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KENNEDY ADDRESSES GLOBAL AFL-CIO CONFERENCE ON UNION CONCERNS

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Thank you, Richard Trumka, for that introduction, and thank you for inviting me to take part in this historic meeting. I can think of no greater cause than the fight for dignity and respect for workers and their families. It's a cause that my brothers and the entire Kennedy family have made our first priority and I'm proud to be your Chairman in the Labor Committee of the United States Senate.

It is an honor to be here with so many leaders who have dedicated their lives to serving workers, often at great personal risk. This International Human Rights Day is about you and the hundreds of millions of workers that you fight for each and every day.

This era of globalization must be judged not just by growing profits and rising GDP, but by how we treat the workers who make that progress possible. The ones who build the roads and skyscrapers. The ones who work in our schools and hospitals. The ones who toil in the factories that are at the heart of today's global economy. In fact, we know that true progress and prosperity for our nations comes only when our workers share in economic growth.

Labor rights are human rights, and labor unions are at the heart of human progress. That was true yesterday. It is true today. And it will be true tomorrow.

As President Kennedy said, "Those who would destroy or further limit the rights of organized labor – those who cripple collective bargaining or prevent organization of the unorganized – do a disservice to the cause of democracy." Those words have been true throughout American history. When our unions are strong, our economy is strong. When workers are treated fairly, our democracy is stronger for it.

We know this from our history. In the post-war era, all Americans shared in the benefits of the nation's rapid growth, and the rising tide truly did lift all boats. From the 1940s to the 1960s, union membership reached its peak. During that same time, wages and productivity rose together. Workers shared in corporate gains, and our entire society benefited as a result.

Nearly half a century later, the tide now rises for only the few. With historic declines in union membership, most Americans find their boats sinking fast.

We are seeing that declining union membership means rising inequality. Today, the richest one percent of Americans earns the highest share of national income in almost

a century. More than 40% of the country's total income goes to the wealthiest 10% of Americans.

Middle class families, by contrast, are falling behind. America has the most productive economy in the world, yet its workers' wages remain almost stagnant. Today, for the first time, young men are earning less than their fathers, and only 23% of American parents think their children will be better off than they are.

Without unions, for far too many workers today, economic security is just a dream. Today only 1 in 5 workers earns a guaranteed pension. 47 million Americans lack health insurance, even though 85% of them are in working families.

We all know that this is what happens to a society when union membership declines. And we all know why union membership has fallen to historic lows, even though 60 million American workers say they want representation at work. Workers' rights are under attack.

Last year, more than 30,000 American workers were illegally discriminated against for exercising their rights in the workplace. Every 18 minutes a worker was fired or illegally punished for supporting a union. Let me repeat that—every 18 minutes in the United States of America, a decent, hard-working woman like Kelly Beringer – who is here with us today – is punished for standing up for her human rights.

Unfortunately, there are unscrupulous employers around the world who are pleased by these trends. They are employing union-breaking tactics and forcing rising inequality not just in America, but in Europe and Asia and South America. They are working to convince other nations to follow our lead by weakening their own labor laws and put profits ahead of the well-being of their own people.

Today, our mission is clear. We love our countries and we're going to take them back. We'll fight and fight and fight for workers not only for their well-being but for the well-being of the lands we love.

Here in America, we've begun that campaign. Unions are leading the way to reform our labor laws. We're battling to enact the Employee Free Choice Act so that whenever a majority of workers want a union, they can form one without fear of retribution, delay, or harassment.

So we assure you here today that America will do its part. The tide is turning and there's a new scent of optimism in the air. Together, we can lock arms and make history – for the workers of today and tomorrow and the generations to come.

The future is in our hands and we will shape destiny.

Thank you for all you do so well, and it is a deep honor to join you today.

- First, we will hear from AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, who so ably represents more than 10 million American workers.
- Next, we will hear from Kelly Beringer, a nurse who faced tremendous obstacles in organizing a union in Chicago.
- Next, we will hear from John Lindler, a Verizon worker who has taken a stand for justice and a voice at work.
- Next, we will hear from Wade Henderson, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, an outstanding advocate for civil rights and human rights.
- Finally, we will hear from Dr. John Logan of the London School of Economics, who has prepared a report for the conference on “Unions Facing Hard Times: The International Campaign to Undermine Collective Bargaining”

As our first panel comes to a close, I’d like to thank all of our panelists for their impressive leadership on justice and human rights.

I also commend the members of the Senate and House Labor Committees for their thoughtful questions and their strong commitment to workers’ rights.

Next, we will hear from Larry Cohen, the President of the Communications Workers of America, who is also President of the Union Network International Telecom Sector. Larry is well-known for his strategic vision and effective advocacy for organizing in the United States and many other countries.

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