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Vice President at AFL-CIO Executive Committee

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

February 23, 1997

FAX TO STEVE KELMAN

HERE IS THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE VICE PRESIDENT'S PRESS CONFERENCE

Kathy Wallman

News Conference with Vice President Al Gore
AFL-CIO Executive Council Meeting
February 18, 1997

Chris Woods:

I'm with the Organizing Department at the AFL-CIO and I just wanted to take the opportunity to introduce a group of workers to our Vice President who might recognize their stories in attempting to organize their workplaces and what they have gone through. To my right is Julia Lopez, who works with ServiceMaster and is a janitor at the University of Southern California. Next is Cathy Sharp, a registered nurse at Sharp Memorial Hospital in San Diego. And next to Cathy is John Robledo who is a truck driver with Overnight Express here in Los Angeles. To my left is Jane Turney who works as a waitress in the Santa Fe Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. Next to Jane is Grant Lindsay, a young organizer who came into the labor movement with Union Summer and is now working with the United Farm Workers Union. Next to Grant is Elisa Lopez who is no longer working but worked as a telemarketer for Sprint/La Conexion and is now displaced as a result of that facility being shut down during their organizing campaign. And next to Elisa is Mike Boudreaux, who works for Avondale Shipyards, a major employer in New Orleans and supplier that produces navy vessels for the U.S. Government.

John Sweeney:

Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. I'm happy to join these organizers whom you have just met. Vice President Gore, as you've heard, has met with them and has been the guest at today's Executive Council meeting, as he has been for the past four years. Al Gore understands as we do that working families are hurting as never before and that income inequality is hurting us. His visit to this meeting underscores his commitment to improve in the lives of working men and women. Al Gore grew up learning the values of American unions from his father who was Secretary of Labor in Tennessee and who worked hard to improve the lives of working families, and from a mother who taught him that public service is a noble calling. He has proven time and again as a Congressman, as a United States Senator, and now as Vice President, that he is a leader that working families can count on. From helping stop legislation aimed at destroying workplace health and safety and environmental protections, to backing the executive order against permanent replacement of striking workers, he has stood tall for working families. We're especially fortunate to have a such a friend in the White House, one who has joined us at our winter meetings for the past four years. The Vice President of the United States, Al Gore.

Vice President Gore: Thank you very much. I appreciate your introduction. Before I give my opening statement, I want to follow up on what Chris Woods said when she introduced these men and women who are standing on either side of the podium here. I did spend an hour listening to their individual stories, and I would encourage those of you who are here today as journalists, if you have the time, just pick out a couple of them and talk with them. The stories are ones that are not generally known in our country, and yet their stories are all too illustrative of a problem that has been growing in the United States for the last 16 years or so, that stems from an attitude on the part of some that convinces them that they're justified in busting union organizing activities by whatever means they can in completely unjust and unfair ways that violate the dignity of these men and women as human beings, violate the justice that everyone is due in our country. And it really has to stop. They speak for themselves much more eloquently than I can speak for them, so I do seriously invite you to ... where is Chris? Are you going to be available afterwards in case anyone does want to talk to them?

Chris Woods: Yes.

Vice President Gore: The Executive Council and I have just concluded a warm and productive meeting. I thank the Council for the energetic role that the labor movement played in the 1996 elections. In November, one in four voters came from a union household. There's been a lot of talk about the gender gap by those who analyzed the last election. There hasn't been as much talk about the union/non-union gap, but if you look at the numbers, it was extremely significant. That is a powerful, powerful voice. And it's a voice that is growing stronger as we watch the success of John Sweeney's recruiting efforts. I also congratulated the Council on beating back the most anti-union effort that we've seen in recent memory during the last session of Congress. The hard work by the labor movement produced real accomplishments for working men and women. The higher minimum wage, affordable health insurance, strengthened environmental protection, pension reform, and a new commitment to education and job training. We also talked about some of the issues that are raised by the stories these men and women told me before I met with the Council. The right to organize is a fundamental right in America. But it is a right that too often is violated. And I told the Council that this must change. And I told the Council that this White House will take action to give the right to organize new teeth. The President and I stand on the side of working men and women who want to exercise their right to organize. So we're going to send a message to companies that want to do business with the federal

