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Take Back America Conference

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Plenary Session: An Economy that Works for Working People

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Let me just say, the United Steelworkers of America brought more than 60 of our political activists and they're standing and sitting primarily over there to my left. That's only my physical left, not my ideological left, I've still got to move them a bit. We represent more than 1.2 million active and retired Steelworkers. What I want to tell you right now, what I am, what the Steelworkers are and what we're not. I'm the son of a union organizer and a left wing miner. I'm an agitator. And like Jim Hightower says, "the job of an agitator in a washing machine is to get the dirt out." And that's what we're going to do.

The Steelworkers Union is not middle of the road, move to the center, so-called moderate, "me, too," hard hat Republicans. We're not centrists, we're not free traders, we're not corporate apologists, and we're not new Democrats. Rather like all of you, like all of you, and millions of Steelworkers, industrial workers, public sector workers, civil rights activists, anti-poverty activists, social justice activists, environmental activists, student activists, and so many more, we represent the values of fairness, of equity, of social justice, of decent jobs, of high quality universal health care, clean air, clean water. We represent equality of opportunity. We represent a fair trade policy. We represent economic and social justice for everyone. Sisters and brothers, all too often in the recent past, we have been the disunited, almost silent majority. But I believe from the bottom of my heart that after this week we will make it loud and we will make it clear that we are the progressive majority that will take back America!

Brothers and sisters, we are the heart and soul, we are the true values of America. We are the heart and soul, and in fact, we are the blood that runs through the veins of democracy. And today, tomorrow, and everyday thereafter, let us say loud, clear and often, no one will make it to the White House in 2004 unless they come through us! Unless they come through us! Not only are we the heart and soul, but we are the foot soldiers of the Democratic party. And whomever will carry our banner, whomever will carry our torch, must understand that the disunited, formally silent majority is now united and we understand that we are the progressive majority and they'll come through us if they want to help us take back America.

I really wanted to get that off my chest. Now let me ask you some questions, has anyone seen any direct benefit of deregulation? [audience shouts, No!] Is it easier and

better to have your energy deregulated? [No!] Does the transportation industry, the trucking industry serve the interests of workers and serve the interests of community better now that it's deregulated? Does the aerospace industry, does the financial community? Remember back to the deregulation of the Savings & Loans? The Bushies did quite well, by the way. The deregulation of the financial industry we've now seen. The Wall Street crowd and the corporate elite behave like kids that were locked in a candy store with their parents gone away and say, "Don't put too much in your pocket, I won't be back for two hours." Industrial workers, sisters and brothers, in the last 2 1/2 years or less, lost 2.3 million jobs. Let me just ask you to go – not now but later – to the program and you'll see an ad prepared, the work was done by the AFL-CIO, but like all good trade unionists, we plagiarized it It's in the book. Every state in the union except Alaska has lost jobs. 2.3 million jobs. That's almost 600 jobs an hour since Bush became President. That's almost 150 jobs if I speak for 15 minutes.

Let me ask you, do you know an industry other than the pharmaceutical industry that's doing well? I can tell you, is the steel industry doing well? [No!] Is the auto industry doing well? [No!] Is the aerospace industry doing well? Is the petrochemical industry doing well? Is the pulp and paper industry doing well? Is the electronics industry doing well? Is the transportation industry doing well? None of them are doing well, except the military and the pharmaceuticals. Let me give you a few quick facts. In the first two years of the Bush Presidency, 400 firms of \$100 million capitalization or more filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy. That's not the ones below \$100 million, that's just the ones above. Thirty-five of those were steel companies. Of those 35 steel companies, 250,000 workers had their pension plans seized by the PBGC, most of them seized before they could exercise their shut down benefits because the PBGC didn't think we should get those "rich" pensions.

