

Getting ready for the future

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If you're a friend of labor, liberal or radical, Rich Trumka's invitation applies to you. He's asking for your thoughts on how the AFL-CIO can get ready for the future. (As you know, unions have not been doing so well these days, and maybe someone can come up with some good ideas.) Toward that end, he posted questions on the internet submitted by seven presumed notables, including former labor secretary Robert Reich and *In These Times* labor editor David Moberg. Within a few electronic moments, over a thousand comments poured in. If you want to get in on it, try www.AFLCIO.org and click on "Join the discussion."

I did my old-fashioned best to send in my piece, perhaps unsuccessfully; but that doesn't bother me. It's hard to believe that any deliberative council of busy labor leaders will ever ponder over this mass of digital printings and use it to work out a policy for the next AFL-CIO convention. Besides, that kind of concentration is hardly necessary. In the last year or two, popular and scholarly books, magazine articles, and internet submissions have proliferated with suggestions on how to steer the labor movements out of its doldrums. Some are written by academics based on research; some by labor organizers, based on experience. It's already out there: Cooperate with community social organizations; encourage rank and filers and locals to organize; fewer male and pale bureaucrats, more attention to women, minorities, immigrants; demand collective bargaining rights even where unions lack majority support; use TV, radio, internet more effectively; activate city and state central councils; more and even more concentration on organizing; be bold; be imaginative; be demanding and militant; be responsible and compromising.; etc., etc., etc.

A whole range of ideas has already been public for many months. Unions have been listening and taking advantage of what seems best and inching along in the right direction.

Still, Rich Trumka's latest invitation is a welcome sign. At one point, when unions were riding high, the main message of labor leaders to their liberal allies seemed to be: We know what's best. Shut up and come along. Now in labor's time of troubles, Rich Trumka is eager to show that they value advice from allies. (In any event, the AFL-CIO will accumulate a valuable new mailing list.)

Here for your information is what I tried to submit. HB

In preparing for the future, begin at the starting point.

If you study all its resolutions, its policy declarations, its expressions of good intentions, if you've heard the speeches of Rich Trumka, you should know that the AFL-CIO is moving firmly in the right direction—its stand on immigrant workers, on taxes, its increased alliance with community activists, its support for the nation's 99%, its call for social justice. Back in 1995, when the Sweeney forces replaced the Lane Kirkland camp, the labor movement won the enthusiastic support of liberal and radical intellectuals who rallied thousands of students and teachers to pro-union teach-ins in the universities. But now, eighteen years later, although it won the hearts of liberal academics, the labor movement has failed to break through to a majority in the broad public, not in organizing, not in politics. That's the problem.

The union movement can count upon the loyalty of an impressive main base, the pro-union cadres who respond to its call at critical moments and constitute the pillar of its strength. We've seen them in action in massive demonstrations in defense of public employee unionism. We know that unions can convince many thousands of their loyal followers to go to the polls at election time, often enough to make the difference.

But they are moving those already converted. On election day, a huge proportion of the unions' own white membership (I think, a majority!) vote for labor's adversaries. And, an amazing irony of our times: although the labor movement is actually the best organized and most numerous continuing people's movement—reaching almost everywhere in industry and the nation, taking in every race, religion, sex, every philosophy and quirk—a vast section of the nation's population, hoodwinked, sees it as a “special interest.”

Rich Trumka, it seems, realizes that the AFL-CIO must convince a wider audience that the labor movement represents its interests. His broad solicitation for comments and his choice of David Moberg to monitor the discussion is a sign of that intention.

What to do? Some gimmicks that have already been tried have fallen short: union credit cards, associate memberships for sympathizers, a labor-sponsored retirees' organization. Right now, lots of good labor people are already experimenting with many ways of making labor's message more persuasive. I am sure that people in the field, based on experience, will come up with excellent ideas for improving what is already in the works.

