Remarks of  
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Thank you, Meghan. Your remarks take me back to my roots at AFSCME and that’s exactly what I want to talk to all of you about this afternoon.

Sisters and Brothers, it’s a very special kind of pleasure being with you today. I know that sitting in this audience is a future President of AFSCME. Do you believe me?

Believe it.

Fifty years ago, who would have guessed that a kid from a North Philadelphia row house, whose father got up every morning before sunrise to climb behind the wheel of a trash truck, would become International President of the greatest union in this country?

Not me. I wouldn’t have guessed it. The labor movement is a big part of who I am now. But let me tell you, it wasn’t always that way. Just because my father Bill McEntee was totally immersed in the movement, didn’t mean I would be.

Like so many of his generation, my dad made a living through long hours of hard work. And because of that work, he was able to support and raise a family.

But he did more than perform his job. He became involved big time with the labor movement. In fact, when I was growing up, it was as if this person named Labor lived at our house. Labor was at our kitchen table. Labor was on the phone. Labor was what kept my father so busy outside his job and family.

His job was our bread and butter. But the labor movement was his calling. And, perhaps most of all, it was his passion.

And while I didn’t start out thinking I would follow in my father’s footsteps, he showed me by example how dedication and fighting for the rights of workers were not only important, but essential to building America and her middle class. And that it mattered.

In a way, my family’s house was built inside the House of Labor. How many of you grew up in a Labor Household – a place where a father, a mother, a grandparent or aunt or uncle were in a union? Raise your hands. And the rest of you got here other ways. But guess what? Your children will be growing up in a labor household. And they may be the future members of AFSCME!

What we accomplish in the House of Labor is our legacy – all of us – to our children, to our grandchildren, to every generation that comes after us.
My legacy is rooted in my story. A good Irish Catholic boy, I went to the Parish school. Then I was the first in my family to go to college. And after I was discharged from the Army – where I was Private McEntee – I needed a job. At that point, I had a wife and children to support . . . so I went to work for the city of Philadelphia as a traffic engineer.

During that first job, I became a union member and then a steward. Eventually, after Jerry Wurf became International President of AFSCME in 1964, I became an organizer and made – catch this – $4,000 a year! Not much, but it was a job. One that had a very broad but clear assignment: organize, organize, organize.

When I first started, I found out about a guy in Lancaster. His name was John Cypress and he was a carpenter. I knocked on his row house door and after an hour and a half, I got the picture. He wanted to bring a union into the school system there – and I wanted to help him make that happen.

Now, the local school board met once a month and at the end of each meeting they’d ask, “Is there any new business?”

Every month, I would walk up and give my speech – workers are entitled to respect, justice, a voice at the workplace. Hell, collective bargaining wasn’t even on the table yet.

And every month it was voted down.

Now, this went on for a long time. Eventually, the newspapers got interested in the young, persistent son of a B from Philly who wouldn’t shut up about organizing the Lancaster school system.

Finally, the Board agreed to recognize a union. They called the workers in, said they’d negotiate a contract. Only one thing, that fella who’d been going up to the mike, month after month after month was not allowed on the bargaining team, was not allowed in the building at all!

Yep, I had to sit outside in a beach chair while the negotiating team was inside. I got the best tan of my life that summer. And even though they’d come outside to get my advice from time to time, there was something important we all learned, those school workers and me. We learned that they were the ones negotiating their contract – not me. And in the end, it was a good contract.

Ownership is so important. Those of us who have been around the block a few times, we can advise, we can mentor, but you are the union. Each of you in this room. You are the union.

Of course, I was living in a different world than the one you live in now. We had less pressure on our time. We did our jobs and came home. We didn’t have all the advanced
electronics, instant messaging, twitter, CDs, DVDs, flat screen TVs – with virtual reality games competing for our time. You don’t even have to leave your house to go bowling anymore!

But a few years – a few decades ago – my life took a turn. It was 1969. A man had landed on the moon. The Miracle New York Mets had won the World Series. And a good-looking young fella from Pennsylvania named Joe Willie Namath had defied overwhelming odds and led the underdog New York Jets to a Super Bowl upset.

In 1969, I had a wife and four young, beautiful daughters. Some of you may be able to relate to this. Like my dad before me, at first all I focused on was putting food on the table and keeping a roof over our heads.

