

**Harold A. Schaitberger Remarks
March 15, 2010
IAFF 2010 Legislative Conference**

Welcome to our 28th Legislative Conference. It's great to see another near-record turnout.

To our General President Emeritus Al Whitehead – the man for whom this Conference is named – I want to extend a warm welcome to you Al. Thanks for all you've done for our union.

To each and every one of you, the grizzled veterans and those of you who are here for the first time, welcome.

I hope you'll find this to be an informative and enriching experience, and also come to better understand just how crucial this week is and how vitally important the work you'll be engaged in over the next four days is to the future of our members.

Over the years, this union has developed and delivered so many outstanding and important forums, symposiums, conferences and functions that allow you – our leadership – to make a profound difference in the lives of our members.

And this morning we gather at one of our most important events because I so strongly believe that our political and legislative work – at all levels of government – is vital to the lives and livelihoods of every one of you and every one of our almost 300,000 members.

And following the historic election of 2008 just 16 months ago, it appeared we were poised to make real progress.

There was a super majority in the U.S. House that supported our issues.

There was a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate that was committed to moving our agenda.

Not only did we have allies in both chambers of our Congress, Barack Obama – who had the support of our trademark gold and black IAFF political brand – was elected president of the United States, occupying a White House that we had been out of favor with for the previous eight years as we stood on the outside looking in.

So the stars were in alignment and we had reason to believe the sky was the limit.

We imagined great potential and we felt that Washington held great promise.

In light of the rhetoric and the commitments made to us along the campaign trails, it was realistic to expect our friends to deliver on those promises. But now, things look very different and it's time to have a frank conversation about the political landscape.

More than a year since that historic election – since the balance of power shifted – the potential remains unfulfilled and we're wondering whether promises have been broken.

I want to be brutally honest with you – you deserve that – and I know you will accept nothing less.

Through no fault of our own, a wonderful opportunity appears to be slipping away.

It seemed as though it was all right there within our reach.

But who would have thought that a remarkable election would yield so little for working families?

One year later, the big banks have been taken care of – propped up by the federal government by the very taxes our members pay.

Wall Street executives who took indefensible risks and helped destroy our economy aren't being short-changed one damn bit.

We thought the sky was the limit for us but the corporate executives are the ones collecting astronomical bonuses.

Wall Street firms alone paid out more than \$20 billion in bonuses in 2009 – up 17 percent over 2008 when the financial industry received taxpayer bailouts.

The low end bonus on Wall Street last year for corporate fat cats was almost \$124,000, with many in the seven- and eight-digit range.

The streets of the Capitol marketplace are being paved with gold while Main Street is full of potholes.

Congress still hasn't agreed on extending health care coverage to our nation's uninsured.

Congress still hasn't found a way to contain sky-rocketing health care costs or prevent people from losing coverage after they're diagnosed with a terrible illness.

But insurance companies are a picture of health and are seeing record profits.

WellPoint, Cigna, Aetna and Humana combined for \$12.2 billion in profits last year – a 56 percent jump over 2008 – while middle class workers remain empty handed.

A brutal recession continues to eliminate jobs, forcing people to get by without a paycheck. So many are without a glimmer of hope.

Right now, 6.3 million Americans have been unemployed for six months or longer – the largest number since the government began keeping track in 1948.

More than 15 million people are officially jobless and millions more are under-employed.

The good news is being measured by how joblessness is getting smaller.

Homeowners are still missing payments and the foreclosure rate remains alarmingly high, creating millions of personal tragedies while gutting property values and tax revenues we depend on for our members' jobs.

And even though the economy is beginning to show some signs of life – with corporate profits rebounding – so many families continue to struggle with stagnant or lower wages.

One year later... the recession... and this cruel economy... have prevented workers from benefiting from our historic election...

But the recession is only part of the problem.

Our government is adding insult to injury because Capitol Hill has come to a grinding halt.

