

*AFL-CIO*

## **Trumka Vows to Expand Workers' Movement In Order to Rebuild America's Middle Class**

By Michelle Amber

Contending that the decline in unionization in this country is “behind our nation's stagnant wages and our anemic consumer demand,” AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka Nov. 15 vowed to build a working-class movement to rebuild America's middle class.

Speaking at the Passenger Railroad Conference on Labor Management Relations, sponsored by the National Mediation Board, Trumka reminded the audience of labor and management officials that only 7 percent of private sector workers currently are represented by a union.

“That figure is one of the most important numbers in American life,” he said, according to prepared remarks. It is the “reason why our economy hasn't grown—and why it has fallen victim to credit-fueled bubbles. That 7 percent figure has delivered us to our present condition, and we will not revive our economy until it begins to grow.”

Trumka said the nation has to understand and accept “the key role that empowered workers play in any successful economy.”

“I won't dance around this idea,” he said. “The right of workers to organize, to bargain collectively and to raise our voices in the public square is just as important as the right to vote. Workers are not a burden. We are the solution. We are the backbone of America.”

A lot of “misguided people” in this country think that, despite clear language to the contrary in federal law, workers should not have a voice and should not be allowed to form unions, the AFL-CIO president said.

### **Unions Will Continue to Organize**

“Well, on behalf of America's labor movement, I assure you that those people can believe what they will, but we will go on organizing, we will continue pushing ahead with our campaign to enable more workers to make their own choices—and to make sure our unions are democratic,” he said.

Trumka lamented that he hears that “America's workers in the passenger rail industry must accept the fact that their pay and benefits are out of line,” and that they are going to have to pay more for health insurance and more for retirement.

“That's ridiculous,” the AFL-CIO president said. “It's time to turn that around. We're going to fight to give all workers the ability to earn the same pay and enjoy the same benefits as passenger rail workers. That should be more than our goal, that should be America's goal, because every single worker, every family, every community, would benefit.”

Trumka said the labor movement is expanding its reach through its community affiliate Working America,

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which is talking to the unemployed and millions of workers who do not belong to a union. Labor also is helping workers that traditionally have been excluded from labor laws, such as car wash workers and taxi drivers, to organize.

"We're fired up and ready to build an honest-to-God working class movement, a movement to rebuild America's middle class for years to come," he said. "We've had some big wins, but we're not going to sit down and rest, not yet. We're ready to win America's future. We're making things better for working people."

Trumka, who was one of four union leaders to meet with President Obama Nov. 13 to discuss ways to keep the economy growing and find a balanced approach to reduce the nation's deficit (219 DLR A-10, 11/13/12), said America's deficit is a long-term problem, but it is not a short-term crisis.

### **'There Is No Fiscal Cliff.'**

"There is no fiscal cliff," he told attendees. "What we are facing is an obstacle course within a manufactured crisis that was hastily thrown together in response to inflated rhetoric about our federal deficit."

The immediate real crisis, Trumka said, is that there are 23 million unemployed or underemployed workers, a crumbling national infrastructure, and an undersupported manufacturing sector. All of these problems require significant federal investments, which will allow the economy to "grow out of this crisis, instead of digging us further in."

Contending that America is at a crossroads, Trumka said the country will either "get on the path to shared prosperity, or we'll let ourselves be fooled by deficit fears into heading back down the road to economic ruin and inequality."

Trumka said Amtrak is an "example of the choices our leaders will be making." Next year, Congress will take up reauthorization of the federal passenger rail program, which reauthorized Amtrak and expires at the end of fiscal 2013.

"We want to see Amtrak expanded and put on sound financial footing," Trumka said, adding that it plays an "essential role in our national transportation network." He said now is the right time to invest in its operating and capital needs as well as support its employees.

Trumka endorsed a proposal by President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden to invest \$8 billion next year "as a down payment toward the goal of giving 80 percent of Americans the ability to ride a faster train by 2020. This is a necessary step in the expansion of high-speed rail in America, and it would boost U.S. manufacturing jobs," he said.