

Harold A. Schaitberger Remarks
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IAFF 2009 Legislative Conference

This morning we come together at a time that is surely among the most challenging and hair-rowing in our nation's history.

This Legislative Conference – our 27th, named after our General President Emeritus Al Whitehead, comes at a time of grave peril for millions of working Americans and their families as they struggle to save their livelihoods, their homes, and their economic future.

Our nation, and in fact the world's economic climate, has changed dramatically for the worse since we gathered here just a year ago.

The picture is grim: more than 12-and-a-half million American workers out of a job, going to food banks so they can feed their kids, standing in lines that wrap around the block, not to get a job, but rather just for the chance to apply for one.

Unemployment climbs higher every month, 650,000 workers losing their job in each of the past three months.

Caterpillar is cutting 20,000 jobs. The Big Three auto companies have cut 142,000 jobs. Circuit City shut its doors and 34,000 workers are out of a job. Microsoft cut 5,000. Pfizer is cutting 20,000.

Since November, some 22,000 workers on average have lost their jobs every day and even though the layoff of one of our members is one too many and clearly unacceptable, thank God that our losses are far less than in so many other work sectors.

The financial markets have crashed, falling to their lowest levels in 15 years. Along with that drop, our retirement plans at more risk: 401(k) and 457 plans are just a fraction of what they were when we last met. So, many people, including our members, have been forced to sit back and watch as their nest eggs crack or turn rotten in front of them.

Millions of Americans have already faced the foreclosure of their homes, pushing home values lower and lower. The inevitable result is deteriorating neighborhoods and less revenue for our local governments.

The banking system is effectively frozen. Credit is difficult for individuals and businesses. The result: fewer jobs and, yes, less revenue for our communities.

In the midst of all of this: 49 million Americans are still without health insurance, while those with coverage, like our members, watch as premiums skyrocket and co-pays increase.

And we must always be mindful that our young men and women who proudly wear the uniform of our Nation, many of them IAFF members, are still fighting in two costly wars, in both financial and human terms, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

You know all too well that this global economic crisis is forcing state and local budgets into complete and utter disarray because you're living it everyday.

So many of our affiliates are now coming under attack as politicians and bureaucrats are forced to engage in the slashing and burning of municipal budgets, pitting agencies against each other.

Too many elected officials and city managers are going after your wages, benefits, and pensions.

The result: in small towns, like Greenfield, Ohio, and in the largest cities, like New York City, our members are faced with furloughs, layoffs, brownouts, shutting down companies and closing stations.

Our capable affiliate leaders, all of you, are trying to manage and triage these tough challenges, agreeing to delay pay raises in Columbus, Ohio, in Tempe, Arizona, Vancouver, Washington, Galveston and many others, in hopes of avoiding deeper cuts or layoffs, trying like hell to do your part.

Our local in Vallejo, California is fighting for its very life as elected officials there are exploiting a bad economy and using it as an excuse to void our members' labor contract through the bankruptcy code.

With all of that as our backdrop, clearly, these are extraordinary times, the stakes are extremely high.

And, while it's important, noteworthy and you deserve tremendous credit for your political work and your support of our political program this past November, once again, delivering victories for over 90 percent of the candidates this IAFF endorsed.

I'm not going to stand here and sugar-coat what we face and I'm sure as hell not going to give you a rah-rah speech through rose-colored glasses or pretend that our work is done and it's time to put our political machine on cruise control.

I'm not going to tell you that because we have more friends in offices up and down the political ballot, which we do, that everything will be fine.

The simple fact is that at this incredible moment for our nation, none of it matters unless those we helped elect deliver for this union, deliver for our members and they need to deliver it NOW!!

Because of your work, the team in charge of our federal government at all levels is one that we can truly call friends: President of the United States Barack Obama, Vice President of the United States Joe Biden, newly elected U.S. Senators Kay Hagan in North Carolina and Jeanne Shaheen in New Hampshire and re-elected friends like Republican Susan Collins in Maine, Tom and Mark Udall in New Mexico and Colorado and Mark Begich in Alaska and many more.

In the House, we endorsed, supported and worked for 343 candidates and 318 won from Republican Lincoln Diaz-Balart in Florida to Democrat Walt Minnick in Idaho and hundreds of others across the country.

They are in office today, in part, because of the “gold and black” political brand of the IAFF.

We can't underestimate the influence and access we now have with so many members of the President's Cabinet including: Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Hilda Solis, our new Secretary of Labor, Tom Vilsack, the Secretary of Agriculture, Gary Locke, the Secretary of Commerce and our good friend the new Secretary of Transportation Republican Ray LaHood, the soon to be Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sibelius and so many more in multiple levels of our federal agencies.

