

Two Roads Forward for Labor: The AFL-CIO's New Agenda

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An early defeat and a year-old victory have put energy and urgency into the effort by American trade unionists to launch what AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka has declared a “new strategic initiative.” The 2010 defeat in Barack Obama’s first term of the Employee Free Choice Act, the “card check” membership sign-up law, derailed labor hopes for a new era of organization and membership growth, especially among the tens of millions of low-wage workers who are employed in the retail, hotel, health care, and warehouse industries.

But then came the re-election of Obama. Despite high unemployment, a weak economy, and a noticeable lack of enthusiasm on the part of some of his partisans, including many in the trade union movement, the president pulled off a victory that, by way of contrast, seemed far more like a vindication of social policy liberalism than had been put forward in Bill Clinton’s 1996 campaign. Under such circumstances, it seems quite plausible to argue that a progressive, liberal majority exists in the United States, manifest today both in metropolitan America and at the presidential level of politics, but quite plausibly ascendant during the next decade in both houses of Congress and in non-southern statehouses.

Under such conditions there are two roads that lead toward a genuine revival of the American trade union movement. And when I say “revival” I mean not just a larger set of unions with more members, but rather a labor bloc, social and demographic, that is on the offensive, setting the economic and social

agenda on multiple fronts so that employers and politicians find that concessions to or solidarity with the unions seem the most practical and common-sense policy, if only because they will ensure their own prosperity and survival.

The first road would look something like what transpired on May 1, 2006, when during the massive “Day Without Immigrants” demonstrations millions of Latinos and supporters shut down scores of food-processing plants, restaurants, vineyards, and transport hubs in what was, in effect, a general strike. In its early hopeful stages, the Arab Spring looked something like this, and had Occupy been a dozen times larger it might have resembled a de facto sit-in that paralyzed urban financial hubs. We’ve had such mass upheavals in the more distant American past: in the industrial cities of the Midwest during the height of the 1936 and 1937 sit-down strikes; and in the era of hospital, teacher, and sanitation worker militancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In such moments of controlled but hopeful chaos, the union movement wins allies and partners from a surprisingly wide array of forces: in the 1930s Hollywood stars and consumer advocates identified with the new upsurge while those who had long opposed unionism and worker empowerment rushed to offer concessions, if only to avoid something more radical or destabilizing. Smart labor leaders, like John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther in the late 1930s or Jerry Wurf and Leon Davis in the 1960s, first champion this turbulent insurgency and then channel it into a set of well-consolidated laws, institutions, and bargaining arrangements that can last a generation or more. Brilliant and charismatic

leaders, like Cesar Chavez, who fail to institutionalize such genuine but momentary militancy are destined to become tragic figures.

The problem with this first road forward is that it is impossible to plan or predict. Will this mass mobilization begin next year, next decade, or never? Both the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) have done great work in organizing and encouraging the voices and protests of unorganized, low-wage workers in the fast food industry and at Walmart, but thus far they have not sparked the kind of human chain-reaction that would actually make executives at McDonald's and Walmart so fearful that they might be ready to pick up the phone and say, "Let's make a deal."

So we are left, for the present, with a second road forward. Here the union movement relies upon what now seems an inexorable drift to the left in American electoral politics. This has been obscured by Republican obstructionism in Congress, but the cultural and demographic revolutions that have liberated gays, made Latinos a decisive voting bloc, elevated an African American to the presidency, and made the Republicans hegemonic only among those white people who live in the states that once composed the old Confederacy seem to ensure that the Democrats, even liberal Democrats, are going to be the natural ruling party for the next generation. The task before organized labor is to make sure that this Democratic hegemony extends to working people, and not just in terms of an anti-poverty agenda or better health care, but in terms of their capacity to build institutional power—to organize new workers into trade unions and then give those unions the freedom to press forward their economic and political agenda.

Trumka's decision to open up the September 2013 AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles to a wide array of liberal groups was a symbolic step in this direction. He bragged that the convention was the most inclusive in decades, casting the effort to link up with progressive groups like the NAACP, the Sierra Club, as well as gay and immigrant rights advocates in almost existential terms. "We are in a crisis right now," he told a press

conference on the eve of the convention. "None of us are big enough to change the economy and make it work for everybody. It takes all progressive voices working together."

