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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama made a promise on Tuesday night in his State of the Union address. After a slow start to his second term, he vowed to bypass Congress "whenever and wherever" necessary to close the wealth gap between rich and poor.

He revealed a list of small presidential actions, including a wage increase for temporary government workers. He is also planning to make it easier for millions of low-income Americans to save for retirement.

"America does not stand still and neither do I," Obama said in his evening address. Both parts of Congress, the Senate and House of Representatives, were present. Millions of Americans watched the speech on television.

Obama's hour-long address served as the opening charge in an election-driven fight to control Congress. Democrats, the party of President Obama, are seeking to make Republicans look like they don't care about the middle class.

A "Year Of Action"

Republicans and Democrats have not gotten along recently. Their disagreements keep laws from being passed in Congress. Democrats have urged Obama to fix the gap between rich and poor Americans.

Declaring 2014 a "year of action," Obama also sought to convince an unbelieving public that he still holds power in Washington even if he can't crack through a divided Congress.

Presidents have some power that they can use without the help of Congress. It is called a president's "executive" power.

The presidency failed to get Congress to pass several laws in 2013. Now, White House officials say they're redefining success. They no longer want to measure it by what Obama can get through Congress, but by what actions he can take using his executive powers.

In his speech, Obama focused on old ideas that made little progress over the past year. He pushed Congress to bring back a bill to help immigrants that was put on hold. He also wants to pass an increase in minimum pay for workers and give more children the chance to go to preschool.

Republicans have also been talking about income inequality in recent months. But they blame the widening gap between rich and poor on Obama.

At an emotional high point in the speech, Obama singled out Cory Remsburg. Remsburg is an Army Ranger who was a guest of first lady Michelle Obama. He was nearly killed in [Afghanistan](#) during one of his 10 deployments. He rose slowly from his seat and was greeted by long and thunderous applause from the president and lawmakers.

A Cold, Hard Fact

Washington is paying more and more attention to the differences in wages between rich and poor Americans. But not all of America is struggling to make money. Big businesses are doing great. However, with millions of Americans still out of work or struggling with wages that haven't increased in years, Obama

has found himself in a tough position. He wants everything to go back to the way it was before. But for many people, it is happening too slowly.

The cold, hard fact is that even while things are starting to recover, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by, Obama said. "And too many still aren't working at all."

The president got some of his loudest applause from Democrats when he talked about his health care law. The law did poorly when it first went into effect.

The president's speech drew an interesting mix of visitors to the House chamber. Among those sitting with Mrs. Obama were two survivors of the Boston Marathon bombing, as well as Jason Collins, an openly gay former NBA player.

Republican House Speaker John Boehner brought business owners from his home state of Ohio who say Obama's health care law is hurting their companies. Willie Robertson, a star of the television show "Duck Dynasty," also scored a seat in the House gallery with the Republicans.

Though Obama tried to talk about what he can do with his presidential powers, he has limits. For example, he can raise the minimum hourly pay for government contractors from \$7.25 to \$10.10, as he announced. These contractors — such as the people who work in government cafeterias — work on government projects, but are paid by private companies. But, in order to extend that increase to all of America's workers, he'll need Congress.

Republicans quickly said this plan would not work. Said Boehner: "The question is how many people, Mr. President, will this executive action actually help? I suspect the answer is somewhere close to zero."

White House officials countered by saying many more working people would benefit if Congress would go along with Obama's plan to raise the [minimum wage](#) for everyone.

"Give America a raise," Obama declared.

A Divided Washington

The president also plans to pass a law to help workers whose employers don't offer retirement savings plans. He wants to help companies that hire the long-term unemployed and he wants to create programs that make better workers and improve environmental policies.

The president's plan to make changes himself is, in a way, his admitting failure. He promised the American people that he would unite Washington and that his re-election would make it easier for Congress to pass major laws. Neither has happened.

Some Republicans have warned that the president's focus on executive orders could backfire by angering Republican leaders.

Obama isn't abandoning Congress completely. He made a renewed pitch to make over the nation's immigration laws, perhaps his best opportunity for signing major bills into law this year. But it is unlikely, with many Republicans against Obama's plan to create a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million people already in the U.S. illegally.

Seeking to give Republicans some room to maneuver, Obama did not specifically call for a citizenship pathway Tuesday, saying only, "Let's get it done. It's time."

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