

**South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District of the
International Longshoremen Association Conference**

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"Labor, Unity and Service"

It is a special honor to be invited to speak to this distinguished gathering of the International Longshoreman Association (ILA). For this gathering to be held in my hometown of Savannah, Georgia makes it an even more special occasion.

Savannah State University, one of our local colleges, has a slogan that I think is true for this entire city and for those of us who grew up on these streets and in the schools and churches of this special city. The slogan says, "You can go anywhere from here." This city, my family and so many people propelled me to great heights because of the love, prayers, and support they provided. We were challenged in this city by our teachers, coaches and loved ones to go out in the world and prove that we were special people and to defy the labels and limitations that were placed on our lives. I am thankful that it worked for me and so many others who left here and went away to pursue our dreams.

But that slogan of going anywhere from here does not only apply to those who left, but also to those who remained in the Savannah. The person who invited me to be your keynote speaker is also an example of this slogan. Willie Seymour, a graduate of Beach High School, rose from meager existence, just as I did, to become President of one of the most powerful unions in this city, and now serves as Vice President of the South Atlantic and Gulf Coast District for ILA. Willie and I attended the same church, played on the same basketball team, though I was much better than him. He has been one of my greatest supporters through life, and he loves this city, his union and his work in a manner that inspires me and I publicly thank him for his dedication and perseverance.

I want to speak to you today about "Labor, Unity and Service." In this society, it is very easy to pay tribute to those who own capital, run businesses, possess great wealth and sit at the top of large profitable companies. They are the stars, the ones

whom society often envies; the ones that movies are made about and books are written in their honor.

But there is another unwritten story that is not often told, of those who are the true engines behind the economic growth in this country and around the world. There is another group of economic heroes who rarely get their names in light. These are the unsung heroes and heroines of America's march towards economic prosperity and innovation. This quiet and often forgotten story is about those who labor daily on docks and seaports across this nation and keep the flow of commerce at its peak. Therefore I come today to honor you, the forgotten leaders and heroes in the American economic story. Through your work, labor and unity, you have transformed this country.

This is your story; the story of common men and women who work with their hands, think with their heads and care with their hearts so that progress will occur in this country each day. Because of your consistent labor and professionalism, goods from around the world make it into the homes of people around the world. Our ports are the gateways to productivity, but you're the gateways to the ports. If your hands, heads and hearts are not present each day, then our port becomes waterways with no economic meaning. You give life to cities that would virtually die without the work you do. For that this country is greatly indebted to you.

Labor too often gets a bad rap in this country. You are often portrayed as those who make demands, go on strike and take unreasonable positions only for your own gain. But that is a biased and untrue picture of the people who sit before me. As Abraham Lincoln once stated, "If any man tells you he loves America, yet hates labor, he is a liar. If any man tells you he trust America, yet fears labor, he is a fool,"

When I was a young boy in this town, the job of a longshoreman was the job that was envied by workers, the unemployed, and men trying to gain to a better place in life. Men working on the Savannah docks were able to earn a wage that allowed them to build and buy homes, send their children to college, and thus create stable and secure families and communities. On your backs, a middle class, and especially a black middle class, was created in port towns throughout the U.S. We must celebrate that part of American history and development.

I have always had a deep respect for those who work hard to earn a living to support their families. My father was a laborer with the Central of Georgia Railroad. I saw him at the end of a hard day, having toiled in the sun, feet and hand sore, clothes dirty, but he possessed a heart filled with pride, respect and meaning. He was proud that his labor allowed him to care for his family, and I benefited greatly from his sacrifices. The tradition that he and so many others created is what you have

inherited and must pass on to future generations. But the question I will address shortly is whether there will be a future generation for you to pass on this sacred tradition.

What you must never forget, is that your strength, like all labor movements and organizations is based on a spirit of unity. Labor unions by their nature exist only because of a united cause, and the fact that individual laborers have realized that they are more powerful as a collective body than they are as an individual. Those with capital and wealth have the luxury of operating as individuals, but those whose self-worth and labor can be easily marginalized or dismissed, gain their power from the collective spirit of unity. Your oneness is the power that can transform your lives, the lives of your families and these port cities. As Benjamin Franklin once stated, "We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Yet I want to challenge this union to rise to an even greater height in your quest for unity, and to transform that unity into greater service of your communities. Labor unions have a tradition of not only being concerned about their interests, but about the interests of those around them. Thus I applaud the various charitable causes you support. I especially applaud the local union's effort to provide scholarships to deserving students each year. As President of a University, I know what difference this makes in a student's life.

Yet there is a greater crisis facing this nation, and the communities you come from that require you to become a different type of longshoremen union. There was a time when young men of color had male role models all around them. They were in our schools, in the community, in the churches we attended and in our homes. I was blessed to not only have role models on television to emulate, but I had so many men in my life to look up to. Even when I didn't fully understand how they were impacting my life, I later on realized that my father, teachers, coaches and deacons at my church had a tremendous impact on the type of man I have become today.

