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Good evening! It's so good to be home! I am especially delighted to join my brothers and sisters with CBTU of Northern California, and I can't tell you how honored I am to accept this award.

I would especially like to thank my dear brother Antonio Christian for inviting me and for being such a forceful leader of our CBTU chapter. And to the other honorees, I extend congratulations – my brother Larry Martin of the Transport Workers Union, Morris Tatum of AFSCME, and of course, my SEIU sister and friend, Ella Raiford.

You all are trailblazers and champions. So I am proud to accept this award and also share the podium with you.

[Pause]

I am eager to have this forum with you tonight as our country moves ever-closer to war in Iraq and as we grapple with issues of justice – not only in the Middle East – but right here on the home front. I am mindful that CBTU formed for a reason: to fight for justice, for working people and to be a link between labor struggles and African American struggles.

Every one of us in this room have to live up to that mission – whether you are a member of the Coalition or not.

[Pause]

Now that the controversy over Trent Lott has subsided, President Bush is free to massage his base and promote its conservative platform. And he didn't waste any time.

Notice in his State of the Union address last week, he did not make a single reference to civil rights, diversity or the notion of equal justice.

We were all supposed to be grateful that he announced plans to fund the fight against HIV/AIDS in South Africa where our brothers and sisters are tragically dying and an entire generation is being lost.

But for us, that is too little too late.

[Pause]

Bush tipped his hand with the recent announcement of his opposition to affirmative action at the University of Michigan. In two potentially landmark cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, the University is being challenged by white students who were rejected by its undergraduate and law schools.

The President claims to value racial diversity, but not enough to allow public universities to factor that into their admissions policies.

[Pause]

Affirmative action should not be used as the scapegoat for why white students who are rejected from schools like the University of Michigan – a school which receives 25,000 applications for 5000 slots.

Contrary to claims from Bush and affirmative action opponents, race is actually a small factor in the University's admissions program.

But how can you undo the long and historical pattern of racial discrimination without taking race into account.

[Pause]

Does the question of fairness seem off base for George W. Bush -- himself a recipient of affirmative action, who found an open door at Yale University by being the descendant of alumni.

Imagine a self-admitted C student with SAT scores 180 points below the average admit gaining entrance to one of the nation's most elite institutions because his father and grandfather were alumni.

[Pause]

And what of this new, compassionate face of Senate Republicans?

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist made millions from the family business, Health Care Associates (HCA), benefiting from a blind trust that gave him an arm's length from his father's corporation.

Need I remind you this HCA reportedly defrauded Medicare, billed for ineligible expenses, and paid kickbacks to doctors for referrals.

Frist voted with Senator Lott more than 90 percent of the time, rejecting measures of importance to people of color and working families, including election reform, an increase in the minimum wage, a prescription drug plan for the elderly and employment discrimination.

[Pause]

So much for the kinder-gentler face of conservatism.

The storm over Lott's remarks drew as much heat from right-wing Republicans as it did from Democrats. The Republican Party wanted Lott removed from his leadership position because the longer the debate went on the more the Republicans racist, anti-working family agenda would be exposed.

[Pause]

We know that it requires more than a change of face and a clever strategy for the Republicans to win our favor. Vigilance, diligence, and assertiveness must be exerted to protect our rights.

I think we within CBTU owe it to all our constituents to look ahead and recommit ourselves to what needs to be done and then to doing the right thing.

In simple terms, that means stepping up to the plate, being bold and unapologetic about forging an agenda that stands for the advancement of working people, the African American community, social justice and not just equality – but equity as well.

[Pause]

The Bush administration has put a lot of emphasis on trying to expand the Republicans' base by reaching out to Latino voters.

They will try to find issues that they believe separate Hispanics from other people of color, especially from African Americans.

No ethnic or racial group has a lock on any issue, especially not injustice.

Blacks and Latinos are both struggling for decent wages, adequate health care and quality schools for their children.

The incarceration rates of black and brown young people are both higher than the percentage of their kids in college. Both groups still experience racial discrimination in housing, employment and education.