government: How you treat your employees and how you treat unions counts with us. If you want to do business with the federal government, you better get your house in order and clean up your act. Because today we're going to change the rules on federal contracting; that part of having the kind of integrity and business ethics and performance capability that we expect of a federal contractor, is having a satisfactory record of labor relations and employment practices and policies. That means following the law. If you want to do business with the federal government, you had better maintain a safe workplace and respect civil, human, and yes, union rights. That will be taken into account in decisions on federal contracting. Secondly, and believe it or not, the old practice has been that federal contractors can get reimbursed for money that they spend trying to persuade employees not to join unions. If they are taken to court with allegations of unfair labor practices, they have been able to use taxpayer money in order to pay the lawyers that fight against men and women like these who are simply trying to exercise their legitimate rights to organize. Today we're going to try to start changing those rules because they are just plain wrong. The larger principle is clear. The right to organize and the right to strike are fundamental rights and nobody's tax dollars should be spent undermining those rights. I also gave the Council the Administration's commitment on comp time and flex time, and proposed measures to silence labor's voice in the political process, and I reiterated President Clinton's pledges to veto any bills that gut worker protections, any measures that permit sham unions, or any measures that repeal Davis-Bacon or the Service Contract Act. Also, I told the Council that over the next year, President Clinton and I are going to spend considerable time in talking to workers across America about their experiences on the job and their experiences in trying to organize. If employees work hard and play by the rules, they ought to be able to share in the prosperity of the country. And unions are a crucial part of this country. They're critical to helping reverse the trend toward inequality and they are essential to making sure that every worker has a chance to lead a decent life. The statistics show, incidentally, and some of you are familiar with this, that working men and women who are in unions earn more, get better benefits, can be more productive and are safer on the job than workers who are not unionized. Unions matter. Perhaps more than at any time in our history. You could say the state of our union depends in part on the strength of our unions. In closing, let me say it was a warm, very good, and very productive meeting, and I enjoyed it and look forward to any questions that you might have either for me or for John Sweeney.

Reporter: (Question about American Airlines)

John Sweeney: From the beginning of the American Airlines negotiations we emphasized the importance of the right of workers to collectively bargain and we had placed great emphasis on the fact that the union was permitted to try in every way to achieve a successful agreement and now that we are in the process that we're in, we're urging the Administration to put as much pressure on the parties to negotiate an agreement. The pilots have made concessions in the past. The economy of American Airlines has been very good. It's about time that American Airlines shared some of those profits with the pilots.

Vice President Gore: I think that question was really mostly answered by what John said. I would only add that from the beginning of this episode we have consulted very closely and consulted constantly with organized labor.

Reporter: (Question about worker rights)

Vice President Gore: Yes, indeed, we did talk about that. And, you know we had success in Singapore at the negotiations before the WTO and adding provisions to protect workers rights in trade agreements in recognition of exactly the phenomena that you mentioned in your question and that John spoke about in Davos. The day before yesterday, along with two members of the Council, Bill Lucy and Morty Bahr, I had the opportunity to meet the top labor union leadership throughout the nation of South Africa and they raised this very question and expressed gratitude to President Clinton for the leadership he provided in securing that victory that I just mentioned in Singapore adding that provision to the WTO. But, of course, that struggle is in its beginning stages. We're in a period now where the best companies have begun to recognize long since that productivity and profitability are enhanced by a respectful relationship with their employees. One that recognizes that their employees longevity is a corporate asset, that the cumulative experience and learning that comes in the right kind of relationship with their employees can be of incalculable value in global competition. But we're also in a time where some people as always try to cut corners and do so at the expense of their employees and we should recognize this challenge by continuing the kind of effort that President Clinton made in adding this new provision to the WTO.

Reporter: (Question on NAFTA)

Vice President Gore: Well, on the first part of your question, I think that the economic downturn in Mexico that followed the devaluation with the peso soon after NAFTA went into effect, for reasons that most agree had nothing to do with NAFTA, but really had to do with policies in Mexico that artificially propped up the peso for a long period of time. I think that sharp downturn had some impact on Mexico's economy that shouldn't be mixed up with the impact that NAFTA had. My own view is that when you take that into account and separate out those effects that the impact of NAFTA has been quite positive both in Mexico and in the United States and Canada. The labor and environmental protections included as part of NAFTA should certainly be included as part of any effort to enter into a NAFTA lock agreement with Chile or any other country. The precise form that it takes of course will have to be worked out over time. But assuming that the labor and environmental protections are a part of any fast track agreement then I certainly believe that would be very definitely in the best interest of the United States.