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Thus the convention honored domestic workers on one night and immigrant "Dreamers" now working to organize car washes, grocery stores, and hotels in Los Angeles on the next. It condemned for the first time private prisons and mass incarceration of peoples of color, to the disquiet of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers, which represents many correctional officers. And the convention saw Bhairavi Desai, president of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, perhaps the most multicultural union in the world, elected to the AFL-CIO executive board. The alliance can go on strike but holds no collective bargaining contracts with the employer; instead, it pressures and lobbies the New York City Taxi & Limousine Commission, a powerful government agency that sets rates and rules for the drivers, some of whom are owner-operators.

Even the Communications Workers of America, a union that prides itself on the maintenance of a militant strata of shop stewards and its capacity to deploy the strike weapon in contract disputes, has nevertheless devoted much energy to what the union calls a "democracy initiative" designed to break the congressional stalemate and reduce the influence of big money in election campaigns. "If we don't work on democracy issues," CWA president Larry Cohen told *American Prospect* reporter Abby Rapoport, "the stuff we started out working on is never going to go anywhere." "Even if all we cared about was our own contracts, we can't even get those

anymore without community assistance," he told the *Washington Post*. Thus to many AFL-CIO progressives, such coalitions will now be vital to the core functioning of the unions. "We are going to expand the idea of collective bargaining," said Tim Paulson of the San Francisco AFL-CIO. "You can have collective bargaining through legislation. You can have collective bargaining through ballot measures."

The AFL-CIO is a multifaceted institution composed of scores of autonomous unions, so Trumka's leadership can hardly turn around this cumbersome vessel all that quickly. But the new emphasis is clear: the unions should ally with progressive partners and devote more energy to make the kind of changes in social policy that can benefit millions of poorly paid and insecure workers. Thus the AFL-CIO's Working America, which claims 3 million members nationwide, makes no effort to organize in the workplace but instead recruits pro-union individuals for electoral campaigns, largely at the state and municipal level. In existence for nearly a decade, Working America played a key role in fighting off a GOP attack on collective bargaining in Ohio, raising the minimum wage in New Mexico, and winning an earned sick-day law for workers in Portland, Oregon.

The "Fight for Fifteen" movement in the fast food industry seems an even more dynamic and hopeful example of this effort. Although largely bankrolled by the SEIU, which broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2006, the multi-city walkouts and demonstrations targeting McDonald's, Taco Bell, and other fast food outlets combine some of the spirit once generated by the Occupy Wall Street movement with a far more programmatic set of demands for higher wages, more predictable work shifts, and simple respect from supervisors and managers.

But unlike a traditional organizing campaign, the fast food movement—sometimes identified as part of an "alt-labor" set of similar initiatives—seeks neither unionization nor a collective contract. Nor does it hold out for opprobrium any particular company or set of franchises. Instead, the periodic strikes and

pickets have been directed against the entire fast food industry. This has proven a brilliant stratagem: it unites rather than divides a workforce that in any event cycles from one low-paid service job to another; it keeps the attention of workers and the public focused upon the problems common to all employers in one huge industry; and while it avoids the delays and procedural stalemate that always accompany any appeal to the National Labor Relations Board, it points the way to the enactment of a set of seemingly traditional legislative reforms that can generate immediate payoffs on the state and municipal level, if not in the nation as a whole. Thus an increase in the minimum wage has once again been put on the agenda of many cities and states: in California Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation boosting the state minimum to \$9 an hour in July 2014 and \$10 eighteen months later, and in New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is sure to find the path toward a higher minimum there considerably eased by the ruckus fast food workers have periodically generated in Midtown Manhattan.

Not all unions endorse the coalition-building, public policy orientation of either the AFL-CIO or the SEIU. Some leaders from the traditionally more conservative and parochial building trades have been alarmed at the prospect that environmental groups might increase their influence within the AFL-CIO, since they oppose the Keystone XL Pipeline and some other big infrastructure projects. "Does that mean we are going to turn energy policy of the AFL-CIO over to the Sierra Club?" asked Terry O'Sullivan, president of the Laborers' International Union of North America. "I grew up in the movement to do one of two things. We support anything that's good for another union brother or sister, or we keep our mouths shut." Harold Schaitberger, president of the International Association of Fire Fighters, also resisted Trumka's new initiative, arguing that the whole purpose of trade unionism was to represent workers as workers: "We are not going to be the American Federation of Progressive and Liberal Organizations," he told a press conference in the days leading up to the AFL-CIO convention.