But you and I live during a time where too many boys and young men are falling through the cracks of this society. Many are on the streets of the cities wherein we work creating havoc for others and for themselves. Many are in school, but school is not in them. The streets have become their primary role models and we know the values that are taught on the street. Violence, gangs and drug use among our youth are destroying the very communities we come from and still love.

This problem has become so great that even President Obama has recognized it and created a program to combat this problem. He calls it "My Brother's Keeper." But the real answers will not come from the White House; they will come from you

and me. The real answers will be born out of your unity and your willingness to tackle this problem and make it part of the mission of this union.

Where are the young men who will replace you and walk in your footsteps? You may know a few in your immediate family or circle, but there are thousands in the streets who need a second chance; who need someone like you to stand with them and help turn their lives around. Imagine a union that has as its mission the saving of lives of young men around this country. Imagine the impact you could have if each one of you, through an organized effort, agreed to become a mentor to just one of these young boys. Imagine how your unity and service could change one of their lives, and could ultimately save this country. If the violence, deaths and senseless destruction continues then we will do more than lose a generation, we will lose sight of the precious values that have held our families and communities together.

You may know the origin of the name you proudly wear, but in case you don't, I want to share it with you because it has a deeper relevance today. In colonial times in cities like Savannah, ships laden with goods only came to ports infrequently. When they did, those on board, would yell to those on land, "We need men along shore" to help unload the ship. "Men along shore" eventually became known as "longshoremen." Instead of it being a voluntary job done sporadically, it became a full time job that was needed daily.

Now today, we need "men along the shores" of the lives of these young boys who are throwing away their lives and our future. They have talents and potential that need to be unloaded, but they don't know they even have them. Even if they know, they don't know how to use them properly. So we need a modern clarion call to "men along shore" who will volunteer again to save lives and save our future. Will you be one of them?

It is not an accident that some unions call themselves a brotherhood. It is not just because it was made up of men at those times, but because it symbolized a special connection to each other. But this brotherhood concept cannot be limited to just your members. You are your brother's keeper no matter whether they are part of your union or not. You are brothers to those who are in need; to those who have lost their way and don't know it. You are brother to those who have no brother, or father or man in their lives.

Someone touched your life and made a difference. Someone opened the door so that you could walk into this union and that change your life. Now you must open the door to your heart and help some young man change his life. Most scholars who write about this problem imagine that it will be solved by doctors, lawyers and

professors in institutions of higher learning. But I believe that the answer lies with you; with the men in this room. You know what it means to be a man. You work hard to sustain your family and a way of life. You know what it takes to make sacrifices for the good of others and you know what it means to work as a team. These are the values that these boys and young men must be taught by real men.

You can redefine for them the true meaning of a gang. You work in gangs to achieve a job each day. Your gangs, with bosses, unload ships with vast cargoes that make a major difference in the lives of people. You can teach them to create gangs that work to unload the despair in their lives and load their lives with hope, potential and prosperity.

At the University of the Virgin Islands we have started a program called "Man Up" where we bring all high school and junior high school males to our campus for a full day of activities in order to inspire them to stay on the educational path and avoid the traps that exist all around them.

We have a summer program called Junior University for 7th grade males who are failing in school. We send them through an intensive 5-week program to rebuild their academic skills so that they can move on to the 8th grade and see college as something obtainable in their lives. We have some of our college male students meet with them on Saturdays throughout the year to reinforce those skills and values. I mentor two boys each week and they come to my office and home so that they are being nurtured, supported and accountable for their lives and choices. I don't know if any of these activities will solve the complete problem, but I know it is worth the effort. I know that it is better to try to solve the problem than to just consistently complain about the problem.

So if you embrace this challenge I cannot guarantee you that you will solve the problem completely. But I guarantee you that you can make a difference in somebody's life. I also guarantee you that you can make a difference in your own life by giving more of yourself to those in need. If you won't do it for the boys, do it for your own image. Let America know what the ILA really stands for in this country.

In conclusion, I know you face many difficulties in the future. The road you travel as a union in a society that has become anti-union is not always easy. There are internal battles and agendas, there are struggles with management and each of you have your individual lives and families you must care for and be accountable to. But in those moments when you have doubts and feel that you can't go on or do any more for someone else, I ask that you keep the following biblical passage in front of you.

“We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; [10](17) for our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;” 2 Corinthians 4:8-9,17

Your challenges my brothers and sisters are only temporary, but your victories in life are eternal. Your suffering passes, but your healing last forever. Your individual work is temporary and forever changing, but this union is permanent and transformative. So the question is not whether this union will be here in the future, the question is what type of union will you be? If you hold true to an authentic spirit of unity, and if you embrace the power of service to others and take on this challenge that I have laid before you, then the International Longshoremen’s Association will become the envy of unions throughout this country and around the world.

I believe that this is your calling and I know it can become your destiny. I wish you God’s speed in all of your journeys.