Reporter: (Question on global climate)

Vice President Gore: Well, we have been in consultation with members of the Executive Council on the wording of that measure and those discussions have been going quite well. Of course, we believe that the problem with climate change is definitely one we have to confront in an urgent and responsible way. And negotiations would begin in December in Kyoto to shape an agreement that can enable us to do that. We will remain in close consultation with members of this Executive Council and others who have a stake in this issue, and that is practically everybody, before that negotiation session begins in Kyoto. But the final language in their resolution remains to be worked out.

Reporter: (Question on anti-trust laws)

Vice President Gore: Yes, they are being enforced. But I am constrained by our Administration's policy of not commenting on particular buy-outs or mergers that might or might not be challenged by those laws. But the short answer to your question is our policy is to vigorously enforce the anti-trust laws.

Reporter: (Question on corporate mergers)

Vice President Gore: Well, I think you're seeing a trend, not only in our country, but in many countries around the world, toward a reorganization of the corporate community with the new pressures of world competition, the forces that are unleashed by the introduction of new technologies. I won't belabor the list of factors that go into this but this has been a trend that has been going on for such time. Where such mergers or consolidation violate the anti-trust laws, then certainly the Justice Department will proceed.

Reporter: (Question on fundraising)

Vice President Gore: Well, on the last part of your question, as the President said, that investigation ought to proceed. The only thing we know about that, is what was in your newspaper and then in other news accounts. And if that were true, of course, then that would be very serious, if any foreign government tried to put money into the campaigns organized by either political party here, but the only answer to that is that the investigation ought to proceed. On your first question, the document you refer to pointed out that my staff was given a caution by the National Security Council about the balance between Taiwan and China. And that foreign policy caution was heard and responded to. And the National Security team made changes to make sure that there would be no pro-Taiwan symbols or statements or whatever. Now, your question is given that caution on that factor, shouldn't that have caused a reevaluation of the whole thing? Well maybe so. I've already said that it was a mistake, and I take responsibility for my attendance there because the sponsor of the event was a group that required as a condition of membership, a prior donation. So it was financed related. The fact that I did not know that the fundraiser is obscured by the fact that it was sponsored by this group, but that group was far from the only group in attendance there. There were community leaders, there were Republicans there and there was no mention of contributions, or thank you for your contributions, or politics, but it was a mistake to do it. And I've acknowledged that it was a mistake, and I've learned from it and have taken steps to make sure that the kind of disconnect that was obvious from those memos never takes place again.

Reporter: (Question on pushing pro-labor legislation in Congress)

Vice President Gore: Well, when you say "shove it through Congress regardless of the Republican majority," let me hear more about your strategy to accomplish that. I know that John and I would be all ears.

John Sweeney: We need all the help we can get.

Vice President Gore: Well, fair enough, fair enough. If we see an opportunity to do that by turning the spotlight on the Congress in a way that peels off Republican votes as we did on the minimum wage provision. We will certainly do that. But that will have to be analyzed carefully on a case-by-case basis because you know of course, if you just go in, as you say, come hell or high water, and don't look carefully at the dangers of opening up some important labor protection and having the Congress do something that is the exact opposite of something that you hope will occur, you're not being a responsible steward, so we'll look for such chances. I'll give you an example of one. The Republican leadership in the Congress is on record in opposition to expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act. President Clinton has proposed expanding it -- to take care of routine doctors appointments and PTA meetings. I believe that given the right circumstances, turning the spotlight on that vote might well result in enough Republicans being peeled off to join the Democrats to pass that measure. So we'll look at that on a case by case basis. We're certainly eager to do it.

Reporter: What role do you think the movies play in teen smoking?

Vice President Gore: I'm going to try to avoid that question. The question was, for those of you who didn't hear it, is "what role do I think movies play in teen smoking?" You can probably guess what my feelings are on that. The only reason why I am going to try to refrain from answering that right now is that I have a private discussion scheduled with some folks in the industry and I would really prefer to have that discussion on an off-the-record basis, in an environment that would maximize the ability for a free give-and-take without giving the appearance here of coming here the night before and just kind of beating him on the head with a club. I just don't think that's the way to proceed on that. Because the signals I have gotten from the industry is that there is a very strong awareness of this issue and a very strong inclination by some leaders within the industry to really do something about it. I would just prefer not to say any more about that out of respect for the conversation that I hope to have. Because you see, they can always, no, never mind. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

Vice President Gore: Now, don't forget. Don't run off and not interview these folks.