bureaucracy and red tape. So what we've said is if there's red tape that's stopping a project and stopping folks from getting to work right now, let's put that aside.

Because the point is, infrastructure shouldn't be a partisan issue. Investments in better roads and safer bridges -- these have never been made by just one party or another because they benefit all of us. They lead to a strong, durable economy. Ronald Reagan once said that rebuilding our infrastructure is "common sense" -- "an investment in tomorrow that we need to

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make today.” Ronald Reagan said that, that great socialist -- Ronald Reagan. (Laughter.) Couldn't get through a Republican primary these days.

The folks up on Capitol Hill right now, they seem to have exactly the opposite view. They voted to cut spending on transportation infrastructure by almost 30 percent. That means instead of putting more construction workers back on the job, they want to lay more off. Instead of breaking ground on new projects, they want to let existing projects grind to a halt. Instead of making the investments we need to get ahead, they're willing to let us all fall further behind.

Now, when you ask them, well, why are you doing this -- other than the fact that I'm proposing it? (Laughter.) They'll say it's because we need to pay down our deficit. And you know what, the deficit is a real problem. All of us recognize in our own lives and our own families, we try to live within our means. So we got to deal with the debt and we got to deal with the deficit.

And their argument might actually fly if they didn't just vote to spend \$4.6 trillion on lower tax rates -- that's with a T, trillion -- on top of the \$1 trillion they'd spend on tax cuts for people making more than \$250,000 a year. So they're willing to spend over \$5 trillion to give tax breaks to folks like me who don't need them and weren't even asking for them at a time when this country needs to be rebuilt. That gives you a sense of their priorities.

Think about that. Republicans in Congress would rather put fewer of you to work rebuilding America than ask millionaires and billionaires to live without massive new tax cuts on top of the ones they've already gotten.

Now, what do you think would make the economy stronger? Giving another tax break to every millionaire and billionaire in the country? Or rebuilding our roads and our bridges and our broadband networks that will help our businesses sell goods all around the world? It's pretty clear. This choice is not a hard one. (Applause.)

Of course, we need to bring down our deficits in the long term. But if we're smart about it, we also will be making and can afford to make the investments that will help our country and the American people in the short term. Not only will it put people back to work, but if the economy is growing -- look, every time one of your members is on a job, that means they've got more money in their pockets. That means that they're going to the restaurant, and that restaurant

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owner suddenly is doing a little bit better. They're going to Home Depot to buy some stuff, and suddenly Home Depot is doing a little bit better.

This is a no-brainer. And, by the way, when everybody is doing better and the economy is growing, lo and behold, that actually helps to bring down the deficit, helps us pay off our debt. Previous generations understood this. Apparently, right now, Republicans disagree.

And what makes it worse -- it would be bad enough if they just had these set of bad ideas, but they've also set their sights on dismantling unions like yours. I mean, if you ask them, what's their big economic plan in addition to tax cuts for rich folks, it's dismantling your unions. After all you've done to build and protect the middle class, they make the argument you're responsible for the problems facing the middle class. Somehow, that makes sense to them.

That's not what I believe. I believe our economy is stronger when workers are getting paid good wages and good benefits. That's what I believe. (Applause.) That's what I believe. I believe the economy is stronger when collective bargaining rights are protected. I believe all of us are better off when we've got broad-based prosperity that grows outwards from a strong middle class. I believe when folks try and take collective bargaining rights away by passing so-called "right to work" laws that might also be called "right to work for less," laws -- (applause) -- that's not about economics, that's about politics. That's about politics.

That's why we've reversed harmful decisions designed to undermine those rights. That's why we passed the Fair Pay Act to help stop pay discrimination. That's why we've supported Davis-Bacon. That's why we reversed the ban on Project Labor Agreements, because we believe in those things as part of a strategy to rebuild America. (Applause.)

And as long as I'm your President, I'm going to keep it up. (Applause.) I am going to keep it up -- because the right to organize and negotiate fair pay for hard work, that's the right of every American, from the CEO in the corner office all the way to the worker who built that office.

And every day, you're hearing from the other side whether it's the idea that tax cuts for the wealthy are more important than investing for our future, or the notion we should pursue anti-worker policies in the hopes that somehow unions are going to crumble. It's all part of that same old philosophy -- tired, worn-out philosophy that says if you've already made it, we'll

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protect you; if you haven't made it yet, well, tough luck, you're on your own.

That misreads America. That's not what America is about. The American story has never been about what we can do on our own. It's about what we do together. In the construction industry, nobody gets very far by themselves. I'm the first to admit -- I've got to be careful here because I just barely can hammer a -- (laughter) -- nail into the wall, and my wife is not impressed with my skills when it comes to fixing up the house. (Laughter.) Right now, fortunately, I'm in a rental, so -- (laughter) -- I don't end up having to do a lot of work. (Laughter and applause.)

But here is what I know about the trades: If you've got folks who aren't pulling together, doing their own thing, things don't work. But if you've got enough people with the same goal, pulling in the same direction, looking at the same game plan, you can build something that will stand long after you're gone. That's how a Hoover Dam or a Golden Gate Bridge or a Empire State Building gets built -- folks working together. We can do more together than we can do on our own.

That's why unions were built -- understood workers on their own wouldn't have the same ability to look after themselves and their families as they could together. And what's true for you is true for America. We can't settle for a country where just a few people do really well and everybody else struggles to get by. We've got to build an economy where everybody has got a fair shot, and everybody does their fair share, and everybody plays by the same set of rules. We can't just cut our way to prosperity. We need to fight for an economy that helps everybody -- one built on things like American education, and American energy, and American manufacturing, and a kind of world-class infrastructure that makes it all possible.

Now, these have been some tough years we've been in. I know a lot of your membership can get discouraged, and they can feel like nobody is looking out for them, and they can get frustrated and they -- sure, it's easy to give up on Washington. I know that. But we've been through tougher times before. Your unions have been through tougher times before. And we've always been able to overcome it, because we don't quit.

I know we can get there, because here in America we don't give up. We've been through tougher times before, and we've made it through because we didn't quit, and we didn't throw in the towel. We rolled up our sleeves. We fired up our engines, and we remembered a fundamental truth about our country: Here in America, we rise or fall together as one nation, as one people.

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It doesn't matter where you come from, what you look like, what your last name is. It doesn't matter whether your folks came from Poland, or came from Italy or came from Mexico. One people -- strong, united, firing all cylinders. That's the America I know. That's the America I believe in. That's the America we can rebuild together. (Applause.)

So if you're willing to join us in this project of rebuilding America, I want you to know -- when I was running for this office, I told people I'm not perfect. I'm not a perfect man. Michelle can tell you that. (Laughter.) I'm not a perfect President. But I made a promise I'd always tell you where I stood. I'd always tell you what I thought, what I believed in, and most importantly I would wake up every single day working as hard as I know how to make your lives a little bit better.

And for all that we've gone through over the last three and a half, four years, I have kept that promise. I have kept that promise. (Applause.) And I'm still thinking about you. I'm still thinking about you, and I still believe in you. And if you join me, we'll remind the world just why it is that America is the greatest nation on Earth. (Applause.)

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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11:03 A.M. EDT

Source: whitehouse.gov