Surely, there will be proposals to spread labor's message more broadly and more effectively: the internet, TV programs, advertising, a newspaper aimed at a general audience. All of which would be worthwhile—and would be expensive. But we must remember that in everything that depends upon mobilizing practical resources, unions can never hope to match or cancel out the resources of their enemies. A single major U.S. corporation can easily afford to outspend the whole labor movement. Now in elections, it has the legal right to do so.

However, we have one resource that they can never hope to match. They deploy money power. But we count on people's power. At a time when the force of people's power is being displayed all over the world, we are reminded that the labor movement has that kind of power at its disposal, but only as a potential. That power resides in the 15,000,000 union members and their families. Sad to say, unions are now able to draw on only a small fraction of that power, only upon its base, only upon its loyal, activist cadre. The AFL-CIO should look inward as well as outward to find the means for winning over its own membership and drawing upon their power.

To advance labor's cause, union members need not rise up, or revolt!, or struggle, or come out of the shops into the streets and confront capital. All that they need do in the context of our times, is to become forthright advocates of the union cause, to speak out to their neighbors, their friends, their relatives, on the job, in the lunchrooms, in the churches. And it is a simple message: “We are familiar with unions; they stand for people like us.” Imagine the change in the mood of the country if that message was actively conveyed into the public arena, not only by thousands of union activists and staff employees, but by millions of organized working people.

A big part of the membership, probably a majority, is indifferent toward their unions. But what is disturbing is that a whole section of the membership, articulate and energetic, has become disillusioned, disenchanted with the labor movement as they see it today. Unions are antagonizing the very kind of active members who could be counted on to shake others out of their passivity.

How many are there who are disappointed and disillusioned? Nobody is counting, But at one

point, long ago, there was a kind of public record. In 1960, drawing upon his experiences as counsel for the McClellan Committee investigating what he called, "tyranny, corruption, and dishonesty" in certain labor unions, Robert Kennedy wrote that he had received "150,000 complaints during the committee's life," seventy-five percent from "representatives of organized labor, mostly rank and filers." That was almost two generations ago, when the labor movement was a more formidable force. Since then, organized crime has been driven out of major unions. Members' rights are protected by federal law, even though feebly and inadequately. The blatant evils of those days have been mitigated. From that standpoint, ours is a better labor movement, and it continues to change for the better.

Still, the reality of the disenchanted unionist remains. True, there is no formal public record, but I can cite my own experience of the last fifty years as editor of *Union Democracy in Action* and then as a founder and executive director of the Association for Union Democracy. In that time, I have dealt with tens of thousands of union activists, as individuals, in caucuses, candidates for office, rank and filers, officers at every level. Part of that record is in the Reuther archives at Wayne State University.

Except for a rare few, they remained pro-union in their sympathies. Their dissatisfaction resided in their feeling—justified—that their unions fell short of their enthusiastic expectations. From them, I heard about stolen elections, drumhead trials, job blacklisting of those who criticized incumbent officials, phony contract referendums, niggling restrictions on the right to run for office or campaign, arbitrary trusteeships imposed on locals whose elected officers criticized their international leadership, sometimes even arrant physical attacks and corruption. My point here is not to catalogue union flaws but to underline the need to regain the loyalty of these good union activists and restore them as crusaders for unionism. Walter Reuther once said that we must do more than organize the unorganized, we must unionize the organized. In that spirit, a democratization of the AFL-CIO will make it a more powerful force in the public arena.

But what does all this mean in day-to-day practice? Based on my own experience, let me count the ways:

Obey LMRDA Section 105 which requires unions to keep members informed of their democratic rights protected by federal law.

Impose trusteeships over locals only for legitimate causes, not to suppress independent-minded local officers as so egregiously has recently been the case in the Operating Engineers, Machinists, and SEIU.

Stop using union trial procedures to suppress critics. Institute an impartial trial and appeals procedure modeled upon the UAW Public Review Board.

Extend the right to elect job stewards and vote on collective bargaining contracts. In major referendums, guarantee an honest count by retaining a reliable outside election agency.

