

# AFL-CIO Convention finds labor in need of new friends, new blood

**A**t its quadrennial convention in Los Angeles Sept. 8-11, the AFL-CIO, the country's largest labor federation, sought new ways to boost organized labor's relevance in a U.S. economy where only 6.6 percent of the private-sector workforce is enrolled in a union.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka put the issue succinctly: "We are a small part of the 150 million Americans who work for a living."



Photo by Bill Burke/Page One Photography

**AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka lays out his vision for increasing the strength of the labor federation.**

Overall, including the public sector, 11.4 percent of workers are organized. Membership has seen a gradual decline since the late 1950s, when it stood at 35 percent. This is largely the result of the exporting of jobs, increasing anti-union employer aggressiveness and a changing economy.

Trumka, who was elected AFL-CIO president in 2009, faced additional challenges, including the steady increase of anti-public-employee union legislation in states including Wisconsin and Michi-

gan, as well as right-to-work laws in some states. With these setbacks, raises, benefits, job security and much of the American middle class have disappeared over the last few decades.

"The crisis for labor has deepened," Trumka said in an interview before the convention. "It's at a point where we really must do something differently. We really have to experiment."

To increase AFL-CIO membership, Trumka offered a two-pronged plan: let millions of non-union workers join the labor federation, and form permanent partnerships with environmental, immigrant and other progressive advocacy groups.

By bringing in non-union workers, Trumka hopes to press employers to fix safety hazards, lobby state legislatures for a higher minimum wage and push Congress to increase taxes on the wealthiest Americans. This strategy would allow unions to continue efforts to better workers' conditions, even when the unions don't receive enough votes to organize that employer.

The combined progressive effort idea has proven to be effective in San Francisco, Washington state and other communities. Working with community organizers in 2008, union activists got the San Francisco city government to mandate that employers provide health insurance to their workers or pay the city to subsidize low-income residents' purchase of coverage. This year, the same coalition convinced a hospital chain seeking to build a new facility to staff it with union jobs and provide affordable housing.

In Washington state in 2011, unions, women's groups, immigrant organizations and faith groups worked together to push the Seattle City Council to enact a law requiring sick days. More recently, Washington's unions have

worked with African-American ministers to fight foreclosures and find jobs for former prisoners.

"Even if all we cared about was our own contracts, we can't even get those anymore without community assistance," said Larry Cohen, president of the Communications Workers of America.

While individual unions have aligned with other progressive constituencies for decades, the AFL-CIO president urged convention delegates to make those alliances permanent coalitions. That means labor would commit resources to building omnibus organizations where union, environmental and other leaders all work for a common program. To help make the pitch, Trumka called on three such allies, including Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Women, to address the convention on behalf of the resolution.

Speaking on the convention's opening night, Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) said that a vital labor movement needs to be part of a broader movement to protect all Americans from special corporate interests.

"On almost every issue of economic concern, our values are America's values," she said. "And our agenda is America's agenda."

While the AFL-CIO still represents more than 12 million workers and has 57 member unions, it must do more to stem the loss of middle-class jobs and benefits.

"We cannot win economic justice only for ourselves, for union members alone," Trumka told the convention. "It would not be right, and it's not possible. All working people will rise together, or we will keep falling together."

## Pro-postal resolution

Speaking on Sept. 11 to the delegates of the convention, NALC President

Fredric Rolando informed those gathered inside the Los Angeles Convention Center of the Postal Service's actual financial situation.

"Don't believe what you read in the papers," Rolando said. "The Postal Service is not losing \$15 billion a year. In fact, it's earning a profit delivering the mail, bringing in \$330 million so far this fiscal year."

Rolando spoke in support of a convention resolution calling for the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions to help the postal unions win postal reform that will help the Postal Service innovate and grow, and to help us defeat legislation that would slash jobs and service. The resolution was adopted by acclamation.

The president also warned the delegates about congressional proposals to eliminate Saturday mail and door delivery of the mail.

"Every day, our members are out delivering the mail in rain, snow and sleet," Rolando said. "But if Congress has its way, your grandmother will be forced to go out in all kinds of weather to get the mail herself."

Rolando explained that the Postal Service is required by law to pre-fund its future retiree health benefits decades in advance, something no other government agency or private enterprise is required to do. And he told delegates just how outrageous this unaffordable mandate is, especially as the Postal Service—much as the rest of the country—struggles to recover from the worst recession in 80 years.

"Any reform bill that fails to fix the pre-funding burden will pave the way for a continued attack on the 500,000 postal employee members of the AFL-CIO and the vital services they provide for the country," Rolando said.

The convention resolution was drafted by NALC along with the National Postal



**NALC President Fredric Rolando makes his pitch for a resolution that would have the AFL-CIO and its affiliates join in the fight for positive postal reform.**

Mail Handlers Union and the American Postal Workers Union. It was introduced to the delegates by J. David Cox, president of the American Federation of Government Employees and a member of the AFL-CIO's resolutions committee.

Cox's impassioned speech in support of a strong Postal Service and the hundreds of thousands of AFL-CIO members who work for the Postal Service was met with a standing ovation. NPMHU President John Hegarty and APWU delegate Omar Gonzalez also lent powerful support for the resolution.

## Elections

At the convention, Trumka was re-elected to another four-year term as AFL-CIO president. Liz Shuler was re-elected as secretary-treasurer while Tefere Gebre was elected executive vice president after Arlene Holt Baker decided to retire. President Rolando was re-elected as a vice president of the federation, as well.

NALC's delegates to the AFL-CIO convention were elected in 2012 at our 68th Biennial Convention in Minneapolis. They are Ingrid Armada, Providence, RI Branch 15; Denise Brooks, Medford, OR Branch 1433; Lloyd Doucet Jr., New Orleans Branch 124; Elise M. Foster, Chicago Branch 11; Anita Guzik, Los Angeles Branch 24; Stephen Hanna, York, PA Branch 509; and Charles Heege, New York Branch 36. By virtue of their NALC offices, President Fredric Rolando and Secretary-Treasurer Jane Broendel also are AFL-CIO convention delegates. **PR**

## Victory for workers in Indiana

**T**he Superior Court in Lake County, IN, on Sept. 10 ruled unconstitutional Indiana's so-called right-to-work (for less) law.

A judge speaking for the court said that by forcing unions to represent all workers—even freeloaders who choose not to join and become dues-paying members—the law violates the state's constitutional ban on providing services without compensation.

"This is a great victory for working families across Indiana and around the nation," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "It's one more tool we can use in our fight against these anti-worker laws that are on the books in 23 states."

But the fight in Indiana is not over—the state can still appeal this ruling, meaning the law stands until the appeals process is completed. **PR**