The failure of Congress to respond to the enormous challenges for workers who do have a job is a national disgrace.

While so many working families are looking for a helping hand, to citizens across the country their government appears to be sitting on its hands.

At a time when they need practical solutions, their elected officials seem capable of no more than partisan bickering.

To too many of our members, it appears that Congress continues to put politics before people.

Lawmakers on the far left want everything all at once while lawmakers on the far right want no change at all, using filibusters and obstruction to turn Congress into a quagmire.

And moderates from both parties are running for the doors, retiring in droves, frustrated because the only thing Congress can produce is gridlock.

On the Republican side, friends like Senators Judd Gregg and Mel Martinez have called it quits and are joined by moderate Democrats Evan Bayh and Byron Dorgan.

Scores of House members are following suit.

They are frustrated because both sides are fighting for the high ground instead of finding common ground.

Following the historic election of 2008, I was so hopeful that we were on a new path – that we were on a road to recovery – but we seem to remain on a road of uncertainty.

The unemployed are burning through their savings just to survive, living on credit and falling out of the middle class.

The economic center of our country – the foundation of our economy – is eroding.

With so many positive political signs more than a year ago – with so many friends in power – I would never have predicted that we would still be waiting for collective bargaining, our signature proposal.

And we faced an unexpected fight when we had to take on the Senate and the administration over a foolish proposal to tax our members' alleged Cadillac health care plans.

We knew what would happen if the Senate's version of the excise tax survived – our member's benefits would get slashed or their premiums would get taxed.

That's why we fought like hell against any version of the excise tax.

We said it was bad policy and bad politics, and the White House wasn't happy at all.

I understand, as you do, that the art of the legislative process is compromise. However, there are times when you have to stand on your principle, draw a bright line and simply say hell no!!

And that's just what we did – even while other unions bowed to pressure from the Senate and the White House. We stood strong because it was the right thing to do for our members.

We made it clear that we don't view ourselves as an island onto our self. We want health insurance companies to stop dropping people with medical conditions from their rolls.

We want to control and bring down the cost of health care.

We want to stop companies from denying coverage because of pre-existing conditions.

We understand that the country can't sustain the status quo.

But we're not going to reform health care on the backs of our members who fought for their plans over the last several decades.|

And we are not about to allow anyone to place the cost of health care reform at the feet of the hard-working men and women of this union!

The House bill had it right. It had those who make more than a million dollars a year and families that make more than \$2.5 million – those who profited from the Bush tax cuts for the last eight years – pick up part of the tab.

And as we are watching this final chapter on health care reform play out before us this week, I believe that we can take great pride that it was our resistance – our unwillingness to compromise – that forced the White House and congressional leadership to modify their excise tax provision so that it will not impact our members' plans.

This is a sad commentary that we are measuring some of our victories by the damage we're preventing instead of the success of moving an agenda forward that raises the standard of living for our members.

I've been pretty critical so far this morning, but let me be fair: we do have many friends in Congress in both the House and Senate – congressional leaders who truly support this union and our members.

Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, George Miller, Harry Reid, Dick Durbin, Tom Harkin and many others have gone the extra mile for us.

And we do have strong long-time friends now heading many federal agencies in this administration.

Labor Secretary Hilda Solis, who has clearly signaled that she will support workers by improving worker safety, expanding OSHA coverage and supporting unions rather than trying to throw union leaders in jail.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano has been a vigorous advocate already, working with us from day one to streamline SAFER and pump substantially more funds in order to save our members jobs.

FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt has signaled his commitment to revise and improve the ARFF standards that haven't changed in 20 years.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is committed to address wildland fire fighting privatization, as well as safety and fire fighting standards.

HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius is keeping our NIOSH programs funding robust, our hazmat training fully resourced and continues the support for our line-of-duty death investigations.

Yes, there are plenty of friends as they say in 'high places' and there is reason for optimism and hope.

But the simple truth right now is that partisanship is thwarting progress.

So what do we do?