What does it mean to be the largest minority? Just ask my people. We've been the largest minority for 400 years and we are still struggling for justice. Being a minority group by itself is still a minority –whether large minority or smaller minority.

You are still out-ranked by whatever, or whomever, is defined as the majority. We must not fall into the divide and rule trap.

There is no monopoly on racial exploitation. Nor should there be a monopoly on the fight for racial justice!

[Pause]

Call me old-fashioned. But what we have to do is straight forward and traditional. It means helping our friends to understand they should not run away from the label “liberal” as if it’s an incurable disease.

It means not allowing others to determine who our leaders are. It means going to our base because when the chips are down that’s who we can depend on.

And it also means reaching out and enlisting – not the 40 percent who are registered to vote – but the rest of the *potential* electorate, unregistered and disaffected voters.

We must reach out to allies who stand for the values and ideals that we fight for every day.

We cannot be successful in a society where all the important decisions – about the economy, about war and peace and about our basic legal rights – are made by a tiny, self-interested elite group of wealthy white men like George Bush, Dick Cheney and John Ashcroft.

[Pause]

Let's take this notion of leave no child behind.

They have ripped off the language of our movement, using words like “choice”, “opportunity,” “freedom.”

But let us not be tricked. Take the example of the voucher campaign. It was packaged in deceptive wrapping, made to look appealing for people who are looking for answers to the crisis of public education.

The bottom line: the voucher movement and all its rhetoric is no better example of the big lie.

Black parents want nothing more than to give their children the best education possible. All of us grew up believing that education was the key to a better life.

[Pause.]

There's no disagreement from us at SEIU that our schools are in crisis. Fixing public education is the solution to a substandard system.

We must work for real improvements. For example, SEIU supported our members and allies in Florida to secure adoption of the initiative for smaller class sizes.

And here in California, each time the voucher measure reared its ugly head, we beat it back.

We need smaller class size, improved training programs for teachers and the workers who assist them in the classroom, parent engagement, new funding streams for public education and raising standards in line with curricula and instruction.

None of these objectives are the goal of vouchers. They simply drain our tax dollars and the scarce resources available to public schools.

Their goal is to bolster, not struggling parents and their kids, but the affluent whose children are already in private schools.

Just do the math. There are not enough vouchers or private school slots in the nation to answer the massive needs facing inner-city schools and inner-city school children.

The voucher system gives the choice, not to parents, but to private schools which can pick the privileged few, while the students in need of extra attention are left behind in public schools lacking the resources to help them.

[Pause.]

To understand this big lie, let's look at the people who are behind vouchers.

They don't support public education, but they are the biggest promoters of privatization, a sub-minimum wage, affirmative action roll-backs and union-busting.

It includes the likes of billionaire John "Wal-Mart" Walton; affirmative action foe Ward Connerly; and Lynde and Harry Bradley.

The Bradleys are billionaires who own a foundation that supports dangerous causes ranging from right-wing think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation to people who write books claiming that African Americans are intellectually inferior.

How can anyone believe this crowd could support choice for Black parents?

[Pause.]

They have deep pockets for slick multi-million dollar newspaper and television ads. They even created an organization to try to fool the black community.

Let us not forget the group called Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) that was formed with Walton and Bradley's bankroll. And recently, this group received one million dollars from the Bush administration.

They have set out to dupe Black parents by spouting appealing rhetoric, and at the same time they are undermining everything that would empower our community.

This is an important challenge that we must take up. But for the Waltons, it does not end with vouchers.

[Pause]

Let's look at Wal-Mart's disrespect of low-wage workers, women, working families, labor laws, and their practice of injustice.

Wal-Mart is the largest employer in the U.S., the largest retailer in the country and the largest corporation in the world.

It props up sweat shops around the world; has NLRB claims against it in 25 states; been hit with the largest sex discrimination lawsuit in history, and add to that 38 other state and federal lawsuits for forcing employees to clock out and stay on the job.

When people talk about going to Wal-Mart to save a few dollars, I always point out that their discount is being paid for on the backs of millions of low wage earners, working families and all of us taxpayers!

