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Thank you and good afternoon sisters and brothers!

I am honored to join you here at the 30th Anniversary CLUW luncheon. I am proud to stand before you as a trade union woman, and longtime member of CLUW who counts more than 30 years in our movement.

[Pause]

If you will indulge me, sisters and brothers, let me digress for a moment and talk about my person beginnings -- as a clerical worker in at Alameda County Hospital Medical records. It all began when a friend dragged me to a union meeting where they were showing a movie about the old days of organizing back in the 1930s. [Pause]

I remember being stunned to learn that people were not just ostracized, but lost their lives in the early days just because they wanted a voice at work.

Imagine the picture of people being beaten, shot or risking their lives for union organizing. I don't think most understand the sacrifices that have been made. The idea of getting shot for joining a union seems unbelievable.

So the least I could do was attend a meeting. Being committed to the concept of union organizing seemed a small price to pay.

I come from working class stock. My father was a fork lift driver in the Machinist Union for 33 years. Daddy always encouraged his coworkers to support their union, and it's that spirit that helped raise me.

Back in my early days, before I became an active trade unionist I didn't fully understand the labor movement, but I had the vision of a strong, proud, dignified man who worked hard, earned his living and demanded to be treated like the decent human being he was.

That's the credo of all workers – to be accorded the decency, dignity, respect and rewards they deserve. It's significant because I started out simply as a worker – not a union leader or even a union member. We all bring that life experience, that potent world view to the table.

[Pause]

I was a young mom. I went to work when most people were going to college. My parents helped take care of my son and were part of my support network.

I was lucky to have childcare whenever I needed it. This is what many of my union sisters and low wage workers across the country lack: a support network to assure that their childcare needs are met.

This essential need should not be left to chance or luck, but must be part of the basic support that all working women can take for granted.

Sisters, we women epitomize the workers struggle. In Alameda County more than three decades ago, we women began to look around and saw how things were not right in our work environment.

For instance, fully paid health care wasn't provided; sick leave was a gift from the boss. You may or may not get a cost of living raise and if you didn't there was no recourse to address it.

Because we were predominantly women, we clerical workers were marginalized and diminished. Our job – the union’s charge – was to instill power and dignity and a sense of our collective importance.

We formed an association of County Clerical Workers over 2,000 strong. Our theme was “Clerks are Special.” That was a bold statement in 1972. The goal was to instill pride and power.

[Pause]

Let me tell you that those early days in Alameda County would set a tone for my future and make me who I am today – a clerical worker by trade and executive vice president by calling, from the people who struggle and toil and still fight for that pride and power.

Women epitomize our worker's struggle. The kind of work we do – women's work – is devalued and dismissed. Only industries in the nursing and educational sectors are most likely to employ women as officials and managers.

Women in executive positions earn 78 percent of the median income earned by men. When you talk about women in the upper reaches of corporate America, that figure diminishes even more.

While more than half of women in the work force hold managerial or professional positions, only 15.7 percent of corporate officers of Fortune 500 companies are women, and only 5.2 percent are among the executives who earn the top five salaries at their companies.

Only 1.6 percent, a total of eight women, is chief executives of Fortune 500 corporations. [Pause]

Sisters, it gets even worse when we look at the trade union movement. Only two women head international unions – the Flight Attendants and the American Federation of Teachers.

But think about the low wage earners and how difficult their struggle is.

Office workers were prestigious in the early part of the Twentieth Century. It was only when women entered the workforce after WWII and took over clerical and office jobs that our positions were viewed with disdain.

Women also didn't think much of their jobs and their roles. They harbored internalized sexism that helped to keep them subordinate.

[Pause]

Hospital workers; housekeeping; the women in those positions were performing the same jobs and working just as hard as the men. Maybe the men just used a heavier mop, but they were cleaning the same floors.

Yet, they still made more money than their female counterparts. Individually, most women just accepted that inequality as the way it was supposed to be.

It was not until we collectively organized, asked questions and understood that this pay differential was not fair, not acceptable and had to change.

It took work and struggle and courage to stand up and push for change.

There was a deeper lesson we learned in our organizing: you cannot always assume that people will support things because it's in their best interest to do so.

Some of our biggest opponents were the women who we were defending.

Women received raises eventually. Collectively, we struck a blow at the historical roots of discrimination even if all the victims were not on board with the fight.

[Pause]

Keep in mind that our mission is to organize and build a united and strong front of workers. But also to fight for justice and dignity for *all* working people.

Every one of us in this room has to live up to that mission. We have an agenda that is driven by local, state and national issues.

Each of us has a responsibility to understand and embrace our mandate on behalf of women in our locals and other trade unions. [Pause]

But in this very important Presidential Election Year, this means taking on a new attitude.

Significance of women in upcoming election cannot be underestimated. Women will make the difference in this year's election.

Women have been in the background but are truly the backbone in all great movements, dating back to biblical days – the civil rights movement, the union movement, political campaigns.

So what does this mean to us here in Sacramento and beyond?

It means not allowing others to determine who our leaders are – neither in our unions, our local community or our nation.

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.

[Pause]

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, right-wing men like George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and John Ashcroft.

CLUW cannot shy away from battles against the enemies of women and social justice.

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]

In this Bush era new figures show that jobless rates are higher than they've been in 20 years.

The budget deficit is swelling to historic proportions.

Fighting for social justice should be a union priority and a CLUW priority.

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.

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

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

[Pause]

This 30th Anniversary Luncheon is a celebration of how far we have come. But it should also be a signal for us to guide new battles for all our trade union sisters and brothers -- black, white, Latino, Asian, young and old.

Whether those struggles are around mandatory overtime, full healthcare, childcare, workers right to organize, to flex our political action muscle or collective bargaining, we need our allies and the partnerships forged by our political activism.

We must not let the sacrifices of so many of our heroes and heroines be in vain.

We have an obligation to continue the work they started. We want to make the world better, not just for us, but for our children and the generations after them.

We women must be the conscience of organized labor. We collectively have a responsibility to make politicians – friends and foes alike – live up to their rhetoric, or expose it for what it is.

[Pause]

In closing, I leave you with the simple but uncompromising words of that great southern freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hammer.

“I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Brothers and sister, let’s get busy. (end)