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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON  
AT THE SEIU LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE  
WASHINGTON, DC

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you all. Thank you. This is always such a restrained crowd. You know you just wonder what's really on your minds when you walk in.

It's a great pleasure and honor for me to be back here, and I want to thank your President, John Sweeney, because he was such a stalwart friend, and I am so grateful for his personal support, as well as his commitment to the issues and concerns that we share. And I wanted to say that to you publicly, John. I'm very grateful to you.

You know when I was here almost exactly, I think, two years ago, we were struggling on behalf of health care reform. And now, two years later, we have to take stock of where we are in our nation, and I think be grateful about some of the positive changes that you have helped to bring about, and be very concerned about some of the challenges that we face together.

In the last two years, we have seen some extraordinary changes. Our economy has done better than all of the pessimists predicted, when you stood with the President and stood in favor of trying to bring some sense and some priorities into our budget. And there were many who said that it would cause unemployment. It would cause a recession, but that's not what happened.

Instead we've seen more job growth. We've seen positive economic trends for the last two years. You were there with us and this administration when the President signed into law measures that expanded opportunities in education and training for people of all ages, following through on his commitment to lifelong learning to assist all of us, as Americans, to continue to be able to improve our skills.

You were right there when after several vetoes, we finally passed the Family and Medical Leave Act. And this President proudly signed it into law. (Applause.)

You were there when the taxes were cut for 15 million working families which is now trying to be undone. But you stood with the President when the Earned Income Tax Credit made it possible for us, for the first time, honestly, to say that people who worked hard for a living with children in the home should not have to work at poverty level wages, and you were there supporting him. (Applause.)

You've been there on so many issues that I don't even have time to name because you are close to the people that you represent. You see people struggling every single day to keep body and soul together. You know what it's like when people don't have enough income to be able to live in dignity. When they don't have benefits that will support the quality of life that we should have here in this country.

So I want to thank you first for what you have already done. I am grateful. The President is grateful. But more than that, and I think it's becoming increasingly common that more and more people are finally beginning to understand what has been done the last two years that has not been fully appreciated up until now. And so we are very appreciative of what you have done.

But we also know, especially those of you gathered for this meeting, that we have much work ahead of us. You know, I think it's understandable that whenever there is a positive action, there's always a reaction. I think that's the Law of Physics. I never was very good at Physics, but I think that's what it says.

And so it is not surprising that after twelve long years of trying to undermine the quality of work safety, of trying to provide more tax breaks for the wealthy, of experimenting with trickle-down economics, which made a lot of people very well-off and very happy, that as this President began to try to take action to reverse those trends and positions there would be a big counter-reaction.

That should not surprise anybody. People don't want their positions interfered with. They want to keep the power and the perks and the privilege that they have. So they will fight hard in order to prevent the kind of changes that this President is trying to bring about.

What surprises me, though, is how they have convinced so many people that that is good for them too. Convincing working people that it's good to reverse the economic policies of the last two years which have finally begun to right the balance. Convincing working people that it's just fine that we restore a lot of tax breaks for multi-millionaires, and instead raise taxes on working people again.

There's a real challenge to those of us who really care about what the future of our society will be. That we have to go out and do a better job talking with our friends and neighbors. That is what I'm here to ask you to do today.

Because if we don't take that opportunity, those of us who care about the future of these babies that I see in this crowd and am delighted to see here. That's real family values to me. To be able to look out and see these babies and to know that they are here because their parents and their family members are working very hard to give them the future they deserve.

But if we don't talk about that, and if we don't make our views known, then how can we expect people who may be working more hours than they were five years ago, may be holding down two jobs in order to make ends meet, may be trying to figure out what to do with their declining benefits that are being decreased right before their eyes, how can we expect them to know what it is you stand for and are fighting for if we don't redouble our efforts to, in your words, reclaim America?

And that's what I think all of us have to commit ourselves to in the next months ahead. You know, because you work on the front-lines of the American economy what kind of impact good wages and fair benefits and safe working conditions can make on the daily lives of you and your fellow workers.

But the last thing we can afford to do now in our country is be sidetracked by an agenda that hurts workers, that weakens families, and that threatens to jeopardize all of the good efforts that have been made over decades to provide a safety net, to provide a floor for the average working American.

The last thing this country can afford right now are budget cuts and budget priorities that put money in the hands of people who already have more than enough. That's why your work is so important today.

I have seen firsthand, as you have, that many of these government programs, that are the target of so much criticism and attack, are so necessary to help people. The school lunch program is not there as a luxury. It is there because a lot of working families don't make enough money to be able to provide their own subsidized benefits for their children without some help. Since when is it a sin to help each other feed our children? (Applause.) We ought to be doing that out of the goodness of our hearts.

