

Rich Trumka: Reflections



Philip
Dine

Coal miners dominated the news in April 1991: U.S. miners were irate over government findings that half of our mining companies had falsified tests meant to ensure clean air in mines. In the world's other superpower, a third of the 1.2 million Soviet miners were on strike, aiming to topple Communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Meanwhile, Congress and the Supreme Court were addressing the aftermath of the landmark Pittston Coal strike.

The young president of the United Mine Workers of America, Rich Trumka, having led the victorious Pittston strike, was on a hectic pace as he rose to the new challenges. So, for a St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* reporter, interviewing him meant showing up to

his St. Louis hotel room around midnight—after he'd addressed 1,000 local labor leaders—as he opened a Persian Gulf military MRE (Meal, Ready-to-Eat) of chicken and rice he'd been carrying around.

My initial impression: He was burly and blunt and bright, someone I'd no more relish facing in a debate than in a dark alley. This straight-talking son and grandson of miners (both felled by black-lung disease) had spent seven years in southwestern Pennsylvania mines and led a perilous grassroots campaign to reform a union run by a murderous autocrat, before being elected the country's youngest union president at 33.

His frenetic schedule notwithstanding, he was cordial and engaging—until I mentioned that he was being touted as a future AFL-CIO leader. His demeanor turned icy. "I'm going to tell you something," he said. "I don't know where that started, where that came from. I know where it didn't come from. I got the job that I like. I'm going to stay with it."

A decade-plus later, Rich invited me to see his secretary-treasurer's office at the AFL-CIO. He gestured to the expansive rooftop veranda outside his office. I opened the door and strolled outside—prompting Rich to launch himself onto the porch, nearly tackle me like the former high school football player he was and hustle me back inside.

I looked quizzically at him. He gestured to the White House roof just blocks away, noted the sharpshooters stationed there post-9/11, and said they had to be alerted before anyone ventured out.

In ensuing years, I watched with admiration—and pride—as Rich Trumka became an unsurpassed force for unions. I also respected how he didn't attribute labor's woes entirely to the media, Republicans or business, instead acknowledging unions' uneven communications, hyper-politicization and tepid organizing.

I wasn't with a huge news outlet that could make or break a leader, but that didn't affect how he dealt with me. When I wrote a book on labor, Rich organized an AFL-CIO event, inviting numerous staffers. He concluded his generous introduction by asking tongue-in-cheek why I'd written so many unkind things about him in the book. (I hadn't.)

As he sat down, I looked at him and replied, "Because I know you, Rich."

No one in the large room laughed more heartily than Rich, who took his mission on behalf of working people far more seriously than he took himself.

About a year later, in September 2009, Rich was elected AFL-CIO president. I interviewed him, and included in my Oct. 13 *Washington Times* labor column:

He also told me that he meant it 18 years ago when he said he had no designs on leading the American labor movement. A few years later, when Mr. [John] Sweeney challenged the incumbent AFL-CIO leadership in 1995 and asked Mr. Trumka to run on the ticket as secretary-treasurer, Mr. Trumka favored change but was reluctant to leave the miners union that had been the focus of his life.

So, he says, he went to the man whose advice always pierced through the confusion when things mattered most—Frank Trumka, a man toughened by 44 years working in the mines.

"I called my dad. He said, 'It doesn't seem to me like you have any choice. If you want to change things, then get in the game and change things. Otherwise, keep your mouth shut.'"

The column concluded as follows:

The path that Mr. Trumka chose that day changed his life; now it will change the labor movement, and perhaps more. [He] will be forceful; he will be loud; he will be visible; he will be in many people's faces; he will articulate complex ideas in ways that move working people.

And he will make a difference in the economic and political life of this country.

Indeed, he did.

Our labor movement and country are poorer without Rich—but his legacy inspires us as we continue his work.

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