Close to 200,000 steel workers lost their retiree health care. Some of them 70, 80, 90 years old. No worker, no citizen, should have to depend on the financial help of his employer so that he can have health care or she can have health care in the dying days of their life. For eleven straight years we've had national trade deficits. The balance of account deficits was over \$500 billion. Does anyone know what a billion dollars is? Does anyone know what the number "a billion" is? I don't think you really know! I don't really know. But I read somewhere what it is. Think about this very carefully. A billion seconds ago, a billion seconds ago it was 1959. A billion minutes ago, Christ was alive. And a billion hours ago, dinosaurs walked the earth, there's still a few of them walking in Washington. But dinosaurs walked the earth. Now when I tell you that we have a close to 500 billion dollar trade deficit, think about that in terms of dinosaurs and minutes. Think about that in the terms of jobs. If we eliminated the trade deficit, and simply had a neutral balance of trade, if the trade did what they said it would do, we'd have 5 percent more GDP. And we'd now have Hubert Humphrey's dream of full employment.

We are concerned about this in the steel worker's union. So we asked ourselves, for what purpose is an economy? If an economy is to serve the Gucci shoed, café latte drinking, run to the nearest tax dodge haven, corporate elite already filthy rich who want to be more rich, it's doing very well. But if it's working for the people that Barbara

[Ehrenreich] just talked about, and steel workers, and industrial workers, and public sector workers, it's failing miserably.

So we went out to see what people thought in nine battleground states. We went out and did a poll and we asked key questions. We're going to release that poll today at 1:45 p.m. with Bob Borosage, John Sweeney, Carl Pope, and others. And what the poll said, very quickly, 75 percent of the voters surveyed agreed that creating new manufacturing jobs should be the President's, or the next President's top domestic priority. By a margin of nearly 3 to 1, 68 percent to 23 percent, voters would be more likely to support, listen to this very carefully, voters would be more likely to support a candidate who's top priority was creating new manufacturing jobs over one who's top priority was additional tax cuts to Americans. Among Democrats and Independents, this preference is almost overwhelming- 84 percent and 68 percent respectively, now even Republicans supported that idea, 51 percent to 39 percent. Respondents expressed sweeping dissatisfaction with the nation's trade policy. Fully 90 percent favor enforcing fair trade agreements that would require countries like China to respect environmental standards, human rights, and worker's rights. More than two-thirds of this majority, 66 percent would favor taking such actions which have long been demanded by our union.

Let me make one thing perfectly clear, the Steelworkers Union, when we argue about free trade versus fair trade; when we argue about the kinds of things we argue about, about manufacturing jobs, we're not against workers in China, or in Mexico, or in Brazil, or in Bulgaria, or in Vietnam, or in Bangladesh. But we're against the system that exploits all of us, them and us, and plays us against each other.

I'm running out of time, but let me just say to you, as so many speakers have said already, that it's not sufficient to just come here today and last night. I want to say, and I think you would agree with me, I have never been more inspired, more energized, and more moved than I was by Bill Moyer's great presentation. If we move to involve people, if we move to reach our agenda, if all of us here go back and do as we've been asked to do and get so many more people involved in the process, we're going to run more blood through the veins of democracy and we'll win. Let me tell you what the Steelworkers Union will do. We have more than 20,000 rapid response coordinators in our more than 7,000 locals. We're going to mobilize them to be more politically active, not two weeks before the election, but two days after we get home from this conference! I've committed to David Wellstone and Jeff Blodgett that we're going to put 200 more people this fall through Wellstone Action to train them to be grassroots rank and file activists. We will mobilize, we will politicize. We need to be able to tell our members who's voting for them and who's going against them. We need to be able to tell them who's talking nice and who's putting a knife in their back. We will politicize, we will energize, we will organize and with you, and with us, we will win. Our members belong to your organizations. We're proud to belong to your organizations, we will be there with you and for you. And when the opportunity arises, as it will surely do someday, for you to become associate members of the United Steelworkers of America or any AFL-CIO union, join with us and together we will change the world! Thank you.