**2015 Convention Speech**

*Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO President Jeff Johnson – July 23, 2015*

Sisters and brothers I love our conventions. This is my 29th WSLC Convention. I love them because you inspire me with the work you do every day and because I get to be with you the leaders of our labor movement.

Sisters and brothers it is a great honor and pleasure to be with you these next few days. We have a lot of important things to talk about and some decisions to make about the direction of our labor movement.

The theme of our convention this year is "Fighting Inequality"!

This is an important phrase. We didn't choose dealing with inequality or choosing policy options around inequality or what to do about inequality, we chose "Fighting Inequality".

Everything we have achieved as a labor movement throughout history we have gotten through struggle. Unions are not pacifist organizations. We fight, we agitate, we organize, we educate and, yes, we propose policy solutions.

But the point is no one hands us anything because we think it is a good idea – we come together In Solidarity to make things happen, to make change. Solidarity is our most precious value – because without unity of purpose, vision, and action we are weak and ineffective.

Why should we fight inequality? Because the economy is not working in the interests of the working class. The economy is off the rails for most of us. We are living in an Age of accelerating Inequality.

The working class and our communities have been under a broad and relentless assault from an economic, political and climate crisis that shows up as extreme income and wealth inequality, loss of family-wage union jobs, a vanishing middle class, a failure to tax the 1% and to broadly share prosperity, attacks on the rights of unions to exist, attempts to disenfranchise voters, a concerted effort to cripple public services and a shredding of the fabric of the "common good", increasing health and environmental problems from excessive carbon emissions and greenhouse gases, and disruptions to our economy, public health, and social safety net due to severe weather episodes due to climate change.

And it is not just the climate crisis that is man-made,- the economic and political crisis is man-made as well.

Governor Scott Walker began his speech announcing his candidacy for President with the words "I Love America"!

I have no doubt that he does, but he also hates workers and their unions and what we stand for. He doesn't want workers to have a voice at work or in the political sphere. And he would love to do to the United States what he did to the state of Wisconsin.

His vision is the same vision the Republican Party has had for the last 40 years, which is to let the free market do its thing, blame the government for most of the failures of the market place and and blaming individual failure for the rest of our problems. So the solution in their eyes is less government, more support for business, a smaller safety net and more relieance on the individual.

This constant barrage of negativity has sucked the life and sense of hope out many Americans and turned them off to politics.

And while the Democratic Party has done better, it has not done all that much better.

While as a party it believes in a strong safety net, it too is locked in a vision that the free market should be left to its own. As a consequence, we can have health insurance reform but not health *care* reform. It's okay for workers to be members of a union but we shouldn't have a universal voice at the workplace – no Employee Free Choice Act or Worker Privacy Act. Fast Track is good for Americathey say because it's good for business. But what they really mean is they believe it is too messy and too scary to allow unions and community groups to influence trade policy in ways that protect people, not just corporations.

As a consequence, trade deals aren't evaluated by whether they will create broadly shared prosperity. Instead they create an unplanned system of winners and losers. The winners make big profits for their CEOs and shareholders. And the losers are the hard working people whose family wage jobs have disappeared.

These trade deals aren’t judged on whether they will enforce labor, environmental and human rights standards. Nor are they judged on whether our food will be safe or whether our laws and regulations will be safe from corporate tribunals.

This is why we fight inequality Sisters and Brothers! Because we are the only ones to do it. The labor movement, unions and our community partners, have to lead the way in Fighting Inequality. And we need to develop and support political leaders who will follow; political leaders who will stand with us and not stand in the way.

We have to take on the economic, political, and climate crises that are assaulting us and our way of life. And we need to hold ourselves and political leaders accountable.

Talk is cheap. The proof is in organizing for change and voting for change. We need political leaders who will advocate for and vote for raising the minimum wage, passing paid safe and sick leave, ending wage theft, restoring the freedom to join unions, honoring and expanding public service, making tax incentives accountable to the people or ending them, linking job and wage security to the aerospace tax incentives, and making the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes.