You know because you see firsthand what programs like WIC and Head Start can mean in the lives children and families. Why on earth would we try to save money by taking good nutrition out of the mouths of pregnant women and little babies? (Applause.) Why

would we cut back on Head Start when our children need that kind of stimulation in their early years?

We know that half of what any of us will ever learn in our lives, we learn by the age of five. Now that's a scary thought. And for people who sometimes look at little, tiny children and think, "They're just kids." And you know, "What difference does it make what they're exposed to, or what's done with them, or why read to them?" I want everybody to think about that. Half of what we learn by the age of five.

Anything you can invest in a child in those first five years will pay off, over and over again. (Applause.) Every conversation you have with a child, every book you read with a child, every walk you take with a child, every game you play with a child, that is part of helping to build the kind of people who will be able to take better care of themselves.

And yes, the family has to be the primary caretaker and primarily responsible. But there's an old proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." And we all are part of an extended village whether we want to admit or not some days. (Applause.)

And the fact that all children deserve the opportunity to have a good beginning is not just some altruistic idea. It will make a difference in our own lives. The more we invest in our kids, the less likely we are to see them on streets, holding somebody up, and being sent to prison where we sure spend a whole lot of money on them. (Applause.)

Also what earthly sense does it make to be cutting education and training programs? (Applause.) You know, every study I've seen and every experience I've had in the last years, and I know that you've had them too, demonstrates clearly to me that we are having growing income inequality in our country. And that's the first time it has happened so dramatically in the entire history of the United States. The rich are getting a whole lot richer. The middle is stagnating. And the poor are getting poorer. Now that is not good news for the American democracy.

In fact, if you compare us with all the other advanced countries in the world right now, we have two unfortunate distinctions. We have a very high percentage of our people incarcerated, second, I think only to Russia. And we have the greatest divide between incomes of any advanced country. Now there are many reasons for that. And some of them lie in the changes in the global economy that have occurred.

But certainly one thing we know is that the more education and training our workforce gets, the more their incomes will stabilize and rise. On-the-job education and training, in community colleges, in vocational programs, in post-secondary

education, in high school, lifelong learning is a clear way of guaranteeing that individuals and the workforce in our country in general will continue to be productive and competitive and demand incomes that they deserve to have.

Now, what is the role of government in making all that happen? Well, this President believes that it's government's responsibility to extend opportunity to people. Now you can't make people accept opportunity. That's human nature. You can only extend it. People have to be responsible. But for goodness sakes, if we don't extend that opportunity, if we don't make it easier for working people to send themselves and their children to college and to post-secondary educational programs like the President has proposed.

If we don't make it easier to pay back loans that people have to take out. If we don't make it easier for people to get training in a "one-stop shopping" approach instead of being shuttled hither and yon to different kinds of offices and programs than that is the government's fault.

We have to do a better job to provide the opportunity, and that's the plan the President has put forth. And the response is, "Government doesn't need to do that. Just cut that safety net. Make it harder to get those loans. Make it harder to pay them back."

Why on earth when we've got the best workers in the world would we not want to give them the tools of opportunity they need to demonstrate that and to make a good living for themselves and their families. That is, to me, the American way. (Applause.)

The other thing I just don't understand is if we're really going to promote family values, why don't we want to make it possible for families to go to work and be good parents at the same time? I just don't understand that at all. (Applause.)

I have visited many child care centers in our country where people have worked there way off of welfare. Whether they have gone back to school and gotten better training, maybe finished high school, maybe gone on to vocational training, maybe finished an associate program in community college, maybe gotten a four-year degree which they could not have done on their existing incomes without some help with child care. Some kind of subsidy that would give them the comfort that their children were taken care of while they were off trying to better themselves.

Why do we want to make it so difficult for people to be both good workers and good parents? My version of family values values families, and that means putting support under families so that they can do what they need to do to provide for themselves and their children. And that's why it is so important for all of us

to guard those programs that truly are helping families make it in today's tough economic world. And not to pull the rug out from under them which makes it even more difficult.

So if you will stand on behalf of the working families you represent, the President will stand with you. And I think most Americans will stand as well in favor of making it possible for people to be good workers, good parents and good citizens. That's what we're trying to develop in this country. (Applause.)

You know another issue that is so important. That I know you care a lot about, and that is also, as far as I'm concerned, a family value is the minimum wage. (Applause.) You know, it used to be that raising the minimum wage in our country was a bipartisan issue. Because people understood how tough it was to make a living and support a family on the minimum wage. And how important it was as a way of keeping people in the workforce, off welfare and being productive.

