Thank you to the organizers of the Jobs for All Coalition for inviting me to speak.

My name is Gibb Surette. I am the President of the Legal Services Staff Association, a wall-to-wall unit of UAW Local 2320. Our members, as first responders for the poor, see firsthand every day, more and more, what the current economic priorities and staggering unemployment are doing to people.

I was invited today primarily to speak on behalf of US Labor Against the War, but before I do that, please indulge a couple more words concerning my union.

First, an excerpt from a recent letter that went from the International UAW to every member of the House of Representatives. Speaking of the job loss that would accompany proposed cuts to transportation, infrastructure, water, high speed rail and green jobs programs, as well as education and job training programs and funding that flows to the states, the February 16 letter stated:

The UAW submits that ... the federal deficit will not be solved by cutting federal spending. It will only be solved by stimulating the economy and creating more jobs so that 14 million unemployed Americans can get back to work, earn an income, pay their mortgages, make purchases, and pay taxes.

Second, at the more local level, our Region 9A New York Area CAP Council, the UAW’s local political arm, has voted to organize a regular contingent to begin attending these First Friday jobs vigils beginning in April.

Now, let’s talk about US Labor Against the War, its new NYC chapter, and its message about creating and saving jobs.

USLAB is a nationwide coalition of labor organizations, including a number of state federations, that came together to oppose “the” war—if you recall when there was only one. The New York City affiliates of USLAB have been meeting, marching, and organizing solidarity events as a group for some time, but we only recently formed an official NYC chapter. I represent that chapter on USLAB’s national steering committee. Some of the unions affiliated with USLAB-NYC include CWA Local 1180, United University Professions (AFT 2190), SEIU 1199, SSEU Local 371, PSC, AFSCME DC 37 Retirees, the EMS workers of AFSCME 2507, the Adjunct Professors of UAW 7902, my own UAW Local 2320, and our area CAP Council representing a number of other UAW locals.

USLAB concerns itself with issues such as the repression of unions in US occupied Iraq. However, increasingly our attention is drawn to the issue of “guns or butter”, which for growing numbers of people is really “guns or bread”.

The case that we cannot afford our current militaristic budget priorities is stated succinctly on our leaflet. On the back of that leaflet are some compelling statistics. Let me call your attention to a couple.

The cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are but a fraction of the U.S. military budget. Yet recapturing what Wisconsin alone contributes to those wars would eliminate over 79% of that state’s deficit for two fiscal years—before we even talk about rolling back tax breaks for the rich.
Here in New York, the comparison is even starker. What our state contributes to these wars is almost double the amount of the state deficit! This is the same deficit that is being trumpeted as some kind of catastrophic act of God which can only be addressed on the backs of workers and the poor. Even the New York Times has recently called fraud on what it aptly referred to in a March 3 editorial as The Hollow Cry of ‘Broke’.

Money for jobs is available. The estimated annual cost of keeping each soldier in Afghanistan is 1.2 million dollars. Think how many we could employ with that money to provide public services and infrastructure. What New York City alone, without the rest of the state, contributes to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could instead get us over 70 thousand teachers, or almost 80 thousand firefighters, or 948 thousand university scholarships, etc. etc. etc.

And it’s not just Iraq and Afghanistan. Together, they account for only about a third of what the Pentagon receives, and that does not account for nearly all of our military spending. Apart from the countries where we are conducting shooting wars, we are paying to maintain the largest standing military in the history of the world and a U.S. military presence in some 120 countries around the world.

A $35 billion contract was just awarded for aerial tankers whose only use is to enhance that global reach. Here it should be noted that even military spending at home consistently yields less bang for the buck in job creation than virtually any other form of investment. Weatherization creates half again as many jobs per dollar, while mass transit and education do twice as well.

Our total military budget has nearly doubled since 2001. It now accounts for well over half of our discretionary federal spending. In military spending, the US roughly equals the rest of the world combined, outpacing the runner up (China) by a factor of six. We now have the largest investment in the military since WWII. And it’s still getting worse. What the administration has called proposals to “cut” military spending would actually only limit, not reverse or even stop its growth.

When the military comes out so far on top, and education, services and jobs come out on the bottom, the resulting joblessness drives an economic draft, feeding multiple deployments to wars so destructive of hope that in some months military suicides have outnumbered battle casualties. Needless to say, the same joblessness feeds desperation and anger at home, too. It is perhaps small wonder, then, that the US also leads the world in incarcerating its own inhabitants, with one in a hundred behind bars (a very large and very dubious use of resources in its own right).

Brothers and sisters, we are engaged in a struggle not just over our nation’s resources, but over its soul. We dare not fail.