Do we get frustrated? Quit? Pack up and go home?

Do we spin stories for our members and affiliates that are less than brutally honest?

Brothers and sisters, I don't care how discouraging the process may seem today.

I don't care how toxic or partisan the atmosphere becomes on Capitol Hill.

What I do care about is staying focused on the job our members have empowered us to do.

We're not going run and hide.

We're not folding our tent or picking up our cards to go home.

That's not who our members are; that's not who you are as leaders of this union...

That's not the reputation of this IAFF we've built.

Just like our members do every day on the job, they don't back out, and we're not going to back down.

It's in the most difficult of times that our members – and you – do our best work.

So we'll stay prepared to fight even harder. We're going to keep pushing and we're going to stay committed.

If we had walked away from the health care debate, we might have had an excise tax that would have decimated our members plans shoved right down our throats.

If we had walked away, we wouldn't have been able to convince DHS to rewrite the SAFER regulations to get our members who've been laid off back on the job, or been able

to convince the Obama administration to double the SAFER funding.

If we gave in or gave up we wouldn't now have almost a billion dollars of federal funding over the next three years to bring back our members who have been laid off, fill jobs that have been rified, reinstate companies that have been closed and open stations that have been shuttered.

If we get frustrated and leave the playing field, then we will never get collective bargaining rights – which our members deserve today.

We've already waited to long.

We've worked so hard.

We have built the support.

We have the votes.

The time has come – not next year, not in the next Congress.

But this Congress and this president must pass and sign this bill into law – right now!!!

So we aren't going anywhere.

Are we somewhat disappointed right now?

Hell yes.

Are we a little disillusioned?

Hell yes.

Are we going to quit?

Hell no!

Our members work on the job every day where their efforts are filled with many difficult and dangerous obstacles, but they get their job done.

And we're not going to allow a few political obstacles and disappointments to prevent us from moving forward, from getting our job done on their behalf.

Looking back over our long history, we've never had anything handed to us and we shouldn't expect to have anything handed to us now.

Our success has always been a result of our tenacity and determination.

And that hasn't changed.

We will stick to our political principles and support our friends in both parties.

That hasn't changed.

We will let lawmakers know that 'if you support us, we support you.'

That hasn't changed.

And we will hold those who commit to our efforts accountable.

And that won't change.

Lawmakers might have a hard time crossing party lines to work with each other, but we must never hesitate to walk freely from one side of the political aisle to the other.

This is no time to pick sides or get dragged into an ideological niche.

We've been fighting for our members' lives and livelihoods in Washington, DC and in Ottawa – across 50 states and 10 provinces for decades – and we aren't about to stop now.

The halls of Congress may be filled with the piercing cries of partisanship, but we will continue to search for the voices of reason.

Lawmakers may feel there is more to gain by being obstructionists, but we will continue to build bridges with all lawmakers so we keep moving forward.

So let's not lose our faith, and let's not lose our historical perspective.

The November 2008 election remains historic and unprecedented.

Despite the unexpected hurdles, we still have enormous potential to reach our goals.

Despite the maddening gridlock, we still see enormous promise.

Our government may seem broken, but our goals remain intact.

So we will continue to fight like hell for collective bargaining.

We will continue to fight like hell to get fire fighters back on the job and keep those rigs rolling fully staffed.

We will fight like hell for funding to expand Urban Search and Rescue teams and for passage of the 9/11 bill for our brothers and sisters of the FDNY.

We will fight like hell for re-authorizing the FIRE Act to ensure that professional career fire departments get their fair share.

And we will fight like hell to ensure that federal fire fighters earn fair compensation and have the benefit equity they deserve.

We will continue to build bridges, even while others burn them down.

We aren't going anywhere except to Capitol Hill where we will keep on working, where we will keep on fighting every day.

So let's get to work. Let's get the job done for those on the frontlines – for the men and women of this great union.

God bless you and God bless every fire fighter and every soldier everywhere.