



WISPOLITICS.COM

Wisconsin's Premier Political News Service



Obama calls for minimum wage hike at Laborfest, saying America 'deserves a raise'

9/2/2014

MILWAUKEE -- President Barack Obama told a labor rally Monday “America deserves a raise,” calling for an increase in the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour.

“I’m not asking for the moon, I just want a good deal for American workers,” he said.

He urged public and private employers to take action on raising wages on their own. He praised the mayor of Los Angeles for his action to raise minimum wages there and the president of Kentucky State University for giving up \$90,000 of his salary in order to raise the pay of campus workers.

It was a return trip to Milwaukee’s Laborfest for the president, who also spoke here in 2010.

Obama touted the economic gains the country had made since he took office, including 10 million new jobs over the past 53 months. He told the crowd he placed a bet on America’s workers and “that bet is beginning to pay off.”

“By almost every measure, the American economy and American workers are better off than when I took office,” he added. “Every inch of it we have had to fight for.”

“The question now is, are we going to make the right decisions to accelerate this progress?” he asked.

Obama won Wisconsin handily in both 2008 and 2012. But he returned to the state with poll numbers that dipped. A Marquette University Law School poll out last week found 44 percent of registered voters approved of the job Obama is doing, while 48 percent disapprove. His personal approval rating was 50-46.

Republicans jumped on the president’s visit to knock Dem Mary Burke, who’s locked in a tight race with Gov. Scott Walker.

“The truth is that Burke and Obama represent the same failed policies that have produced disastrous results – and just as President Obama has taken our country backward, Mary Burke would take Wisconsin backward,” said Joe Fadness,

executive director of the state GOP.

Still, Obama, wearing a blue chambray shirt rolled at the sleeves and khaki slacks, appeared relaxed and jovial at the event, cracking several jokes, some of them aimed at himself.

He drew applause and laughter when he said, "Every gray hair is worth it," after saying that his reforms regarding health care, education and equal pay have met with "opposition every inch of the way,"

"People say, 'You look OK,' like they're surprised," Obama joked.

Obama said he wanted to give middle-class workers the chance to take an occasional vacation, mentioning the Wisconsin Dells and drawing a strong reaction from the crowd. He then launched into an aside of how he and First Lady Michelle Obama used to enjoy breaks there, staying in the water so long "our fingers were all pruned up."

"There were lot of kids there -- that made me wonder about the water," Obama joked, adding, "That's not in the prepared remarks."

Obama mostly touted his accomplishments since taking office, saying that the country is adding jobs, for the first time is producing more oil and gas than Saudi Arabia or other nations, and that at the same time, the U.S. is producing clean energy via solar and wind power, creating tens of thousands of jobs.

Obama said America's schools are now in a race to the top and that the high school graduation rate is at an all-time high.

The crowd gave Obama the biggest applause, with many people jumping to their feet, when he added, "More Americans are healthy because they have access to affordable health insurance."

Obama's visit also comes just more than two months ahead of the general election. As he complained that GOP opposition has held up his priorities, the crowd booed. Obama countered, "Don't boo, vote. It's easy to boo, vote."

With persistence, Obama said, "We'll break them down."

"That's how I got Michelle to marry me," he added, prompting laughs from the crowd. "I wore her down."

Local labor officials estimated 6,000 attended the president's speech.

After arriving in Milwaukee, the president was greeted by Col. James Locke, commander of the 128th Air Refueling Wing, and several Wisconsin politicians.

That included Walker, Mayor Tom Barrett, Milwaukee County Exec Chris Abele and U.S. Rep. Gwen Moore, D-Milwaukee.

Burke campaigned at Laborfest, but announced ahead of time she would not participate in the president's public event, saying it would not be appropriate because it was an official White House stop.

Republicans knocked that as an excuse for Burke not to appear publicly with Obama. Walker's campaign sought to tie Burke to the president, pointing to a national interview in which she was asked for one issue on which she disagreed with the president. Burke paused before a staffer cut in to redirect the interview.

"Mary Burke isn't fooling anyone by not publicly posing for pictures with the president after she was unable to point to one issue where she disagreed with him," Walker spokeswoman Alleigh Marre said. "It's clear Burke would take our state backward with the same policies that failed Wisconsin and are failing America."

Burke's campaign said she would meet privately with Obama during his stop, and she tweeted, "Great chat w/ @BarackObama in Mke abt WI mfging. Look fwd to seeing him again b4 11/4...esp if its after the @Packers beat da Bears - mb."

Before Obama took the stage, the crowd roared with applause and boos when national AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler blasted Walker's attack on collective bargaining.

"What Scott Walker did was wrong. The fight-back and energy and the grit that you have shown is nothing short of incredible and I want to thank you for that," she said, adding the activism has inspired others around the country.

*By Kay Nolan
For WisPolitics.com*