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Can Richard Trumka Turn Organized Labor Around?

The African World

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The Pittsburgh convention of the AFL-CIO (the largest of the union federations in the USA) made it official: Richard Trumka, Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO under John Sweeney, and formerly President of the United Mine Workers of America, was elected to their top office.

Trumka takes over as President of the AFL-CIO at one of the worst times in the history of organized labor, at least since the 1920s. Unions represent approximately 12% of the workforce (down from 35% in 1955); workers are under near continuous assault by employers, whether in the form of demands for concessions or in the form of repression of efforts to join or organize unions; economic restructuring over the last thirty years has turned previously thriving working class communities into ghost towns; and Black and Chicano workers have suffered devastating employment losses as major manufacturers deserted the cities and either closed down, moved into rural areas or moved overseas.

Yet the problems facing organized labor are not only the result of external assaults - many of which have been openly supported by anti-worker elected government officials - but also internal problems and malaise. In 2005 several unions, as a result of frustration and in some cases ambition, led a misguided and ill-informed split from the

AFL-CIO forming the Change To Win Federation. This split did nothing to revitalize the union movement or even to clarify the nature of the crisis it faced. Instead it promoted confusion and despair.

Thus, Trumka inherits a federation facing financial hardship, in large part due to the 2005 split, and deep unclarity as to direction. By way of example, in 2005, in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster on the Gulf Coast, organized labor restricted its role to providing relief (which it did so generously), yet it did nothing to build broad awareness, let alone a fightback, to address the deeper socio-economic roots of the Katrina disaster, specifically the racial and class oppression on the Gulf Coast and the economic policies followed by the Bush administration.

In the fall of 2008, in the midst of the financial collapse and the tsunami of foreclosures and layoffs, organized labor was anemic in its response. Instead of mass demonstrations (which were carried out by the New York City Central Labor Council, it should be noted), labor's response took the form of press statements, emails and web postings. This lack of an activist response ceded the ground to right-wing populists who have tapped into the intense anger felt by many white workers and professional-managerial employees.

The question, then, is whether Trumka can lead a renewal effort on the part of organized labor that can reshape the mission and form of the union movement. If Trumka is to lead in the reorientation of organized labor, there are several questions he must immediately consider:

- With whom does he surround himself such that he can get diverse, frank and useful input in the making of decisions?
- What sort of unity exists among the unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO as to the role of a national labor federation?
- What strategies can unions adopt that places them dead center in the fightback against the economic crisis?
- Can the AFL-CIO in particular, and unions generally, become the voice of and for workers irrespective of whether they are union members? Can they, in particular, support the organizing of the unemployed in fighting for jobs and income?
- Can the AFL-CIO fully repudiate its own past, and build practical, social justice-rooted solidarity with labor movements in other parts of the world which do not pit US workers against non-US workers?
- Can the AFL-CIO and its affiliates put real, street-based pressure on the Obama administration to make sure that it does not collapse in the face of pressure from corporate America and the political Right?
- Can the union movement build a forceful response to the rise of right-wing populism?

These questions cannot be answered in the abstract. They must be answered as part of a renewal effort understanding that WHETHER organized labor has a future in the USA

depends less on its structure and who leads it, and more on organized labor taking a direction that addresses the needs of workers. One aspect of the answer rests with Black workers, that section of the working class that has repeatedly, and more than any others, demonstrated its support for unionism and defiance of economic injustice. Mobilizing Black workers, in other words, can have a ripple effect on the rest of the union movement.

There are two examples of something that organized labor could address right now that, while it is not exclusive to Black workers, could tap into the Black working class and its desire for resistance. In the South, unions could mount an organizing effort targeted at the public sector (particularly municipal, county, and state workers). The public sector in the South has a significant percentage of Black workers. A public sector organizing campaign, building off of the experiences of unions such as the Communications Workers of America and the United Electrical Workers, would need to not only focus on organizing workers in their workplaces (where collective bargaining is often illegal for public sector workers) but also on organizing active support in communities and among elected officials. In other words, this would need to be a full-fledged campaign.

A second area would be organizing unemployed workers. Whether workers laid off in the midst of this "Great Recession" or workers who have been structurally unemployed or underemployed for years as the economy has cast them aside, there is an entire segment of the workforce that is treated by mainstream society as if it has ceased to exist. As unemployed, they are often living very isolated existences, sometimes blaming themselves for their unemployment rather than blaming the system that no longer needs or wants them. Many of these unemployed have also found themselves homeless as they can no longer afford a mortgage or rent. As took place in the 1930s or in the first decade of the 20th century, the unemployed CAN be mobilized, but it has to happen through organization and not speeches. While there are some organizations undertaking the difficult work of organizing the unemployed (such as the worker center movement), the union movement has largely ignored this sector. Organizing the unemployed will require special attention to the Black and Latino unemployed who are disproportionately out of work compared with whites.

Richard Trumka has a chance to lead a resurgence of the union movement. The window for change will not be open long. In 1995 he came into office as part of John Sweeney's reform effort. This reform effort failed, despite many important changes that it brought to the AFL-CIO. The failure of this reform effort promoted cynicism among many trade unionists and their supporters. In fact, there are those who believe that organized labor can never change.

The question for Richard Trumka is whether he can refute this cynicism and not simply promote "hope" through the militant rhetoric long associated with him, but promote a willingness on the part of millions of workers to make the sacrifices necessary to win the battle for social and economic justice.

The clock is ticking.

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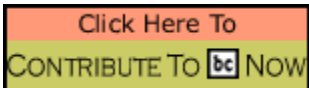


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