

Rally for Peace, Justice, and Respect
Niagara Square, Buffalo, NY

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Prepared Remarks

Today, we stand together at a critical crossroads.

After decades of decline, staggering job losses, the collapse of American manufacturing, and a culture of corruption that has squandered generations of opportunity – we must re-bend the arc of our city’s history towards justice, peace, and brotherhood.

On issue after issue, our reality remains starkly unequal, unjust, and unacceptable.

There are too few opportunities for too few people. Over 50 years ago, I was young and struggling to find my way in a city that fell on hard times. I was lucky enough to have been able to learn a trade while I was young, and it gave me the ability to make a life for myself and my family.

But today, our economy is harder and the climb up the proverbial ladder has become more difficult. Young people aren’t getting married because they can’t find good jobs. They aren’t buying houses – because they can’t find good jobs.

Families are struggling – unable to save money, buy cars, and provide more for their kids than was provided to them.

A lack of good paying jobs and economic opportunities are at the heart of our city’s struggle. For too long, our economy has kept us bound by invisible chains that must be broken.

Without good high paying jobs – on which a family can be sustained – we are unable to build strong families, strong neighborhoods, or strong communities. And without hope for a better tomorrow, we find ourselves caught in a vicious cycle of degradation.

But we can reverse this vicious cycle into a virtuous one – by understanding the root causes and fixing what is wrong with the very structure of our economy.

Opportunities are too scarce and our government is too corrupt.

Crime has grown too pervasive and too violent – because it stems from poverty that is too grueling, too segregated, and too entrenched.

Our neighborhoods are mere remnants of their former selves, burdened with a vast housing crisis that few places on the planet have ever confronted.

Our infrastructure has been allowed to deteriorate. Our streets have been allowed to crumble. Our economy has been allowed to collapse. Our business leaders have been allowed to buy our politicians.

And our politicians have been allowed to rest too easy for too long.

Fifty years in the construction trades has taught me something important – that we can rewrite our history – with concrete solutions – starting today.

We can demand an economy that is inclusive and we can reform a business community that has been too closed and too biased for too long. Make no mistake: the construction contractors in this city will never meet diversity goals until they are smacked with hefty fines when they fail to do so.

We can reform our police department and we can take a radical new approach to crime – building a system that thinks beyond punishment to prevention – that seeks to restore, not destroy, our communities.

We can revive our neighborhoods home by home, block by block – not with grandiose development schemes that seek to gentrify and displace – but with hammers and shovels, young families and new dreams.

We can restore our infrastructure by reinventing our streetscapes, elevating our civic aspirations, and electing a caliber of leaders with the fortitude to follow through.

We can shed the vestiges of discrimination and shake off the racism that continues to hold us back – by opening doors, changing hearts, and enlightening minds.

My fellow Buffalonians – here is our city – calling us – beckoning us – demanding something of us that would take more than a lifetime to give.

Together, we can and we will rebuild this city better and stronger – more inclusive and more open – than it has ever been before.

God bless us all.