

## Labor Sets Out to Woo Younger Workers

By KRIS MAHER and MELANIE TROTTMAN  
Wall Street Journal--September 1, 2009

Richard Trumka, the third-generation coal miner likely this month to assume the helm of the nation's largest labor federation, is launching a drive to court younger workers, many of whom don't see unions as relevant.

The 59-year-old secretary-treasurer of the 11-million-member AFL-CIO outlined a plan Monday before the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, to push for causes that more directly affect younger workers, including freelancers and temporary workers. Among them: affordable college education, protection for telecommuters and portable health care.

[Trumka photo] Getty Images

Richard Trumka, likely to take the helm of the AFL-CIO later this month, speaks Monday in Washington.

"We've lost touch with a whole generation," Mr. Trumka said.

Mr. Trumka noted that a study by the Center for American Progress showed support for unions was higher among Americans ages 30 or younger than in any other age group, based on presidential election-year surveys.

"The problem is that they don't think we have much to offer them," he said. "Fighting to make college affordable may not be a traditional union issue. But if we care about the economic security of young workers, it has to become one."

Mr. Trumka said in an interview that he planned to field a team of 1,000 organizers to help the federation's 56 unions recruit such workers and visit college campuses. He also planned to boost organizing efforts among low-wage minority workers.

It would be a change in tack for a man known for his often-fiery, populist rhetoric. "Trumka looks tough and talks tough," said Gary Chaison, a professor of industrial relations at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. "He's an old-fashioned two-fisted labor leader."

But as union membership shrinks -- it stands at 7.6% of the private sector, down from about 17% in the early 1980s -- Mr. Chaison said labor leaders must focus on issues facing all working families and younger, professional workers, whether they belong to unions or not. "The labor movement has to go beyond representing its members," he said.

Business leaders expect little change from Mr. Trumka.

"I suspect he's going to be very aggressive but I think, frankly, more of the same in the sense of a very liberal agenda that does not appear open to compromise," said Randy Johnson, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's senior vice president of labor. "The truth is that most employees are fairly satisfied with their employment relationship and that employers are not the employers of the 1930s and '40s."

Mr. Trumka is expected to take the helm of the AFL-CIO at its convention this month in Pittsburgh, when he runs unopposed for president. He will assume the role at a time when labor, which expected huge gains from the Obama administration, is seeing some of its top priorities -- including a bill to more easily organize workers -- fall by the wayside. Support in Congress is also wavering for a public health-insurance plan, a proposal broadly supported by unions.

Speaking in August at the Sheet Metal Workers International Association convention, Mr. Trumka promised to take on politicians. "We need to send them a special message," he said. "You may have forgotten what the labor movement did to get you elected, but, by God, we never will! And if you stab us in the back on health care this year, don't you dare ask us for our support next year!"

Mr. Trumka, who began mining coal at 19 and later received a law degree from Villanova University, led the United Mine Workers of America for 13 years. The stocky Pennsylvania native spent the last 14 years as secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, largely in the shadows of federation president John Sweeney, 75.

As Mr. Sweeney prepared to retire, Mr. Trumka began taking a more public and political stand, helping shore up his candidacy. In a tough-talking 2008 speech to United Steelworkers, he said race shouldn't play a role in the presidential election. The speech was viewed as helping Mr. Obama shore up support among white union families.

Mr. Trumka has had long-running disputes with a few labor leaders over the course of his career, including James P. Hoffa, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. In 1996, Mr. Trumka backed Ron Carey over Mr. Hoffa to run the Teamsters. A year later, federal prosecutors alleged that Mr. Trumka helped illegally steer \$150,000 toward Mr. Carey's campaign. Mr. Trumka invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and declined to answer questions. He was never charged.

He is set to take over the federation as dwindling membership and dues have weakened its balance sheet. At the end of 2008, the federation had \$2.3 million more in liabilities than in assets, compared with net assets of \$29.1 million in 2004, according to Labor Department filings.

"There are some inefficiencies within the AFL-CIO that Rich and his team are going to have to address," said Greg Junemann, president of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engi