

DECEMBER 16, 2024

# Remarks by President Biden Honoring our Nation's Labor History and Establishing the Frances Perkins National Monument

U.S. Department of Labor  
Washington, D.C.

12:38 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Hello. (Applause.) It's a good day. (Applause.)

Thank you, Acting Secretary Su.

AUDIENCE: Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe! Thank you, Joe!

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. I — I had no choice. (Laughter.) My grandfather would come down from Heaven if I didn't do this. (Laughter.)

(Coughs.) Excuse me, I have a little bit of a cold.

Folks, you know, this is an incredible honor. I really mean that. And I want to thank Acting Secretary Su and the Department of Labor for this incredible honor.

You know, I measure the importance of the — any award I ever received based on the character and consequence of the organization that's bestowing it. And the Department of Labor is an organization of character and consequence. And I'm honored — (coughs) — I'm honored to be joined today by leaders of character and conscious, many of them sitting right here in the front row. Half of my Cabinet is here. (Laughter and applause.)

I want to thank all — all the labor leaders here today, including Liz and the AFL-CIO; members of the Cabinet, including Interior Secretary Deb Haaland. You know, you talked about that list that she — that the secretary

brought in her pocket when she met with Trump — I mean, with Roosevelt — Trump? — Freudian slip — (laughter) — and — but I — I think she had a relative she left behind.

Would you stand up, Madam Secretary — secretary of Interior? (Applause.)

I've been around a long time, and she's the only secretary I've ever worked with or had working for me who when I say, "That's done," she'd — "No, no, no. We have this to do now." (Laughter.)

Thank you, kiddo.

Look, you know, former Labor secretary, who is now in the White House, senior advisor (inaudible), is Tom Perez. (Applause.) Where is he?

Tom, thanks for sticking with me.

And members of Congress, including Maine — Maine senator, Angus King, and ~~Cherlie~~ [Chellie] Pingree — where — where is Ch- — where are you guys? All over here. Okay. There you are. (Applause.)

And, by — and, by the way, last night, we were doing a — a Christmas event at the house, and I got finished talking to a group of folks from Labor, and my wife said, "And, by the way, his wife is a member of a labor union too." (Laughter and applause.)

I'm Jill Biden's husband. She's not here today, but she's been a long-time union member of the National Education Association. (Applause.)

And it's fitting, with all these powerful women here, that we've gathered at headquarters of the Department of Labor, named after one of America's greatest labor leaders — and that's not hyperbole — Frances Perkins.

You know, we're honored to be joined by her grandson, Tomlin. Where are you, Tomlin? (Applause.) Thank you, bud.

Saturday, March 25th, 1911, Frances sat down for afternoon tea at her home with a close friend from New York City. Suddenly, they hear the sound of a

distant screams and sirens. The building was in flames. Her instinct was to run to the scene.

As she approached the fire and smoke, she recognized the Triangle Shirt[waist] Factory, a company that employed hundreds of workers, mostly immigrants and women, who worked long hours crammed into tight quarters, where managers locked them inside to make clothing.

In an instant, those workers were trapped in a brutal blaze. With no safe exit, some workers forced to climb out the windows, holding on for dear life until their fingers gave out. Others just jumped – prayed and jumped.

A total of 150 lives were lost that day. It was the deadliest industrial disaster in American history.

Frances was devastated. But that fire ignited a passion in her. It strengthened her resolve to fight even harder for working Americans and working families.

In her decades of service, she became a fierce defender of unions and workers' rights, an architect of the New Deal, the first woman Cabinet secretary – the first woman Cabinet secretary. I increased on that a little bit – (laughter) – because I know what my family is like. All of – all the really bright people in my family are women. (Laughter.) And the longest-serving secretary of Labor in American history, God love you.

And the story goes, after Franklin Roosevelt asked her to become his Labor secretary, Frances Perkins immediately responded by outlining her goals, what she wanted done. She said, “I want unemployment relief, overtime pay, child labor laws, minimum wage, worker’s compensation, national health insurance, and Social Security” – (laughs) – many of the benefits we take for granted as a consequence of Frances’s dedication to inciting courage.

But that – can you imagine walking up to Roosevelt and saying, “Hey, I’ll take the job, but here’s the deal, man.” (Laughter.) “Let’s get this straight.” Like I said, a little bit like when I asked Frances to do my job.

Hard-fought battles and — with Teamsters and, you know, at her — look, a real testament to her skill as an advocate for public servants.