You know, I just don't understand why people want to deny the importance of the minimum wage. And I've never yet met anybody on the minimum wage who doesn't think it's a good idea to raise the minimum wage. (Laughter.) Most of the people who are against it are people who are doing quite fine. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

And I hope that in the next few months we can make a very big push on demonstrating to Americans why raising the minimum wage makes good economic sense and why it is the fair and right thing to do to help lift people out of poverty.

That combined with the Earned Income Tax Credit will truly, for the first time, give people who are earning less than \$27-30,000 a year the belief again that they are cared about. That they have a stake in our society and our economy. To me, something like raising the minimum wage is not just about dollars and cents. It is about respect and dignity, and I think it is high time we did that. (Applause.)

I also want to say a word about workers' safety, because I know that that's also a concern of yours. You know nobody argues with the need to streamline government, make it more efficient. After all, it was this President who started cutting government, not all the folks who talked about it before he got to town. And I think that that's an important issue to remember.

So nobody is against that, but there's a right way of doing it, and there's a wrong way of doing it. There's a way that will cut into bone and muscle, not just fat. And taking away the mechanism for ensuring workers' safety is like a total lapse of

memory in our country. People just don't remember what working conditions were like, why we had to have all these rules.

Now I personally wish every employer in America woke up every morning and said to him or herself, "I want to make sure my workers are safe." And the vast majority do. But we all know that the laws are made for the people who will run the stoplights, and who will unfortunately, cut the corners when it comes to workers' safety.

So what the President believes is let's try to get the system to work well and streamline it, so that we make it possible for everybody to have the attitude that they want to protect workers's safety.

But let's not turn the clock back. Let's not decimate OCEA. Let's not make it possible for people to go back to the old ways where they did not have to pay attention to workers safety. We don't need a budget that is balanced on the backs of our nation's workers at the cost of your standard of living or your work safety standards either. (Applause.)

Now one thing that I hope is that the enthusiasm and the commitment that you all feel here will be carried out with you as you return home. I know that it's difficult, in many circumstances, to talk with people, your friends and your neighbors about what's actually going on in Washington.

Because I know that people get their information from a lot of sources that do nothing but criticize and make it absolutely impossible for people to believe anybody up here cares about them. And there's a lot of frustration, a lot of insecurity and a lot of anxiety out there. But part of being a leader, which all of you are, is facing that straightforwardly and trying to deal with it.

I've had the honor in the last month to speak to many groups representing various of our unions around the country. And in each occasion I have said that much of the hope we hold for reaching people at the grassroots level rests with you. And I know that it's not easy.

When you walk up to somebody, and you try to talk to them about workers' safety, or you try to talk to about the budget, they may respond in a non sequitur kind of way, "Yeah, but they're going to take my gun away." I know you know that, don't you? You've had those conversations. And you know how people have been really worked up, haven't they?

I mean I don't suspect there's, you know, a hundred people in America who know that Assault Weapons Ban listed 650 hunting weapons that were going to be protected by the government. Did

you all know that? And 19 that we thought really only deserved to be on the battlefield, and that we'd never even heard of anybody shooting a deer with. (Laughter.)

That's the kind of dialogue you've got to engage in. And it is not easy, but we're at a real turning point in American history. We are really poised, not just on the edge of a new century, but on the edge of determining what kind of society we're going to be.

Some of you know that recently took a trip with my daughter through South Asia and visited five countries that were fascinating and are all democracies trying very hard to be 8 democratic, to give their people a better chance in life, to open their economies to the outside world. And I met with people who have paid the ultimate price to support democracy.

I looked into the eyes of women whose husbands and brothers and sons had been assassinated, whose fathers had been assassinated because they cared about democracy. I've talked with people who've been imprisoned and tortured and exiled. And I have to tell you it's pretty humbling to visit with people who every day are getting up, trying against enormous odds, to keep democracy going.

And it's a little hard to take, coming home and listening to people complain about America and complain about our democracy. I mean, certainly criticism is fair game.

But we need a little perspective here at home. We need to be grateful for what we've got. We need to understand that we are here because for more than 200 years people understood they had to build a community. They had to take care of each other. They had to live with people of different backgrounds and races and religions, all in the name of building the strongest, greatest democracy in the world.

So your work is not just on behalf of this union. Your work is not just on behalf of the issues that you are lobbying on. Your work is not even just on behalf of electing people you care about. Your work is really fundamental to making this country what it should be and keeping it going the way it has. And that's what I ask you all to join with us in doing.

Make America what it should be. Stand up for America. Fight for what you believe in. And take the message home that we have a lot at stake. And if we do it right, we will be proud to go into the next century together. Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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