Two-thirds of Wal-Mart workers can't afford the company health insurance.

[Pause]

This is a huge concern for SEIU, which you may know is the nation's largest union of health care workers.

One of our major program areas has focused on health security and pushing to assure that every American has health insurance coverage.

Wal-Mart officials have actually stated on the record that the workers who don't have company health insurance can get coverage – not through a program that this multi-national corporation has established – but through the struggling spouses who are participating in state and federal assistance programs.

That means the public is subsidizing this multi-billion dollar corporation's exploitation of low wage workers.

This corporation, owned by a family with a net worth of about \$102 billion, is contributing to the 40 million uninsured working families. Just one percent of their worth could pay for health care for the 700,000 associates that they employ who are without adequate health coverage.

And you say you can get a bargain at Wal-Mart!

[Pause]

CBTU cannot shy away from battles against the Wal-Marts of our nation.

The only way we can win is by standing up and standing together.

As trade unionist, we cannot improve the lives of our members if we ignore the problems they face at home and in their community. We must be politically active and engaged.

[Pause]

I cannot leave here tonight without mentioning the impact of George W. Bush's so-called victory in 2000.

We've only begun to feel the sting of the massive tax cuts for the rich that will squeeze public service right down to the local schoolhouse. In this Bush era new figures show that jobless rates are higher than they've been in 20 years, crime has soared and we are on the brink of war.

Assaults continue on civil rights and civil liberties led by Attorney General John Ashcroft, and we should brace ourselves for more bad news with the establishment of the Homeland Security Department.

Under the guise of antiterrorism, the Bush administration has imposed a dragnet on thousands of workers including 150 of SEIU's Local 1877 members in Los Angeles who were arrested, sacked and some even face deportation. This goes beyond immigrants and beyond airport security.

[Pause]

The future of our political program lies in encouraging and supporting our members to run for elected office, developing our Member Political Organizers program, increasing our COPE contributions and educating our members on the importance of registering to vote...and then voting!

[Pause]

Not everyone in the labor movement is convinced that fighting for social justice should be a union priority. Well, CBTU and SEIU have a different vision.

Being a union member is not just about a fatter paycheck. It's about being part of a movement that believes in the worth and dignity of every human being.

We are part of a movement that answers, "Yes, I am my bothers (and my sister's) keeper."

The skills we learn fighting for justice are the same skills we need to build a stronger labor movement and a more united front with our friends in elected office.

I am convinced that the struggle for social justice makes all of us stronger.

[Pause]

I know this work is difficult. But keep in mind, unionists died so we could have a 40-hour work week and child labor laws so our children would not be exploited. Many sacrificed their jobs so we could have a 15-minute break, a minimum wage, and the right to organize. But they did not do it alone.

Just as we take up new battles for low wage workers in both the public and private sector, the right to organize and collective bargaining – we need our allies and the partnerships forged by CBTU.

We must not let the sacrifices of so many of our heroes be in vain. We have an obligation to continue the work they started.

Remember we want to make the world better, not just for us, but for our children and the generations after them.

We in CBTU are the conscience of organized labor. We collectively have a responsibility to make labor live up to their rhetoric, or expose it for what it is.

[Pause]

In closing, I would be remiss if I ended without fulfilling the promise I made to a trade unionist I met during my visit last year to Kyoto, Japan.

This man was a newborn when the Atomic bomb was dropped on his home. He and all his family members are survivors of Hiroshima.

Like people all over the world, this Japanese trade unionist is truly fearful of this U.S. administration and the prospects of war it is advancing.

Because he has an understanding of war that we have never experienced – even in the aftermath of September 11 – my Japanese friend views the Bush administration not, only as a world power, but a very dangerous power.

[Pause]

We must be mindful of this madness, and raise our voices against the kind of fear and instability that the Bush administration has unleashed across the planet.

I leave you with this reflection: *Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.*

The words of Albert Einstein.

And to paraphrase the Reverend Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, let me caution: We've come too far, fought too hard, marched too long and died too young to go backwards.

Brothers and sister, thank you for listening to me tonight.

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