At the state level, Governors, eight endorsements, eight wins, including great friends of this union like Brian Schweitzer of Montana, Jay Nixon in Missouri, Joe Manchin in West Virginia, Christine Gregoire in Washington and Republicans Jim Douglas of Vermont and Mitch Daniels in Indiana.

The question for all of them today, this week, this Congress is: Are they going to live up to their promises? Are they going to work with us to ensure that we have the ability protect America during this challenging time?

It's tremendous that we put our “gold and black” army on the streets for our friends in this last election.

And while our \$4.8 million dollar FIREPAC fund is generating significantly more influence, now is not the time for those we helped elect to tell us how much they love us or how we are their “heroes,”

This is no longer about kind words for fire fighters on the stump or promises on the campaign trail.

I want to be clear. Our political principal is a two-way street.

We support you, you support us.
You support us, we support you.

To fulfill that principle, this week we need to push and push hard, demand accountability and ask how they are going to respond to our members' needs going forward.

It's now about their deeds on behalf of those we represent, those who contributed the FIREPAC dollars, those who have BOUGHT into our political efforts.

Now is the time for those we helped elect, our friends, to do what's right by this union and our members. NOW is the time for them to stand with us in protecting our members' jobs. No questions asked. No excuses!

On January 20, 2009, our new President and Vice President took office and this new Congress began with a greater margin of strength for our friends.

Because of that, we have reason to be hopeful and optimistic about our country's future despite the economic chaos.

For the first time in eight years, not only are our voices being heard, but our presence is welcomed back in the White House once again.

Last month, I met privately and separately with President Obama and Vice President Biden, who will be joining us later today, as the recently passed stimulus bill was moving through Congress.

We talked about the economy, about the importance of a strong labor movement to rebuild the middle class.

We talked about you, our members, all across the country, who are working under tremendous pressure to protect communities while city, county and municipal budgets are being slashed around them.

We talked about how the federal government's response to this crisis must cover the macro and micro wounds being inflicted in every city, county and town.

Without an enormous influx of resources, the budgets that provide the very foundation for our nation's public safety would be raided.

We discussed the imperative idea of keeping our communities safe in these uncertain times that now is NOT a time to allow the frontline of our homeland defense, all of you, to be weakened.

I also spoke a number of times with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, who will be with us shortly, and to a number of other Senate and Congressional leaders.

I wanted to ensure that the final stimulus bill would provide funds to help maintain local fire department budgets as part of the broader plan.

Now, I told you I wouldn't sugar-coat this so I want you to hear me clearly.

The \$787 billion dollar economic stimulus bill signed into law by President Obama does have more than \$250 billion targeted to states and localities, the largest federal infusion of funding EVER signed into law.

And every dollar that goes to your jurisdiction will help, but the truth is: the final bill did NOT give direct, dedicated funding for our profession.

The truth is that of the \$25 billion that was in the House proposal that the Speaker and her team pushed to be directed to maintain public safety and other critical local government services.

When it came out of the Senate and in the final bill sent to the President, the \$25 billion was cut to 8.8 billion in discretionary funds and the governors of each state now have control over the distribution of those funds.

Since that money is not dedicated to us, getting the governors to direct a portion of those funds to your jurisdiction and to our needs will take determined and relentless work and follow-up.

It will require you to get key decision-makers working with you to get your share and I pledge to you we will do everything in our power to make that happen.

I want to make sure you understand that the stimulus bill will do a tremendous amount of good for our nation, states, cities and counties.

It has billions of dollars for our infrastructure. It will create millions of jobs.

It will provide for extended unemployment insurance for laid off workers. It will make sure that our children get a better education.

It includes \$210 million dollars targeted directly for fire station construction and it removes the employer match in order to get a piece of the \$210 Million that was appropriated for the SAFER program this year and so much more.

I know the reality of what that stimulus legislation DID, but as important, I know what it did NOT do.

We didn't get all that we wanted, what we needed and, more important, what our profession deserves.

But you also need to know that since that bill was signed, the administration has reached out to us and Congressional leaders have reached out to us.

I met with top White House staff and sat with Congressional leaders just last week... to begin developing what I believe will be a real solution, providing the dedicated resources YOU need at the local levels to keep our members riding those rigs and to keep their stations opened.

It's also important to acknowledge and accept that we're just seven weeks into this new government.

This administration has only been in office for 54 days and they're faced with our entire nation in crisis on multiple fronts.

