

# So, What About The State Of the Unions, Mr. President?

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Unions? Organized labor? The AFL-CIO? Those words were nowhere to be heard in President Obama's State of the Union address, despite labor's vital role in the economy and strong support for Obama. The continued support of the labor movement is essential if the president is to carry out the bold plans he outlined and if he is to be re-elected.

The president's failure to mention one of the country's most important economic and political institutions was unfortunate. It was perhaps understandable, however, given the anti-union climate stirred up by attacks on public employee unions and their allies.

Obama's failure to mention unions and their leaders was ignored in the post-speech pronouncements of AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and other major unionists. They in fact proclaimed the speech a victory because of its endorsement of policies widely supported by labor.

"It was clear throughout the president's speech that the era of the one percent is over," Trumka declared. "We demanded a strong stand on behalf of working families – and the president delivered."

Trumka cited, in particular, Obama's promise to thoroughly investigate "misconduct in the mortgage industry that wrecked our economy," his promise to invest in jobs and infrastructure, and his proposed tax rules that would help the 99 percent.

President Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers praised Obama for making it clear "that children and our future must be priorities," and for noting "what America's teachers have long understood. We can't test our way to a middle class, we must educate our way to a middle class."

Praise, too, from President Leo Gerard of the United Steelworkers Union. He singled out Obama's promise to work "to bring manufacturing back to America." Gerard said, "The president's commitment to discourage job outsourcing and promote in sourcing is a ticket to a better economy." It was most welcome news, added Trumka, to the millions of Americans who are unemployed.

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President Gerald McEntee of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees described the president's speech as "a comprehensive plan to move our country forward, bolster job creation and find real solutions for the problems confronting our country."

McEntee noted that "in today's political environment, it takes guts to stand strong with working families – even when we make our voices heard, loud and clear, because the toxic influence of money in politics – which the president spoke out against – is powerful."

So, although Obama made no mention of organized labor in his address, he said much that greatly pleased labor, and made promises to carry out measures high on labor's economic and political agendas.

As the AFL-CIO's Trumka declared, Obama showed he "listened to the single mom working two jobs to get by, to the out-of-work construction worker, to the retired factory worker, to the student serving coffee to help pay for college." The president, in short, "voiced the aspirations and concerns of those who are too often ignored."

Trumka cited the similarities between Obama's approach and that of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Like the occupiers, the president is "speaking out forcefully against the staggering increase in inequality" between the one percent and the 99 percent. The president's speech, Trumka added, demonstrated "a focus on job creation Republican House and Senate leaders should follow."

It's clear, certainly, that as long as Obama continues on his current path, he'll have strong labor support. But should he stray, it's clear that labor will forcefully remind him of his promises and of the needs of those who work for a living – or who are attempting to work for a living.

Whatever Obama does is certain to be in startling contrast to his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, one of the most virulently anti-labor presidents in U.S. history. Obama has already rescinded several of Bush's executive orders that limited the union rights of some workers and has replaced openly anti-labor Bush appointees to labor-related federal agencies, boards and commissions with his openly pro-labor appointees, including Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis.

Imagine Bush, or any of his GOP allies, actually saying, as Obama did, that "we need to level the playing field for workers and the unions that represent their interests because we know you cannot have a strong middle class without a strong labor movement."

Important words. But they need to be heard – and acted on – by the millions of Americans who know little or nothing of unions and their important position in our economic and political lives.

President Obama failed to take advantage of a great opportunity to explain the true nature of unions and their importance to the country-at-large and make clear the often vicious anti-unionism of his political enemies. He missed a chance to explain the crucial role labor is certain to play in attempts to carry out essential reforms.

Obama needed to speak out forcefully to try to counter the anti-unionism that is limiting the chances of many Americans to find decent jobs at decent pay and a strong voice in workplace and community matters.

Obama missed an important opportunity. But if he stays true to his promises, the president will have plenty of other chances to show the country the true nature of the labor movement and its opponents, to speak out in favor of unions and the importance of their members, leaders and supporters, and to carry out his proposed and much needed reforms designed to help the nation's working people.

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