An example that, through the Fair Labor Standards Act, she cemented the idea that if you're working a full-time job, you shouldn't have to live in poverty — a simple proposition. If you work a little extra, you should have extra money for overtime. Not a crazy idea. Even — some even argue about it now.

Frances understood what my dad taught me, and I — you've heard me say this a thousand times, but it — he really would say this. He said, "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about your place in the community. It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay,' and mean it." That's my dad.

In fact, during her 12 years in office, she accomplished everything on her list, except expanded health care for health insurance. It took 65 years later and a guy named Barack Obama and I to get the Affordable Care Act passed. (Applause.) And thank God all of us here have protected and expanded the Affordable Care Act.

Look, it's clear that Frances Perkins and a generation of activists and labor leaders laid the groundwork for much of what we've accomplished in the last four years.

We're fundamentally transforming the economy by breaking an economic orthodoxy that has failed this nation for generation after generation, in my view: trickle-down economics, the notion that if you — every — the wealthy do very, very well, a little will trickle off — off their tables onto our kitchen table.

My dad used to say, "Nothing ever trickled on my table, honey." (Laughter.) No, I'm serious.

My dad was a really well-read man who didn't get to go — he went — accepted to Johns Hopkins, but during the war, he never got to go. But my dad was a well-read guy.

Well, you know, the primary benefits to the very wealthy and the biggest corporations were trickle-down economics, and that didn't do much for working people and the middle class and left too many people behind.

Together, we built an economy from the middle out and the bottom up, not the top down, and because we know this simple truth: Wall Street didn't build America; the middle class built America, and u- — (applause) — and unions built the middle class. (Applause.) Un- — and that's a fact.

In fact, as th- — as the secretary of Treasury will tell you, I asked her to do a study because I was going to get hit, because I knew they'd say by having unions increase in their numbers and their wages go up, we were going to cost people thing. Guess what? The study the Treasury did showed that when unions do well, all workers do well -- union and ~~non-worker~~ [non-union], across the board. (Applause.)

It matters. It works. It's fair.

Kamala and I are so proud of the great job creation record of any — actually, the greatest job ~~correction~~ [creation] of any single president in a single term: over 6 [16] million jobs so far, including over 1.5 million manufacturing and construction jobs — good-paying jobs you can raise a family on and don't have to require a four-year degree. And get this: There are more women, especially mothers, in the workforce than ever before in American history. (Applause.)

We're so damn proud to have protected pensions of millions of union workers and retirees — (applause) — when I signed the Butch Lewis Act.

You know, think about that. Imagine what the average American would say if you were going to do that with their Social Security, which this guy wants to do. Imagine if he said, "Your pension, you can't count on it anymore."

In addition, we've recovered more than \$1 billion in back wages and damages for over 600,000 workers here in America. (Applause.)

We wo- — we've pushed for a right to a living wage and your right to overtime pay.

Jobs and factories are coming back home to America because we invested in the American agenda. We're modernizing American infrastructure.

Last time, this guy had — last guy had the job, he had “Infrastructure Week” every week — didn't build a damn thing. (Laughter.) Well, guess what? We're — we built a lot. And guess what's coming?

Look, folks, one of the things that is frustrating — I knew this was going to happen because I've been around a long time, and I talked over to the secretary of Agriculture and other places. Guess what? All the things — we have \$1.4 trillion in economic — in — in infrastructure growth. That's thousands of good-paying jobs.

The CHIPS and Science Act investing billions of dollars — billions of dollars — building these fabs that are going to house hundreds of people working, thousands, and they're going to be ba- — getting paid about average of \$102,000 a year and don't need a college degree.

So much — so much is going on. But it's going to take a little bit of time. But we got to make sure to protect — protect the — the onslaught that's going to come, because it's hard to see right away.

And, by the way, I know I got criticized by putting as many of these programs in red states as blue states — actually more. Well, guess what? The red state guys screwed it up. (Laughter.) And we got a be- — benefit — we — we represent all of America, not just — not just blue America, not just Democrats, but all of America.

Look, as we do all this, we're — we're buying America, using American workers, using American products. And we're standing up to Amer- — for American steelworkers against China's unfair trade practices.

We appointed a National Labor Relations Board that actually believes in unions and has pro-union members on the board. (Applause.) A strange notion. And a special thank you to the chair of the board, Lauren McFerran — (applause) — (inaudible) — who is here. Where are you, Lauren? There — thank you, Lauren.

Don't be so shy. Raise your — stand up. Let everybody see you. (Laughter and applause.)

And it's no accident — no accident that petitions to form unions have doubled — doubled under my presidency. (Applause.)

