

**Remarks of Senator John Edwards
Commencement Address
National Labor College
June 28, 2008
As prepared for delivery**

It's an honor to be with you today.

Brothers and Sisters, congratulations to the class of 2008.

You know, I am so proud of what the unions have done for my family. My mother is a card carrying member of the Rural Letters Carrier Union. My brother is a member of IBEW. And I am a proud board member of American Rights at Work. Unions have helped my family get the health care they need. And I will always stand with you because of what you've done for my family—and for millions across this country.

As some of you may remember—my Dad worked in a mill. You may have heard that story and, well, I still am a son of a mill worker.

But what you may not know is this story. When I was in school, I remember coming down the stairs at night. I would see the glow of the television, and my Dad was working at the kitchen table. He wasn't paying the family bills or going over paperwork from his job at the mill, he was trying to improve his skills by learning math on the local TV station.

Since he couldn't go to college, he did what he could to get a better job in the mill. And I was proud of what my father was trying to do—still am proud of him. I wish he had the chance to get that degree. But I realized that I lived in a country where I could...where you could... thanks to your brothers and sisters in Labor.

And where I come from, people like my father and the people he worked with in the mill. People who work hard and try to build a better life for their family—they're the heart and soul of this country. America can and should always be a place where hard work and determination mean the sky's the limit. And I am here today because I have lived in the bright light of America and more people ought to have same chances I've had—you've had.

You are parents who understand what life-long learning means. You are organizers who just wanted the chance to go to college and you've been balancing work and family. You are full-time sheet metal workers and carpenters who want to build a better life for your family. It is because this college and your brothers and sisters in Labor that anything is possible.

So brothers and sisters, congratulations. You deserve this and have worked very hard for this success.

Now that we've celebrated a little, let's get to work because there is so much to do together.

Let's start with the truth.

When in the course of human events and millions and millions of our own people are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness a simple stirring just won't do.

When in the course of human events--when in the course of our American history--millions and millions of our own people who count on their Friday night paychecks to get by are going deeper and deeper into debt because the very basics food, shelter, and the price of gas are too much--a simple protest just won't do.

When in the course of human events millions and millions of our brothers and sisters are bullied because they want more protection on the job, are threatened because they want to earn a living wage, and are intimidated because they think that 40 hours a week of laying bricks and pipes, driving buses and changing bed pans have earned them that sacred and undeniable right of health care--a simple complaint just won't do.

When in the course of our human events a war on work has been waged for eight long years when profits have gone up and wages down; when more at the top control most of the wealth while your jobs are sent to China, India, and Brazil; when big corporations are getting billions in dollars of tax cuts while fathers and sons are competing for the same jobs at Target, Cosco, and Sears—a simple objection just won't do.

When in the Course of human events the dignity of work is diminished, the promise of work is in question, the very value of a hard days work for an honest day's pay is ignored a few miles away down the street in the Oval Office, the voices of disapproval must be loud, and the battle to right these great injustices must be led by you.

This very college is here so that working men and women like you can further their education and go to college. Many of you are the first in your family like I was. The Labor movement understands how important an education is. It's more than the ticket to opportunity in this country; it very often serves as a gateway to change.

So to the graduating class of 2008, it's time to get to work. It's time to take those organizing ideas back to Ohio, Pennsylvania, or California to bring economic justice to where you work, to your lives, to your families so that the children cheering you on today have a better life.

What all of us know from the many, many sad lessons we've learned over the last eight years, is that while justice maybe blind—she doesn't always act on her own. Justice in this country never comes easy. We have to fight for it.

It wasn't too long ago when we sent nine year old boys to work in the coal mines, young girls to work the looms in Lowell, and that children sold newspapers all day on the Capitol steps. It wasn't too long ago when the work day was all day, safety was tough luck, and segregation kept some of our best men and women from working. It wasn't too long ago when women were told that they could only be teachers, nurses, and housekeepers.

Justice in this country never comes easy. But thanks to good, decent, committed people like you it does arrive. This graduating class is strong and you can right the wrongs you see every day. You can restore justice with what you learned here and the determination you carry in your heart.

You can restore it because of what was written: that all people are created equal, and that we are endowed with certain inalienable rights. This is what we started more than two centuries ago: a great experiment in the history of mankind. Ordinary citizens gathered in their churches, in their stores, in their homes to pursue a greater good, both civic in its promise and human in its hope.

It gave the farmer the same rights as the president. It gave the blacksmith the same chance as the ship merchant. And it gave the men and women who said that we had not honored our ideals the right to speak out in the great calls of change.

America is a place that was built by people who work. We believe in the dignity that comes from our labor. That we all have the same worth. That a doctor and a bus driver both matter the same in America. They just have different jobs, but their hard work and dignity can lift us up equally.