Where unions operate hiring halls or referral halls, make sure they are run fairly without discrimination. End the widespread patronage system of using control over job assignments to strengthen incumbents' political machine and starve out critics.

Encourage members to participate in fair union elections. Toward that end:

- Guarantee an honest count, especially in major elections, by employing an outside agency, one with a reputation for integrity, to conduct the casting and counting of ballots.
- End niggling election rules which suppress the right to run for office by the widespread two-

year continuous good stand requirement.

- Eliminate restrictive meeting attendance rules that block the candidacy of 90% of members.
- Open up the publications to membership discussion, especially in the months before nomination and elections. Too many union periodicals are puff sheets which glorify the words, deeds, and photographs of incumbent officers

In sum, the goal is to democratize the labor movement, to change the atmosphere within it, to convince members that the union belongs to them, not to its officials. Out of the mass of dues payers, the aim is to create an enthusiastic army of union advocates who are best able to carry labor's message into the broad national public. These proposals are not intended as the panacea to solve labor's pressing problems. We need democracy but we also need leadership and direction. But democracy provides people's power behind any progressive program.

Will the AFL-CIO ever respond, now or ever? There is no solid basis for easy optimism, but there are justified grounds for hope. The obstacle is the divided soul of American labor leadership. In most of the issues that come up for decision in the broad public arena, they can be counted on to stand for progress, for social justice, for democracy **in the nation**. But it all changes **in the union**. In their unions, the main leaning of union officials is toward limitation, even repression, of democratic rights. Their instinctive bulldog grip on union power blunts their ability to serve effectively as progressive leaders in the nation.

In all of the many cases that have reached the higher courts, where the rights of members in their unions were at stake, the AFL-CIO and/or its constituent unions were on the side of limitation and suppression, never for the defense or extension of democracy in unions. The AFL-CIO dilemma is personified in the figure of its top leader, President Rich Trumka.

Trumka is a superb public representative for the labor movement, perhaps the best since John L. Lewis or Eugene Victor Debs. He is eloquent, hard-hitting; his words are moving and persuasive. For me, and I am sure for any union loyalist, it is a pleasure to hear him speak out for fair play. But I fear that mainstream nonunion Americans listen skeptically to what they see as just another "fast-talking labor boss" saying and doing what he gets paid for.

Yet, in one respect, Trumka is an unusual labor leader. As a young miner, he joined up with the Miners for Democracy, Joe Rauh, and Chip Yablonski in their battle to wrest control of the United Mine Workers from a corrupt officialdom headed by the murderer, Tony Boyle. Their success as insurgents opened the way for Trumka as UMW president and from there to the presidency of the AFL-CIO. And so, Trumka became UMW president, not by inheriting the post from an established bureaucracy but as the active beneficiary of an insurgent movement he helped to victory.

Tell that moving story, and tell it again, to the broad voting American public, and they will surely begin to see Trumka in a new light and receive his message more sympathetically and with an open mind. He will speak with effectiveness to more than those already converted.

But this part of the Trumka story is classified in official labor channels as jealously as the White House classifies internet wiretapping. When he won office on the Sweeney slate at the 1995 AFL-CIO convention, his official biography released not a word about his admirable UMW insurgency. Not a word when he was later elected AFL-CIO president.

The suppression of this Trumka story is symptomatic of what must change in the AFL-CIO. The unwritten code, accepted almost universally by the top labor leadership, holds that there is something, suspect, heretical, morally impermissible when a rank and file organizes against its leadership. That closed-circuit mood destroys the image of the AFL-CIO as a great people's

movement.

There is hope because the labor movement has been changing. In two generations, corruption and organized crime have been pushed back and democracy is more robust in unions. But unions are weaker. Responsible labor leaders realize that something must be done to stop the decline and build the power.

The United States boasts justifiably of its democracy, of the right of its citizens to criticize political leaders, of all the freedoms we enjoy. Despite its limitations, of the errors, even outrages, our nation may have committed, our democracy still stands as a beacon in the world. The hope is that a democratized AFL-CIO can become a beacon for social justice in America.

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