But things changed for me. There was a moment of truth when I knew that unions and union building were MY calling, just as they had been my dad’s.

There was a definite line in the sand for me. On one side stood the husband, the father who went to work each day, did his job and came home. On the other side was the adrenalin rush – and deep satisfaction – that came from helping to improve people’s lives.

Once I became totally immersed in organizing the state employees in Pennsylvania, that was it for me. I looked out there and saw people just like me who worked hard for a living and took what they could get. Well, working for the state of Pennsylvania at that time meant what they got wasn’t much. They had a lousy patronage system where they could be hired and fired at the whim of the politicians.

But we could change that. We could get job security, decent salaries, benefits, a voice at the table – and respect. With the union.

I was in my twenties then. Already settled into my life. But then I found myself in what was at the time the biggest organizing drive in this country. There was this small group of 400 members and for 15 years, no one serviced them. They had a union card and they paid their dues. That was it. Can you imagine that? For 15 years that’s all it meant to be a member of the union! We were about to shake up their world and change all that.

I remember showing Bernie Martin, one of the other guys on the Pennsylvania Organizing Committee with me, a map of the state. I had stuck pins all over it to mark each highway, hospital, park site, university and prison. This was our map to victory. I thought it would take five years. Turns out, it only took two and a half.

First, the state passed its collective bargaining law in early 1970 and organizing began immediately. Then in March of 1971, AFSCME won the right to represent 17,000 state employees. Before we knew it, we represented 85,000 members.
Who wouldn't get an adrenalin rush going from representing 400 to 85,000 state workers in two and a half years! It was wild. It was fun. It was exciting. And I realized, "This is it! This is something I love doing. Something that makes me happy to get up in the morning and go to work." It was more than just a job.

I remember going into state institutions and talking to people, workers, who were being treated like trash. What I saw then still guides me now. What I learned then still guides me now. What I dedicated myself to then – the work of the union – still guides me now.

By organizing into a union, these state workers became powerful. They became strong. They were able to claim a seat at the table. I'd like to ask the Council 13 members who are here today to stand.

I hope that if you haven't felt the rush of excitement and accomplishment I have experienced in the union movement that some day you will. Followed by the realization, "I'm in it for the long haul."

In fact, when I'm asked to look back over my career in labor and pick out what I'm most proud of, I surprise people. As much as I'm honored to be, and love being, this union's International President, it's organizing those unrecognized, unrewarded, unknown state workers in Pennsylvania that gives me the most pride.

Have you had that moment of commitment – and excitement – when you realized the union is your life work?

Where do you envision the movement being in your next 30, 40 or 50 years of activism?

Are you ready to carry the movement forward?

I predict that one day, some of you will be up here encouraging other people 35 and under to work hard and stay connected and committed to AFSCME and labor. They will be the next "Next Wave." And you will be the teachers, the mentors, the role models. I'd love to be able to hear what you'll have to say!

Sisters and Brothers, I hope that something I said today will prompt you to consider your part in building the union. Will make you want to take a more active role.

We have many battles to fight. And we need to be strong. We need you to be there on the front lines making sure that change continues to happen.

It means reforming our health care system so we don't have to keep giving away our health care benefits at the bargaining table any more.

It means passing the Employee Free Choice Act so that employees who want a union can have one without being threatened or harassed. So that workers in places like Resurrection Hospital right here in Chicago will be able to unionize and not be
victimized. There are 15,000 of them and they've been trying to organize since October of 2002. But we won't give up and we won't give in. We need you to help with Resurrection. We need you to help with the many organizing campaigns across this country.

This is America, Sisters and Brothers. This is America. This is where you can catch the golden ring, find something you want to do, work hard at it and rise to the top. I know because I'm living proof this can happen.

Now, some say the union movement is dying. But I look around this room and I know that's bull.

You are the new face of AFSCME. The new face of Labor.

You are living testimony that the doom and gloom predictions about unionism just aren't true.

Because with your help and support, AFSCME is reinventing what it means to be in a union.

You have a lot to deal with in these difficult times. But with this new administration – one that was swept to victory by young people like you – it's going to get better for all of us. Every day.

I believe in you. Each and every one of you. Together we can make change happen.

So I say to you, make a commitment. Jump in and be the “Next Wave.”

Be strong.

Fight like hell and then go back and fight another day.

Have a great conference and thank you for being here.

God bless you, your families and God Bless America.