So then why has this war on work gone on for so long?

Why is it still so difficult to join a union after all these years? Why is it still easier to join a political party than the local IBEW or machinists or teachers?

Why isn't the Employee Free Choice Act the law of the land?

Why haven't we banned the permanent replacement of strikers by now?

Why haven't we punished more employers who violate labor laws and put your brothers and sisters at risk?

Why hasn't there been more outrage for the young girl in China working 16 hours in a factory so that a pair of socks can be five cents cheaper?

Why hasn't there been more indignation for the workers in the Amazon who are sick because the big oil companies have polluted their land?

Why hasn't there been more rebellion for the women in struggling countries who are denied the very right to work because they are viewed as property and not a good seamstress or basket maker or cook?

Why do these injustices exist? It's not an accident. It is by design. This is what happens when the leader in the Oval Office doesn't know a thing about how regular people go about their lives. This is what happens when our leaders don't respect and honor hard work. This is what happens when profits come at the expense of people. This is what happens when our president does nothing to speed up justice's arrival.

Brothers and sisters, this is why it's time to get to work. This is where your voices of disapproval come in. This where you take your degrees to wage the next battle of workers rights in this country. This is where you become our next leaders to fight for what working men and women need to get ahead.

You will fight for universal health care for every, man, woman, and child in this country. You will fight for college for every one who is qualified and wants to go. You will fight for an economy that remains second to none by understanding right now that America must lead in the new energy economy. We must build the cars that run on something other than oil. We must design and build the materials that make our homes more efficient. We must finish bringing broadband to every corner of this country. And our health care workers must be the ones who discover the new cures and advances to the disease that plague this world.

This is what your degrees mean. This is the fight we are in brothers and sisters. We are in the fight of our lives to restore dignity and honor to those who work.

And just so you know that I am in this fight with you every step of the way, I have launched another kind of campaign to ensure that work is honored in this country.

Right now millions of people who work the early shift and the late shift—and many who work both—do not have enough to get by so they live in their car or on their sister's couch or in the shelter. Many women, who send their kids to school, race off to jobs at the minimum wage and still don't have enough to put dinner on the table. Many of our grandparents are going back to work bagging groceries because some CEO got a golden parachute after they wiped out the pensions. This is not okay.

I believe—we believe—that no one in America who works full-time should ever want for the basics and should be able to support their family because of that work. That's why I am part of a new campaign called, "Half in Ten." It's a campaign with many partners and one shared goal: to cut the poverty rate in half over the next ten years....and then end it in 30 years.

There are practical steps that can be taken. We can make sure that a waitress earns enough by raising the minimum wage so that it's a livable wage. We can give her a tax break by expanding the Earned Income Tax and Child Tax Credits. We can ensure

that parents all across this country don't have to choose between the job they need and the heartache of leaving their child in substandard care by guaranteeing access to quality child care. And when hardship hits when a job is lost, we should expand eligibility for Unemployment Insurance so families don't slip deeper into trouble.

The proposals are proven and effective measures. They could be enacted tomorrow if Congress and the president chose to, and for a fraction of the cost of George Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy. This kind of leadership might not happen this year, but we can hope for the future when Barack Obama is our next president. Yes we can hope for the future.

But the common thread running through these proposals is work. In America, it's supposed to be enough. Most of the people I've met don't need an economist to tell them that hard work isn't paying these days. You see it in their faces: the pride that comes from work and that panic about what tomorrow might bring.

I saw it in a mother in Kansas City who bundled her kids up at night with coats and hats because there was no heat and said to her children, "Don't tell the people at school or they'll take you away." I saw it in the great man I met in Virginia who went fifty years without speaking because he had no health insurance to correct a simple problem. He was so grateful and humble when someone fixed it for free and he could tell his story.

We don't want to look away from them anymore. We don't want to accept their daily struggles. We want to embrace their coming triumphs and make sure that work pays again in this country.

That is what you carry with you from this day on.

You are the leaders of this new battle. You are the people who are going to make sure that opportunity exists in this country whether we've got a friend in the White House like Barack Obama or someone we'd like to send back to Texas.

And when people look back at this time—at these very human and challenging moments for our families—they will say here is where the next wave of workers' right began.

When in the course of our human events they changed lives. They restored honor and dignity to those who work every day. And they made sure that economic justice arrived on time.

This is what is possible. This is what you can do in the battle to come. For the will of one can change the world, and the might of millions can lift up humankind. Each one of us must lend our voice to this great call for change and justice. Soon after, our chorus will stir the souls of millions to seek out the injustices that surround us. And we will silence it with our work, with our grace, and with these words we sing in unison—it will be done.

Brothers and sisters, congratulations. Now let's get to work