

SECRETARY TREASURER APRIL SIMS' REMARKS
2021 WSLC Legislative Conference
Thursday, Feb. 4

My name is April Sims, she/her pronouns, and I am proud to be the Secretary Treasurer of the Washington State Labor Council. Today, I have the privilege of closing out our Legislative Conference, and I want to thank you all for joining us, and for your grace as we navigated a new way of meeting with legislators and bringing our voices to the halls of power.

COVID-19 has changed our world and the ways we live our lives, but our commitment to building power for working people has only been strengthened in the past months as we've watched the world learn what we in Labor have always known; first, that working people are essential. And second, that working people are undervalued, and underpaid.

Workers who are often ignored — like farmworkers, grocery workers, sanitation workers, and home health aides — and workers who are often derided as asking for too much — like teachers and nurses — suddenly are recognized for the essential work they have always performed.

Working people are the engine that powers this country. But right now, our labor is enriching billionaires and corporate CEOs who are pulling in record-setting profits while claiming it's too expensive to provide hazard pay or benefits to workers in the midst of a global pandemic that is ravaging working families.

We're seeing corporations and billionaire bosses weaponizing a time of job insecurity and economic stress while sowing division for their own profit. The numbers are stark. The wealthiest Americans have added nearly \$3.7 trillion to their net worth since March 2020, while the working class has lost nearly \$3.5 trillion. That's obscene. It's a sign of a broken system.

But all of us gathered together today know this. We've felt this inequity in our own lives, and we've seen it more clearly than ever in our workplaces, our communities, and our families over the past year.

In crisis, our lives become even more centered around keeping ourselves and our families safe. Safe from sickness, safe from falling behind on rent, safe from prejudice and hate. Facing a triple pandemic of COVID-19, economic insecurity, and the rising tide of white supremacy, it's no wonder that healing has been on the minds of many these past few months.

Healing feels like a fraught and loaded concept these days, sometimes used to silence instead of make whole.

But healing took on literal meaning for me when my family and I were diagnosed with COVID-19 in November. I've been privileged to rarely be sick in my life, and suddenly I had to dedicate my energy to healing myself, and my family. And healing is hard work! I know other folks here today have seen first hand the work it takes to recover from COVID. Healing is slow, and there are setbacks - and you cannot take the easy road. Healing as a process requires both broad and intimate support - I was blessed to be supported in healing by my community and labor family.

Our country, too, has healing to do since November. And this healing is hard work. We have delayed reckoning with the white supremacy threaded through our society, and we have seen the consequences; self-serving politicians and billionaires weaponizing race to divide working people against one another for their own gain. And in some cases, this strategy has worked. It is a painful truth to acknowledge, but we cannot heal what we will not name.

We have new leadership in the White House - shout out to Vice President Kamala Harris, the first but by no means the last Black and Southeast Asian woman in her position - but the attitudes, lies, and beliefs that elevated a white supremacist to the highest office in the land are still present.

February is Black History Month. Let's be clear, Black history is American history and an arbitrary month cannot do justice to the multitudes, resiliency, and power contained in the Black experience in America. Still, this month is a call to learn lessons from the ancestors to guide us in this moment we are in.

The Civil Rights Movement has a lot to teach us about healing. Real healing, that is honest about harm committed, healing that seeks to lift up those among us who have been most harmed. Civil Rights leaders named the harm - the systemic marginalization, exclusion, and persecution of Black Americans. Black Americans centered ourselves in the work of our own liberation.

This fight for Black lives, led by Black people and targeted at the white supremacy used to maintain the economic inequities harming our communities, moves all working people further towards realizing the rights promised to us. Fighting for liberation is cathartic. It is real healing.

We have an opportunity in this moment to push further in our fight for liberation, to really heal. Public opinion in favor of unions is the highest it has been in decades, and 60 million people in this country say they would join a union if they had the opportunity. More Americans than ever before agree that racism is an issue that this country must address.

There is a rising understanding that there is more that unites us as working people than divides us. There is recognition that our system is broken, that racism is real, and that it's Our Time Now to demand the real policies and systemic change we need.

COVID-19 has laid bare what we in Labor know; working people united across race and place is the strongest tool we have to advocate for ourselves and combat inequity.

We know in Labor that when some of us win, all working people win. We know that no matter how distant, or different we may feel, we all share the same economic needs.

So let's be clear: real healing for working people addresses our needs in this moment and moves us towards a more equitable society.

For working people in this moment, healing looks like impactful COVID-19 relief. It looks like investments in the people of Washington to support recovery from economic hardship. It looks like policies targeting the abuses of power and state violence targeting Black & Indigenous folks, and other people of color.

Working people have the power to dictate how the legislature responds in the face of crisis. It's Our Time Now to demand that we target the inequality that the powerful hope we'll be too distracted or overwhelmed to focus on.

It's Our Time Now to fight for progressive revenue reform that finally requires the wealthy to pay their fair share. We have an opportunity this year to pass a billionaire's tax on capital gains. Paid by the 100 richest Washingtonians, this tax would raise \$4 billion for public education, childcare, infrastructure, healthcare, and more.

Working people have the power to dictate how the legislature responds in the face of crisis. It's Our Time Now to determine how we will heal and recover. It's Our Time Now to demand that billionaires pull their weight. It's Our Time Now to define a new normal, one that is rooted in equity and remembers whose labor powers this country.

We've spent time today talking about unity, and solidarity. But we can't ignore how isolated many of us feel in our own separate corners of Washington. It can seem like the deep divisions we're seeing exploited in this moment are felt in our own bodies, as caring for each other requires us to stay distanced from one another.

But when we cannot safely link arms, we can still speak with one voice. Uniting to fight for policies that put working people first is a critical way to channel the anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty we feel in our own separate corners of Washington into building power for working people.

Staff are dropping links in the chat to our news site, The Stand, and to our social media. Stay connected with us throughout the coming months to continue the fight for a Workers Recovery Agenda that offers healing, opportunity, and the promise of a more equitable Washington for all of us.

Today, we've heard from the hard-working labor lobbyists advocating for working people at the Legislature. And we've heard from politicians tasked with determining our laws. It's Our Time Now to be heard.

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