

Obama: Republicans Must Approve Jobs Program

Darlene Superville, Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — President Barack Obama used a boisterous Labor Day rally on Monday to put congressional Republicans on the spot, challenging them to place the country's interests above all else and vote to create jobs and put the economy back on a path toward growth. "Show us what you've got," he said.

In a partial preview of the jobs speech he's delivering to Congress Thursday night, Obama said roads and bridges nationwide need rebuilding and more than 1 million unemployed construction workers are itching to "get dirty" making the repairs. He portrayed Congress as an obstacle to getting that work done.

"I'm going to propose ways to put America back to work that both parties can agree to, because I still believe both parties can work together to solve our problems," Obama said at an annual Labor Day rally sponsored by the Detroit-area AFL-CIO trade union federation. "Given the urgency of this moment, given the hardship that many people are facing, folks have got to get together. But we're not going to wait for them."

"We're going to see if we've got some straight shooters in Congress. We're going to see if congressional Republicans will put country before party," he said.

Congress returns from its summer recess this week and the faltering economy and jobs shortage are expected to be a dominant theme.

Besides spending on public works, Obama said he wants pending trade deals passed to open new markets for U.S. goods. He also said he wants Republicans to prove they'll fight as hard to cut taxes for the middle class as they do for profitable oil companies and the wealthiest Americans.

The president is expected to call for continuing a payroll tax cut for workers and jobless benefits for the unemployed. Some Republicans oppose extending the payroll tax cut, calling it an unproven job creator that will only add to the nation's massive debt. The tax cut extension is set to expire Jan. 1.

Republicans also cite huge federal budget deficits in expressing opposition to vast new spending on jobs programs.

But Obama said lawmakers need to act — and act quickly. "The time for Washington games is over. The time for action is now," he told a supportive union crowd that Detroit police said was in the thousands. The event at a General Motors Corp. parking lot in the shadow of the automaker's headquarters building had the sound and feel of a campaign event, with the union audience breaking into chants of "Four More Years" throughout the president's 25-minute speech.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Obama could be including himself in that call for action. His remarks came as he's facing biting criticism from the Republicans for presiding over a persistently weak economy and high unemployment. Republicans dubbed him "President Zero" after a dismal jobs report last Friday showed that employers added no jobs in August — which hasn't happened since 1945. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, remained unchanged at 9.1 percent.

The report sparked new fears of a second recession and injected fresh urgency into Obama's efforts to help get the unemployed back into the labor market — and improve his re-election chances. No incumbent in recent times has been re-elected with a jobless rate that high, and polls show the public is losing confidence in Obama's handling of the economy. His approval rating on that issue dropped to a new low of 26 percent in a recent Gallup survey.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney said the report was disappointing, unacceptable and "further proof that President Obama has failed." Romney is scheduled to get ahead of Obama by outlining his job-creation plan in a speech Tuesday in Nevada, two days before the president addresses Congress.

Tax credits for businesses that hire and spending on school construction and renovation also are expected to be part of Obama's proposal.

Underscoring the political dueling under way over the economy, Obama plans to visit Richmond, Virginia, on Friday, the day after his speech, on the first of many trips he'll make to rally the public behind his plan. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, one of Obama's fiercest critics, represents part of Richmond.

Obama's broader goal with the speech is to make a sweeping appeal for bipartisan action on the economy by speaking not just to the lawmakers in front of him but also to the public at large. In that sense, the speech will mark a pivot from dealing with long-term deficit reduction to spurring an economic recovery.

Aides say Obama will mount a fall campaign centered on the economy, unveiling different elements of his agenda heading into 2012. If Republicans reject his ideas, the White House wants to use the megaphone of his presidency to enlist the public as an ally, pressure Congress and make the case for his re-election.

"People will see a president who will be laying very significant proposals throughout the fall leading up to this next State of the Union" policy address to Congress in January, Gene Sperling, director of Obama's National Economic Council, told The Associated Press in an interview.

While Obama has said any short-term spending proposals will be paid for over the long term, aides say the speech will not offer details on what deficit reduction measures would be used to offset such spending. The speech also is not expected to include a detailed plan to resolve the housing crisis, a central cause behind the weak economy that has vexed the White House since the beginning of Obama's administration.

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Sperling suggested that Obama would address the housing issue separately during the fall.

Meanwhile, the Chamber of Commerce unveiled its own jobs plan on Monday. In an open letter to the White House and Congress, the business lobby called for measures to immediately boost employment, including stepped-up road and bridge construction, more domestic oil drilling and temporary tax breaks for corporations.

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