TRUMKA ELECTED AFL-CIO PRESIDENT; LEADERSHIP TEAM INCLUDES TWO WOMEN

In what is seen as an historic election, delegates to the AFL-CIO’s quadrennial convention elect a new leadership team that includes two women at the top of the ticket. Delegates elect AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard L. Trumka, 60, to lead the organization, succeeding John J. Sweeney, who retired after serving as president for 14 years.

Liz Shuler, the executive assistant to the president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, at age 39, was elected as the youngest secretary-treasurer of the federation, and the first woman elected to this position. Arlene Holt Baker, an African American, was reelected to her current position as the federation’s executive vice president.

The convention also elected 51 vice presidents, who will serve on the federation’s executive council, the governing body between conventions. All the officers ran unopposed.

Trumka was first elected as secretary-treasurer in 1995, running on an insurgent slate with Sweeney, in the first contested election ever in AFL-CIO history. At the time of his election, he was serving as the president of the United Mine Workers.

In his acceptance speech, Trumka laid out his vision for a labor movement that has a moral obligation to leave “no worker behind.” Trumka contends that those in the middle class today are “living in chaos,” losing health care, losing pensions and their jobs. While labor did not get the country into “this mess, we are the people who are going to lead America out of it.” In order to do so, Trumka wants to craft a progressive economic agenda for America, and the officers plan to begin a conversation with workers across the country. That agenda will spell out “our expectations of the men and women we support—and the consequences of turning their backs on working people whose votes put them into office.”

While Trumka says the members of the federation will decide what will be on the agenda, “we do know that we need to take on the problems that are robbing middle-class families of any hope for the future—problems such as pension, education, child care, fair taxes, putting Wall Street on a tight leash, and bargaining trade laws that create good jobs at home.”

Trumka sees the need to reach out to a number of groups—young workers, women, people of color, as well as immigrants. In reaching out to young workers, the labor movement needs to figure out what makes sense to the next generation of workers. Noting that young workers often are trapped in the world of the contingent economy, working as temps, contractors, and on-call labor, with low wages, no health care, no job security or pensions, “we have to change our approach to organizing and representation to better meet their needs.”

In her acceptance speech, Shuler says her first priority will be to manage the finances of the federation with complete accountability and transparency. As the youngest member on the ticket, Shuler will be the point person at the federation to come up with new ideas on how to connect with young workers. She says labor needs to speak in a new language to these workers as well as create new media to connect with them. Young workers have not connected the dots that labor can be their salvation, she adds.

Holt Baker says that the labor movement is not just concerned about unionized workers, but “our fight is really about ensuring life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all families.” The labor movement must keep ensuring that millions of workers have the “dignity and respect they deserve. That means good wages, decent pensions, affordable health care, and continuous job training. If we don’t fight for these securities, who will?”

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