I got all this credit for walking the picket line. It never crossed my mind not to walk the picket line. (Laughter.) No, I'm serious. I didn't think it was any big deal. I walked a lot of picket lines. The fact that I was president, I hadn't thought about that. And then Pamela [Kamala] walked the picket line. We support the right to fair contracts.

Here's one, you know, that doesn't get enough attention: When workers in sectors like construction, manufacturing, mining inhale toxic silica dust on the job, it can lead to lung cancer and other deadly diseases. It's been a major problem for decades, even under Secretary Perkins. She led an investigation, but despite the science, big business blocked the regulation.

But not on our watch. Not on your watch. With your help, we carried Frances's — Frances's mantle and issued a rule that finally reduces such dangerous exposure.

And, by the way — (applause) — our secretary — the secretary of Veterans Affairs is sitting in front of me here — one of the really good guys. I really mean it.

And, you know, we — what we've done — what we did for the CHIPS and Science Act, and then we went — made sure we were going to take care of veterans. We said all those folks, in my generation, exposed to Agent Orange couldn't prove that their illness was a consequence of it and all those, like my son's generation, that were exposed to toxic burn pits in Iraq and other places, that it's assumed that — my son came back, for example, with Stage Four glioblastoma. More brain injuries than anything else. And guess what? They're entitled to the benefits that they were going to get if they had not lost their lives — their family. (Applause.)

And to ad-lib here a little bit, I — I think the American people are beginning to figure out all we're doing is what's basically decent and fair — just basically decent and fair.

We have a lot of sacred obligations — I got into trouble for saying this before, but we only have one truly sacred obligation: to prepare those we send into harm's way and pre- — care for them and their families when they come home. And that's a simple proposition. Finally, that's happening.

What — what you got? Another million now? A million you're taking care of.

I make no apologies. I'm so damn proud of that. (Applause.)

Look, folks, in our four years together, we've made historic investments that have changed the course of the nation's future and will have a lasting impact for decades to come.

And I'm here to say, to state the obvious, we could not have done this without the dedicated professionals here at the Department of Labor and all across this administration. (Applause.) Could not have done.

And I'm damn proud to be known as the most pro-labor administration in American history, because we are. We are. We make no apologies. (Applause.)

Look, let me close with this. Frances Perkins once said, "The people are what matter to government, and the government should aim to give people — all people under its jurisdiction the best possible life" — "the best possible life."

For my dad, it was a simple proposition: Everybody deserves a shot. No guarantee, but a shot. Everybody deserves a shot.

All of you have helped the — upheld that vision, putting the people first, no matter who they are.

Another important legacy of our administration is making sure we learn from history, lift up stories that often have gone untold.



Earlier this year, during Women's History Month, I signed the first-ever executive order on recognizing and honoring women's history to increase representation of women and historic sites — in historic sites all across America.

Today, I'm proud to stand here in the Frances Perkins — Perkins Building, headquarters of the Labor Department, to designate Frances Perkins Homestead in Newcastle, Maine, a national monument. (Applause.)

And Secretary Haaland is also going to be announcing five new national historic landmarks to honor women's contributions to American history. (Applause.)

They includes Charleston Cigar Factory — (coughs) — excuse me — where Black women led a workers' strike that opposed gender and racial discrimination and advocated for better pay for working conditions.

Look, too many people want to rewrite history or ignore it. Look, we wa- — all we want to do is make — le- — make sure we record history — record history — the good, bad, and the indifferent — who we are.

I was able to show up at Indian Country and apologize for what we did to the Indian Americans, for the schools we made them go to and took them away, off the reservations with their parents.

Throughout our history, women's vision and achievements have strengthened this nation, to state the obvious.

That's why I've kept my commitment to have an administration that looks like America, and that includes having more women in senior access all across the board, starting with my amazing vice president, Kamala Harris. (Applause.)

It's about time we honor them in building the American Women's Museum and — History Museum on the Mall — (applause) — and the Women's Suffrage National Monument on the National Mall. (Applause.)

And, by the way, it's time for Congress to move in authorizing that legislation — moving it forward. They should do it now, before this Congress ends. (Applause.)

Folks, our administration is coming to an end, but our work continues.

We get up. We keep going. We keep the faith. I know I will. I know you will. We just have to remember who in the hell we are.

We're the United States of America. (Applause.) There is nothing beyond our capacity when we do it together – nothing, nothing, nothing. (Applause.)

May God bless you all. And may God prote- — protect our troops. (Applause.)

And now I will sign the proclamation.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. (Applause.)

Here.

(The proclamation is signed.) (Applause.)

12:57 P.M. EST