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Celebrating American Workers on Labor Day

Wanda and Sheila are garment workers from Brooklyn, Ohio. They are back to work after their community fought to keep open the factory where they and 200 fellow workers have manufactured men's suits and clothing for years. The only North American manufacturing plant of a German clothing company was at risk of being another example of a company packing up and shipping jobs overseas.

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But employees from Workers United, elected officials, and management rallied together to save a plant and a community. During a visit to the factory's "First Suit Off the Line" event, I heard from employees about what it felt like to come back to work – and what it meant for their families and community. One of the workers pointed to my jacket, and, with great pride, told me that she sewed the pockets, while her co-workers stitched the sleeves and collars.



Above that pocket sewed, I wear a pin depicting a canary in a birdcage. More than 100 years ago, miners took a canary into the mine to warn them of toxic gases. If the canary died, they knew they had to escape quickly. Miners were forced to provide for their own protection because there were no mine safety laws. There were no trade unions able to advocate for their safety and there was little support from their government. The canary pin symbolizes the progress our nation has made over the past century in protecting the safety, health, and well-being of all workers.

Labor Day is a great American tradition that recognizes the courage of generations of workers and activists who have fought to ensure that hard work translates into a respectable standard of living. That is why we celebrate Labor Day – to honor all those who have spoken out on behalf of American workers' right to honest pay for an honest day's work.

Last year, President Obama and I attended the nation's largest Labor Day picnic, which takes place in Cincinnati and is hosted by the local AFL-CIO. At events like this across the country, workers and their families and friends will gather together regardless of profession – electricians, communications workers, steelworkers, teachers, and truck drivers. Through the picnics and parades and rallies – like the one I attended in Dayton this week – we learn the story of how workers have stood up for American manufacturing, improved workplace safety, promoted innovation, and improved the health and retirement security of all Americans.

In Findlay, steelworkers at a tire factory stood up for American-made products that were being undercut by cheap Chinese goods dumped into our markets. Because of these workers, President Obama enforced trade laws to ensure tire manufacturers in Ohio and across the nation can compete on a level playing field. That kind of advocacy is what Labor Day is about.

Earlier this year in Washington, I met with firefighters from Elyria to Columbus to Toledo to Dayton. For generations, firefighters and other public safety officers have organized in firehouses and union halls to fight for the protective equipment they need to keep all of us safe. The groundwork they laid for all workers is what Labor Day is all about.

And today, workers across Ohio are preparing for the jobs of the 21st century – strengthening Ohio's ability to attract cutting-edge employers through a skilled workforce. Electricians in Rossford and Athens with 20 years of experience are training for new opportunities in emerging industries in wind and solar power. In Toledo and Lordstown, auto workers are building next-generation car engines that are re-energizing our domestic auto industry. In Akron and Dayton, workers are making Ohio a national hub for aerospace manufacturing. Today, Ohio is moving forward in creating jobs and laying the groundwork to revitalize our state's manufacturing industry, with our workers leading the way. That kind of determination is what Labor Day is all about.

Because American workers fought for a decent wage and retirement security, we have a federal minimum wage, pensions, and Social Security. The labor movement has provided working mothers and fathers, teachers, nurses, and police officers with health care and life insurance. Because of their fight, we commemorate this day.

In April 1890, the Ohio General Assembly recognized "Labor Day in Ohio," four years before Congress would declare it a national holiday. This Ohio initiative that became an American tradition honors generations of selfless workers who knew that their backbreaking labor was the backbone of our economy. Today, in America, workers have a right to a living wage. American workers have a right to work in safe conditions. Today, we honor the American workers who have brought our country this far.

Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown



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