

# US union head Trumka at the National Press Club

Niall Green  
23 May 2011

Opening his remarks before the National Press Club's luncheon lecture series in Washington, DC, on Friday, the president of the AFL-CIO union federation posed the question, "How do we respond to the spectacle unfolding across the American political landscape?"

Richard Trumka, the top union official in America and the former president of the United Mine Workers, explained the spectacle he was talking about was not the decades-long attack on workers that has seen wages eroded and millions of jobs destroyed, leaving vast swathes of the United States in a state of economic, social and cultural decay.

No, Trumka was talking about the "Politicians in Wisconsin and Ohio and a dozen other states" who were "trying to take away workers' rights to organize and bargain for a better life."

This is a reference to the efforts of several Republican governors, including Scott Walker in Wisconsin and John Kasich in Ohio, to combine wage and benefit cuts with the elimination of collective bargaining rights. These and similar attacks on the social position of the working class produced mass protests in Wisconsin and a host of smaller demonstrations in cities across the Midwest earlier this year.

While pointing to some of aspects of the offensive against the working class—mass unemployment, budget cuts, exploding social inequality, the gutting of workplace and voting rights—the dishonesty of the speech was highlighted by the fact that Trumka made no mention of the role played by Obama and the Democrats. Nor did he mention the disastrous record of the AFL-CIO itself, which has long subordinated the working class to the Democratic Party and American capitalism, while sabotaging every struggle by workers in defense of their jobs and living standards.

With the assertion that the unions were bargaining for a "better life" for their members, Trumka began his hour-long address to the National Press Club (NPC) with a fundamental untruth.

In the hands of the trade unions, the term "collective bargaining" means no more than the right to bargain *away* the rights and living standards of workers. For Trumka and his fellow well-paid union tops, the actions of Scott Walker in Wisconsin and Ohio's governor, John Kasich, were unacceptable because they threatened the dues base and position at the negotiating table of the labor bureaucracy.

The unions in Wisconsin, with the full backing of the AFL-CIO, had already agreed to all of Walker's economic demands before the protests broke out. A "better life" for the state's public sector

workers was most certainly not on offer when the unions in the state accepted that some \$30 million would be gouged from their members' paychecks in the form of sharp increases in co-pays for health care and pensions.

In Republican-controlled Wisconsin and Ohio, and in Democrat-held states such as California and New York, union officials have worked with both big business parties to make workers pay for the bankruptcy of the state governments, a direct product of the economic meltdown caused by the criminal activities of the American financial elite.

Trumka claimed in his NPC speech that the anti-cuts struggle by workers in the Midwest "began after last November's elections brought to power politicians in state capitals across the heartland who had a hidden agenda."

But it was Democratic governors and legislatures in Wisconsin, Ohio and a host of other states that were, with trade union backing, imposing their agenda of cuts *before* the last elections—a process that has continued unabated. Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle, Walker's predecessor in Wisconsin, slashed the state's budget while imposing a two-year pay freeze on public workers with the blessing of the unions.

The real attitude of Trumka *et al* to the destruction of the living standards of workers was expressed in the AFL-CIO chief's comments at a rally held in Madison, Wisconsin, February 18. Standing before a crowd of thousand of demonstrating workers, the AFL-CIO president declared that the unions recognized and accepted the need for spending cuts in state governments.

While, in the hands of the unions, collective bargaining guarantees nothing for workers, a lot is at stake for the unions' leaderships. While negotiating the destruction of jobs and wages for the rank-and-file in Wisconsin and across the US, the senior union officials take home very large paychecks in exchange for their role as industrial policemen of the working class.

Trumka himself has a salary in excess of \$250,000 per year, and there are union heads who make even more than him. There are hundreds of union officials at national and state levels receiving remuneration in excess of \$100,000 per year, and thousands more beneath them making two and three times the pay of most union members.

Even though union membership has fallen through the floor in the past four decades, the bureaucracy is doing better than ever. An established part of the upper middle class, Trumka and his ilk are divided from the working class by an unbridgeable gulf. Even

though in his speech to the NPC the AFL-CIO chief lambasted the “top 10 percent” for monopolizing the wealth in the US in recent years, his salary actually puts him in the top five percent of earners.

This class position makes the unions natural allies of the Democratic Party. But Trumka made it clear that his organization was willing to work with either one of the big business parties. “Quite frankly,” he said, “I’d like to thank our Democratic and Republican friends in the Ohio legislature that stood up for workers.”