Complaints from such traditionalist labor

leaders might well be dismissed as yet another example of the kind of parochialism that has all too often isolated unions and stripped them of allies. But a critique of the Trumka program has also emerged from the labor left, among those union partisans who have long prided themselves as democratic militants and political progressives. Such voices have come from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which earlier this year disaffiliated from the AFL-CIO because the still-powerful West Coast union accused other AFL affiliates, like the Operating Engineers, of poaching on its jurisdiction and undercutting ILWU efforts to defend longshore wage and work standards in a set of bitter battles fought against anti-union shippers in the Pacific Northwest. Officials of the small but militant National Union of Healthcare Workers, which has waged a five-year battle against the SEIU in California, have also been privately skeptical of the new AFL posture, charging that Trumka seems to be downplaying workplace struggles in order to build a larger liberal coalition, a strategy once identified with Andy Stern, the SEIU's controversial former president.

Steve Early, a former CWA organizer in New England and now a prolific writer on labor affairs, has given this disquiet with the Trumka program a sharp critical edge. Long identified with *Labor Notes*, the Detroit-based newsletter that for thirty years has prodded the unions from a rank-and-file perspective, Early has decried the "dumbing down" of the very concept of union membership in organizations like Working America, which he calls a "shell game" that has little to do with real, long-term efforts to build workplace organization in the absence of employer recognition and bargaining rights.

Likewise, charge Early and other critics, a kind of public relations manipulation has characterized both the SEIU-backed fast food movement and the OUR Walmart campaign, another non-union formation, which has been funded and led by the UFCW. In both instances, but especially in the Fight for Fifteen campaign, the unions have no strategy for building a real organization sustained by actual dues-paying members. Moreover, the celebration of such alt-labor initiatives

marginalizes the struggles undertaken by militant unions such as the Chicago Teachers Union, which fought Mayor Rahm Emanuel to a standstill in the fall of 2012, or the 2010 victory won by hundreds of ILWU-organized miners in a bitter lockout and strike waged

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against the Rio Tinto global mining conglomerate in California's Mojave Desert.

"Who wouldn't like to believe that a more exciting convention format prefigured a turning point for labor?" wrote Early after the Los Angeles meeting.

Unfortunately, greater inclusiveness, closer ties with non-labor allies, and the adoption of pleasingly progressive resolutions only begin to address the real organizing challenges facing labor, whether 'alt' or traditional. Missing from the festivities were strategies for defending and re-energizing labor's existing members.

Early is right that mere coalition building, even with successful electoral mobilizations, are inadequate to defend labor when faced with the kind of employer assault that has become chronic in twenty-first-century America. Unless the unions translate progressive victories on the social policy front into the kind of institutional strength that will once again enable them to enroll millions of new members, they will fade into oblivion, leaving American liberalism without its most steadfast bulwark.

The labor left's organizing theory holds that once American workers realize that exemplary militancy in one firm, industry, or sector can really pay off for them, it will spark a chain reaction that can mobilize

millions. Unfortunately, we are not there yet. The social combustibles necessary for such a chain reaction have not been assembled, or rather they remain smothered by a set of legal obstacles and managerial practices that have served to blunt, isolate, and negate those few contemporary victories to which labor can lay claim. The popular and successful UPS strike of 1997 generated no echoes among workers at FedEx or Walmart, and the inspiring sit-in conducted by the Latino workers at Chicago's Republic Windows and Doors factory late in 2008 remained but a singular victory even in the midst of America's most profound economic debacle since the Great Depression. Union organizing today is not unlike combat along the Western Front in the First World War. The heroism is genuine, but the territory captured is pitifully small, if any.

What is to be done? Obviously, both strategies, that of Trumka and Early, are essential and not mutually exclusive. The former seeks to take advantage of the cultural and demographic tides transforming the nation, shifting the political equation in metropolitan America and thus winning modest improvements in the lives of millions. This strategy also opens the door to a new kind of labor movement, not just in demographic composition but

also in terms of how it functions. Collective bargaining will be less important, politics and public policy more so.

However, this is not enough. For two centuries labor's strength has been grounded in the world of work. There is still something called the point of production, where workers have their greatest potential power, even if the factory floor has given way to the transport hubs and distribution centers along a global supply chain or the counters, desks, and computer terminals in the service economy. If a working-class movement is to take advantage of the unpredictable, once-in-a-generation organizing opportunities that have punctuated American history, the unions need to train the kind of militant and experienced cadres that can only be realized through genuinely democratic struggle in the workplace itself.

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