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Good afternoon! It's so good to be here in Indianapolis at the Labor Round Table Luncheon of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators.

I would especially like to thank my brother Willie Baker, vice chair of the Round Table and Vice President of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, for inviting me to be the speaker this afternoon.

All of you are to be commended for the outstanding work you are doing, not only on behalf of your immediate constituents and members, but for the African American community as a whole. I am especially eager to have this forum with you today in the aftermath of the November mid-term elections.

The post-mortem analyses of what went wrong seem endless. And I suppose these analyses will continue until 2004.

But rather than look back on what went wrong, I think we 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]

Call me old-fashioned. But what we have to do is straight forward and traditional. It means not running away from the label “liberal” as if it’s an incurable disease. It means not allowing outsiders to designate our leadership. 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.

African Americans in organized labor and black legislators are joined at the hip. Not only are we the most reliable base of support for our respective organizations, but our fates are inseparable.

The bond is sealed with our shared destiny of being forgotten, disrespected or taken for granted. But also, of standing up for people who don't have a voice.

[Pause]

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.

And as legislators and policymakers, you cannot make a difference in the quality of life for your constituents if you do not address the needs of working families.

[Pause]

That's why I want to talk a little about an issue that we all care about deeply and that is our future – quality education for our children.

I'd like to speak directly to NBCSL's annual conference theme, "Expanding, Engaging, Ensuring: The Blueprint for Educational Excellence."

But first, I have to acknowledge the impact of George W. Bush's so-called victory in 2000. We've only begun to feel the impact of the massive tax cuts for the rich that will squeeze public service right down to the local schoolhouse.

Massive 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.

[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!

Just like in the African American community as a whole, we know nationwide, the registration of our union members is far below what it should be. Simply by registering our own members, we can have a big impact.

And just as important as our political fight, racial justice and social justice are equally important. Not everyone in the labor movement is convinced that fighting for social justice should be a union priority. Well, SEIU has a different vision.

[Pause]

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.”

Our union cannot be successful in a society where your family’s wealth and income are determined by the color of your skin.

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.

But the bottom line is, 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.

Along those same lines, the NBCSL white paper, “Closing the Achievement Gap,” offers a viable blueprint for action that we can all support. In addition to smaller class size, it advocates increasing teacher training and parent engagement, developing 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 with expensive ads in the New York Times and on local television. And they spout appealing rhetoric even as they undermine 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.

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 as taxpayers!

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

SEIU and our sister unions cannot shy away from battles against the Wal-Mart of our nation. We've got campaigns going across the country to organize home care workers, janitors and people who rely on strong advocates and good laws to back them up.

We look to our brother and sister legislators to help us win these campaigns. The only way we get anything is by standing up and standing together.

[Pause]

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 brothers and sisters in state houses across the country.

Just like we need to guard against black legislators at all levels of government being labeled as holders of safe seats and taken for granted, black legislators need to be more sensitive to the concerns of organized labor.

We need you to stand up against big corporations who come into our communities with the offer of jobs, don't pay a living wage or health care benefits and threaten employees with job loss for trying to form a union.

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

I know this work is difficult. But keep in mind, many of you, your family members and friends put your lives on the line for the power, whether used or untapped, that we now have – the right to vote, an end to legal segregation and other civil rights victories.

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.

Organize labor need people making laws and public policy to back us up. And legislators organized labor to provide the resources to elect you and keep you in office.

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 NBCSL by our side.

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, their children and the generations after them.

Black legislators are the conscience of the legislatures across the country, just as we are the conscience of organized labor.

We collectively have a responsibility to make our respective institutions 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 recent visit 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 – not just those in the Middle East – 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.

During this holiday season, we must be mindful of this danger and raise our voices against the kind of fear and instability that the Bush administration has unleashed at home and 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.

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

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