

PRESIDENT LARRY BROWN'S REMARKS
2021 WSLC Legislative Conference
Thursday, Feb. 4

Welcome! I'm Larry Brown and I have the honor of being the President of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO. I want to thank you for joining us today. We have a great agenda today covering different elements of the WSLC 2021 Workers' Recovery Agenda.

But I wanted to start by taking a moment to acknowledge the tremendous loss of life we have suffered since we last gathered together for this conference. One year ago this week, we gathered together in Olympia for this meeting. We went to the Capitol steps to rally together for public employee privacy, racial equity, and many other important legislative efforts.

We had no idea what was to come in the days and months that followed. It seems like a lifetime ago. And it was.

Many of us have lost loved ones, Union siblings, friends, and neighbors to COVID. Many more have lost their jobs or lost income because of the economic fallout of the pandemic. And ALL of us have suffered under the necessary restrictions to flatten the curve – unable to be with our friends and our extended families, or to live our life as we had come to know it.

But the reason we are here today -- and the reason the theme for this conference is "**Our Time Now**" -- is because of the amazing essential workers of Washington who have persevered and helped our state weather this storm. The hospital workers, the grocery store and warehouse employees, the educators, the building trades, farm workers, public safety employees, transit workers and many, many others who have put their health – and their lives -- at risk to serve others.

They are the reason we are here today. This pandemic has exposed the inequities they face, and the unfairness rooted deep in our economy. Our state lawmakers need to understand that, for Washington's working families, there is a renewed sense of urgency to address these inequities.

It's **Our Time Now** to make sure the unemployment insurance system is fixed and that we have access to sufficient benefits when we need them.

It's **Our Time Now** to address our broken, unfair tax system in Washington. Families who earn the least pay the most, and the wealthy don't pay their fair share. Let's pass the Wealth Tax for Billionaires and take other steps to address this backwards tax system. That way we can invest in Washington, and strengthen the safety net for families and communities suffering the most during this pandemic.

It's **Our Time Now** to rebuild our economy by also investing in public transportation and infrastructure to create good jobs. That's how we will grow our way out of this recession.

It's **Our Time Now** to pass the Worker Protection Act. This will empower workers to blow the whistle on employers who are violating existing safety laws, wage standards, and anti-discrimination policies.

It's **Our Time Now** to make childcare more affordable and accessible, and pay childcare professionals a living wage, so these providers can support families struggling to return to work.

And after another tragic year of Black people and other people of color being victimized by police killings and unnecessary use of force, it's **Our Time Now** to achieve meaningful reform that demands police accountability while preserving core labor principles.

You'll be hearing much more about these and other legislative priorities today, but I wanted to make sure I point out something important that is happening at the national level.

Today, the Protecting the Right to Organize Act – or PRO Act -- has been reintroduced to the new Congress to finally fix our outdated labor laws. The PRO Act is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restore workers' freedom to join together in unions. In the previous Congress, both of Washington's U.S. Senators and all seven of our Democratic U.S. Representatives sponsored or co-sponsored this critical bill. It passed the House, but didn't even get a hearing in Republican Mitch McConnell's Senate.

Well, thanks to some hard work from a lot of the unions represented here today, Mitch is no longer in charge. And passage of the PRO Act, the cornerstone of the AFL-CIO's Workers First agenda, is now within reach. In the coming weeks, I'm going to be asking all of you to engage your membership on this issue. This is our opportunity to increase workers power, rebuild our economy fairly, and grow America's labor movement. We need to seize it.

I want to conclude my speech today by talking about this Council's work on race. I know there are some folks who wonder about the amount of time we spend on the topic.

First off, we do this work because we are called on to do this work by the resolutions passed by our conventions over the last half dozen years. But even more importantly we do this work because our unions and our very democracy is imperiled by the racists and white supremacists.

On January 6th at the U.S. Capitol, we saw the confederate flag and Nazi regalia, all symbols of racial hatred, being used as weapons against our democracy. Now, because of these hateful insurrectionists, we can never again claim that America has an uninterrupted history of the peaceful transfer of power. Unless we fight white supremacy and racism it will cost us solidarity within the labor movement and on January 6th, it almost cost us our democracy.