Everyone, everywhere has dire needs right now.

While we will continue to be relentless on your behalf and we will lobby for the passage of our collective bargaining bill, new rules in the reauthorization of the FIRE and SAFER programs, codifying national safety standards, moving presumptive disability for our federal fire fighters and more.

What lobbying around this first stimulus package reinforced is that we're going to have to fight like hell as corporations, the Chamber, ICMA, the League of Cities, who are in this city as we meet, continue to spend billions working against us.

Its times like these that things get put into perspective, that we're not just out on an island fighting against the world or that we're the only ones looking to get our piece of the American dream.

We're part of the larger picture as labor leaders and as leaders of this IAFF.

And as we necessarily pursue our union's significant interests, we have to be mindful of the many critical challenges facing our nation and WE need to be part of the broader solution even as we fight to protect our members and their loved ones.

We are not immune to these challenges.

What affects one, affects us all. That's our creed.

We have to weigh in as Americans at times like these to focus on our national priorities and then do our part to get those needs addressed.

We all must step up to the plate because there is an assault on workers that has been going on for years that is gaining strength during these dire economic times.

Attacks by some in the media, by massive corporations and by many in state and local governments seem to be growing.

The evidence is playing out like a major motion picture debut, airing on screens and in living rooms across the nation.

We've watched the news as the crooks on Wall Street who created the giant ponzi schemes that helped send our economy into a death spiral receive their no-strings attached \$700 billion dollar bailout.

We watched auto industry executives flying into Washington in their corporate jets to ask for billions in taxpayer dollars.

We watched CEOs who earn tens of millions with golden parachutes, stock options, and multi-millionaire media personalities sit in television studios delivering blistering, absolutely false attacks on a sister union, the UAW, whose members earn on average \$30 dollars an hour.

That's part of the battle front we all face together.

I know I'm sick and tired of listening to right wing, anti-union critics suggesting that 50, 60, 70, 80 thousand dollars a year is too much money to pay American workers who work full time, who contribute to the advancement of this nation and have to feed their family, send their kids to college and put a roof over their heads.

This is the United States of America, not some third-rate, third world nation.

But that is part of the reality and the backdrop we are up against.

And you hear the same arguments leveled against you and your members.

They point to the expensive health care plans most of our members have earned, but fail to talk about the true American tragedy that the richest nation on earth, the country with the best, most highly trained doctors and nurses in the world doesn't guarantee health care as a right.

We're told pensions to secure our members' retirements after a lifetime of dedication and sacrifice to our communities are a luxury that they can no longer afford.

I say that's a bunch of B.S.

What the critics fail to say is that our members and those autoworkers over the decades paid for their own health care, paid for their own pensions by deferring a portion of their own pay into the future and by other concessions made to enhance these critical benefits.

So today I ask you: Isn't it time to fix the problems where they originate? Yes, I say it's time.

Isn't it time to stop pinning the blame again and again on workers? You're damn right it is.

Isn't it time to use our newfound voice to fix the problems where they begin, right here in Washington, DC? Hell yes, its time.

And the best way to fix those problems is by empowering workers.

The best way to rebuild the middle class is by empowering workers.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt understood that, in 1933, when he took office, that to begin the climb out of the Great Depression, he needed to protect workers from greedy and abusive employers.

He believed that by leveling the playing field, by giving workers fundamental rights, unions would grow and our economy would expand.

With the enactment in 1935 of the National Labor Relations Act, the labor movement did grow and played a significant role in the greatest economic expansion in the history of our country, literally creating the great middle class and the employment machine of our nation prospered as a result.

It's been 74 years since the basic rights for almost every worker in this country became the law of the land.

For us, for our members, it's been 74 years that we've been waiting on the outside looking in on that federally guaranteed right and we're not going to allow our members to wait any longer. We've waited long enough!

It's time for passage of our national collective bargaining bill. We have the support in the Senate and House. We have the administration on our side and that's exactly what we're going to do, get that bill enacted as the law of the land!

I know we're ready to join our President, Barack Obama, and our new Congress to tackle the massive challenges this country currently faces.

We're prepared to give a forceful, united and true defense of American workers, American values and what our members deserve in return.

Brothers and sisters, we're ready to stand up with our national leaders, together, to rebuild the American middle class that for the last eight years has been decimated and destroyed by corporate greed.

We'll do OUR part to get this nation back on track financially.

But now is also the time to make sure this country's decision makers hear our voice on the critical issues that affect our members' lives and livelihoods.

So let's get to work and let's get the job done for those on the frontlines every day, the men and women of this IAFF.

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