All of these things, and so much more, play a part in "Fighting Inequality" and restoring a sense of common purpose and hopefulness.

But in our struggle to re-establish the American dream – to create a broadly shared prosperity – one where working people can share in the prosperity that they created – it is important for us to recognize that this time around we need to create an American Dream that we all can share in.

An American Dream that includes a racial, gender and immigrant worker lens. We need to fight for policies and organizations that use Equity to evaluate outcomes. We must create access to opportunities and participation in governance across race, gender and class lines.

Part of the solution to inequality is raising wages and creating jobs where workers have a union voice.

But we have to recognize that many of the lowest paying jobs are over-represented by women and workers of color.

The gender wage gap in Washington state is 77.9% comparing all women's earnings to all men's earnings, and 66% for black women's earnings compared to all men's earnings. This has to end.

Raising the minimum wage to at least $12 an hour in Washington State would raise wages for over a half million workers, would provide a billion dollars of purchasing power that would stay in the community, and would lower our state's poverty rate.

An increase like this would especially help workers of color and women who work in low wage industries. Workers of color make up 46% of minimum wage workers even though they represent only 26% of the entire workforce. An increase to at least $12 an hour would raise the wages of 42% of the Latino workforce and 27% of the Black workforce.

One million workers in Washington State are provided no paid sick leave by their employers. This forces workers to make untenable choices. They can stay home and lose pay or possibly their job, or they can go to work sick and further jeopardize their own health and the health of co-workers and customers.

Only 1 in 5 workers earning less than $15,000 a year have paid sick days. Once again, women and workers of color bear the greatest burden of working in jobs with no sick leave.

Many other workers have no first day sick leave policy or have to notify their employer well in advance to get access to sick leave.

Passing statewide paid safe and sick leave protection will create greater equity for workers and it will promote healthier and safer work environments. Resolution #9 prioritizes both minimum wage and safe and sick leave action.

Another part of the solution to Inequality is creating more jobs and jobs where workers have both a voice and representation at the workplace.

While organizing is a difficult job, and my hat is off to the organizers at the convention, helping workers organize into unions and other forms of self-representation is another key to fighting inequality. Resolution #3 focuses on creating a forum for discussing innovative organizing strategies and for coordinating our overall organizing efforts in the state.

But far too many workers still don't have jobs. While our official state unemployment rate has been falling, sitting at around 5.5%, our actual unemployment rate is more like 12% when you take into account those who have given up looking for work and those who are involuntarily under-employed.

When you look at unemployment by race we find Black and Latino workers with much higher unemployment rates than the rest of the population. At the height of the "Great Recession", when overall unemployment was 10%, Latino unemployment stood at 15.8% and Black unemployment stood at 21.1% in Washington State.

These disparities are a combination of occupational segregation, institutional racism, and the lack of access to job training and employment opportunities.

One tragic, embarrassing, and destructive example of this is the mass incarceration of black and brown males in federal and state prisons.

Since Ronald Reagan launched the war on drugs in 1982, the United States now has the highest incarceration rate in the world – six to ten times higher than any other industrialized country. We have a prison population of over two million people. The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature.

In her extraordinary book, "The New Jim Crow", Michele Alexander describes how the U.S. criminal justice system, from initial stop, search, arrest, lack of adequate representation, plea bargaining under threat of lengthy sentences, imprisonment, probation and parole, has led to a racial caste system. It is a system where black and brown men are locked up at a rate five times higher than white men, even though they commit crimes at roughly the same rates.

We have shamefully created a youth of color pathway from school to prison. This has resulted in as many as 80% of young black men in our major cities having criminal records and being subjected to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives by loss of job opportunities, housing options and the right to vote.

Resolutions #2 and #10 address some of the racial disparities in housing, education, job opportunities and contracts. But, Brothers and Sisters, we have a much more serious issue we need to tackle.

Over the past 18 months our country has suffered through the tragic deaths of Treyvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Antonio Montes at the hands of law enforcement, and then our nation's soul was devastated by the racially motivated murders of Reverend Pinckney and eight other members of a bible study group at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the subsequent burning of nine Black churches.