Who is Trumka kidding? These “friends of labor,” are political representatives of an American ruling elite that is waging a one-sided class war against workers. Across the US, lawmakers from both parties agree that billions must be slashed from wages and essential social programs in order to cover the losses of the bourgeoisie.

For Trumka and the unions, the question of who is friend or foe starts and finishes with whether they are willing to back the automatic dues check-off and the bureaucracy’s stranglehold over collective bargaining.

Trumka proposed before the NPC gathering what he called a “new strategy” to defeat “the Scott Walker political agenda,” involving ballot recalls and citizen vetoes of legislation. This is the means through which the unions demobilized and demoralized the mass working class opposition in Wisconsin.

Nowhere in a speech that began with the question, “How do we respond to the spectacle unfolding across the American political landscape?” did Trumka use the word, “strike.” Just as the union executives worked assiduously to shut down the calls from workers in Wisconsin for a general strike, so the unions nationally are implacably opposed to any expression of working class opposition to austerity that goes beyond token gestures.

In response to the current negotiations between Democrats and Republicans in Washington about spending cuts and the debt ceiling on the federal budget, Trumka bemoaned that fact that there was not a “national conversation about putting America back to work to build the future.” Instead, “the debate here in Washington is about how *fast* we can destroy the fabric of our country.” (Emphasis added.)

Later, in response to a question about the demands for fiscal prudence, Trumka said there were long-term problems with the budget deficit, “so you do have to adjust.”

The clear implication is that while Trumka and the unions might take issue with the *speed* of the austerity measures being proposed by the Republicans, they are in fundamental agreement with the general thrust of US ruling class policy, and only seek a voice in this “national conversation.”

Asked by the moderator of the NPC event why he had not mentioned President Barack Obama in the course of his speech, Trumka solidarized the AFL-CIO with one of the most right-wing administrations in US history.

“Well, I was talking about people who were off on the wrong course. So, of course I wouldn’t mention him,” Trumka quipped, immediately adding, “I think the president has done a good job, but I think his scale has been limited, either because he was too slow on things that needed fixing or because the Republicans have

prevented him.”

The AFL-CIO president continued, “If you look at the framework that he’s tried to lay out for trying to get the economy back on track, it’s clearly the right framework.”

What is this “framework” that Trumka finds so appealing? What is the actual record of the Obama administration?

From the moment he took office in the midst of the financial crisis, Obama made clear that he would do everything in the government’s power to cover the speculative losses of Wall Street, while only providing a pittance in aid to “Main Street” as a political cover for the gargantuan handouts to the ruling elite.

One of Obama’s first acts, in a move that has set the tone not just for his administration but for the whole of corporate America, was to force General Motors and Chrysler into bankruptcy in order to tear-up existing contracts, slash benefits and force new hires to accept wages of \$14 per hour—half the pay of older workers—with the complicity of the United Auto Workers union.

The administration has done nothing to help bankrupt state and local governments, and has categorically refused to implement a public works program to ease mass unemployment. Instead, Obama has proclaimed that only private enterprise can create jobs.

Finally, Obama and the Democrats in Congress plan to cut \$4 trillion dollars from the budget deficit over the next ten years, on top of already announced public spending cuts and a two-year pay and hiring freeze for federal government workers.

Ignoring this, Trumka added, “I think you’ll see him [Obama], over the next several months making jobs the centerpiece of what he tries to accomplish.”

The fruits of this are already in evidence, with US manufacturing growing at over nine percent in the first quarter of this year based on sharp increases in productivity and a fall in wages. Corporate America has been able to impose these conditions for growth in manufacturing through the existence of a massive pool of unemployed labor, which the government is deliberately maintaining as a drag on wages, combined with a protectionist monetary policy that has sharply weakened the dollar.

Finishing off his speech on a nationalist note, Trumka proclaimed that, “We will only win investments in our future if we embrace the idea that we are one national community.”

Workers should take this as a warning. While the working class faces the worst attacks on its living standards since the Hungry Thirties, the so-called leaders of labor in the AFL-CIO, UAW, Change To Win, *etc.* are making common cause with the US ruling class. Workers in America will find no more hostile an enemy than Trumka and the rest of the union bureaucracy, and no greater friend than the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**