While race is often not an easy issue for many of us to talk about, whites in America and we in the labor movement need to recognize that we have a sad legacy of racial discrimination built into the founding principles of our country. We have a shameful legacy of slavery, extermination of first Americans, expulsion of Chinese immigrants, internment of Japanese citizens, Jim Crow Laws, the criminalization of black and brown youth, systemic racial profiling, and at times both de jure and then de facto segregation in education, housing, and employment opportunities.

Too often we have allowed employers and right wing agitators to divide us on lines of color and ethnicity, breaking the strength that we have in unity.

As a labor movement we have not always stood up for our brothers and sisters of color. We have at times allowed our own prejudices to blind us to the immorality and destructiveness of racial divisions, or we have convinced ourselves that things are better now and that we live in a color blind society. We do not. And as Dr. King warned us 45 years ago, racial indifference is as much to blame for racial discrimination as overt bigotry.

Before he died Eric Garner cried out "I can't breathe, I can't breathe." I suggest to you, Brothers and Sisters, that none of us will be able to truly breathe until we, as a society and as a labor movement, deal clearly and honestly with racism in our workplaces, in our communities, in public policy, in our institutions and in our unions.

Resolution #12 calls on me and the WSLC, AFL-CIO, to take up President Trumka's challenge to have a" serious and open-ended conversation about what we can do, about what we *should* do regarding race and the labor movement."

As President Trumka said after the tragic killing of Michael Brown, "We can't afford to have my issues and your issues, we need to stand together and mobilize around *our* issues."

Sisters and Brothers, we rise or we fall together as a labor movement. We live by the credo that "An injury to one is an injury to all." And that is why inequality in all of its forms is our enemy and why we fight it.

Brothers and Sisters now we have another crisis facing us, though it is one that also presents us with a great opportunity. That crisis is climate change.

Forty-three years ago when I was a student in Washington, D.C. an analyst from the CIA made a presentation in a Political Science class I was taking. The presentation was on the geo-political ramifications of a warming planet. She hypothesized that if the planet kept going the way it was that we would reach a point in time when the temperate zones, those areas of the world that are the bread basket for the planet, would begin shrinking and that this could set off a geo-political confrontation over food and water.

Now I wish I could tell you that I totally got what she was saying at the time, but I didn't. I looked at it as a hypothesis and with all the interests of a twenty-year-old, including whether there was enough beer in the refrigerator. I assumed that even if this was true, we wouldn't let it happen.

Well, the hypothesis is proving out and we *did* let it happen.

Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, said before last year's People's Climate March in NYC, "We must act on Climate Change now. We don't have a Plan B, because we don't have a Planet B."

Pope Frances, in his recent encyclical on climate, linked climate change and inequality together, and said that we have a collective moral responsibility to look after our common good.

But all we need is our own eyes to recognize that severe weather events (Climate Change) caused by carbon pollution is dramatically impacting our economy, our health, and our very existence.

Increasing ocean acidification has led to the closing of shellfish operations in Puget Sound and Willapa Bay; accelerating glacial melt is leading to increased flooding and storm water pollution; increasing droughts are affecting our water supply and food production, causing great hardship for families and communities dependent on the agricultural economy and causing forced migration around the planet as people desperately seek food, water, and economic survival; great storms like hurricanes Katrina and Sandy and Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines have exacted enormous tolls on life and property.

Today 85% of Washingtonians believe that climate change is real and that it is largely man-made; this is twenty points higher than the national average. And 55% of Washingtonians believe that climate change will negatively impact them.

We have no choice but to significantly reduce our carbon emissions and Green House Gas emissions over the next several decades. We need to cap and lower carbon emissions over time. This will mean leaving much of the proven fossil fuel reserves in the ground.

But we do have choices over how we do this, if we don't let the oil and fossil fuel industry divide us with false choices over jobs and the environment.

We can have both jobs and a clean and healthy environment, if we choose.

We are not going to transition off fossil fuels over night, but we will have to over the next several decades if we are to stop and reverse the negative effects of climate change.

So, as labor, we need to be both on the right side of history, but we also need to be at the table planning for a successful transition rather than being served up on the menu.

As we put in place policies that reduce carbon emissions we need to make sure that workers who work in fossil fuel dependent industries are protected. We need to make sure that industries can actually meet carbon emission reduction levels, so we will need some compliance flexibility to ensure this happens.

We also need to prevent the leakage of jobs and investments in these industries during the transition, from unfair competition from companies out of state or out of country that don't have to meet these emission standards.

We need to protect direct line workers in fossil fuel industries and other vulnerable workers, particularly in communities of color. People who work and live closest to industrial sites and highways and whose health is most negatively impacted by carbon pollution must be protected. These workers and community members suffer rates of asthma and lung disease two to three times higher than the general public. We need to change this.

We need to invest in repairing our state's infrastructure – from sea walls to water mains and pipelines, from the electrical grid to water storage and flood plain protection – creating tens of thousands of building trades jobs, protecting against severe weather, and lowering our carbon footprint.

We need to invest money in the renewable energy economy – taking energy efficiency to scale in our public, commercial and residential sectors – building high speed electric rail – investing in electric car technology and infrastructure – investing in mass transit – expanding our capacity for various forms of renewable energy and creating tens of thousands more jobs.

And we need a "Just Transition". One that invests carbon revenue in mitigating rising energy costs. One that assists vulnerable communities, providing income and benefit support to direct line fossil fuel workers. And one that provides job and training opportunities to direct line workers and to workers in communities of color.

The late visionary labor leader Tony Mazzocchi, from Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, once said, "We need to treat workers as good as dirt."

He was referring to the new super fund created to clean up toxic waste sites. Tony believed that we should have a super fund to investment in transitions for workers so that they did not have to bear the burden of economic transition. It is important for workers to be able to maintain their wage and benefit packages and the standard of living they have struggled for and won over time.

Resolution # 28 directs us to recognize the need to reduce carbon emissions and directs us to work out language for a "Just Transition" and fairness as we move to a new economy.

Sisters and Brothers, earlier I mentioned that part of the Republican Party strategy is to destroy our sense of optimism and hope that we could work through our unions and government for common purposes to rebuild the American Dream.

Well I have great optimism and hope for our future. I believe that our sense of solidarity remains alive and well and grows stronger by the day.

We have stood together with low wage workers and won the fight for $15 wages in SeaTac and Seattle.

We have stood together and won paid safe and sick leave in Seattle and Tacoma.

We have stood up with Familias Unidas and won paid rest breaks for piece workers at Sakuma Brothers Farms.

We have stood up with faculty at Seattle University for the right to have a union contract.

We have marched with Black Lives Matter and the Washington Christian Leaders Coalition to speak out against the racist killings in South Carolina.

We have stood up for our public employees to say, “Public Service Matters!”

We have stood with nurses to protect their health care benefits and safe scheduling.

We have stood with the building trades to pass a transportation package.

But we have more to do!

So I am asking you to stand with me now – to get out of your seats and make a commitment:

Will you Stand with the Machinists and Engineers to tie job security and wages to the aerospace tax incentives;

Will you Stand together to fight back against the Koch Brothers and Scott Walker in their quest for "Right-to-Work for Less" campaigns;

Will you stand up for union contracts at Sakuma Brothers and Darigold for farm workers;

Will you stand up for raising our state minimum wage and state paid safe and sick leave;

Will you stand up for building a new energy economy and a sustainable environment for our children and grandchildren;

Will you stand up against mass incarceration and the criminalization of young black and brown males;

Will you stand uo up against racism in all of its forms;

Will you stand up for immigrant workers and the right to fully participate in the economy and country they support and love;

Will you stand together as Union, Community, with One Voice for social and economic justice;

I thought you wouls - Because we are Union, we are community, we are One!

Sisters and brothers let's have a great convention - Solidarity is our most precious value!