

Death of AFL-CIO president evokes gushing tributes from Democratic leaders

Richard Trumka 1949–2021

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The death of AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka Thursday, age 72, has evoked an outpouring of tributes from Democratic Party officials and the corporate media as well as expressions of concern over the passing of a ruthless and experienced union bureaucrat with a long record of suppressing and betraying workers struggles.

Typical were the remarks of Democratic Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer who tearfully declared, “The working people of America have lost a fierce warrior at a time when we needed him most.” He went on, “Rich Trumka was the working people of America,” adding, “I wanted to inform my colleagues that we have just lost a giant, and we need him so.”

Other Democratic Party leaders joined in the praise, including President Biden who called Trumka “a close friend,” and Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who declared, “Richard Trumka dedicated his life to the labor movement and the right to organize.”

There were also glowing tributes to Trumka, who reportedly died from a heart attack, in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and other media outlets.

Trumka has won praise from representatives of the ruling elite, not because he was a “warrior” for the working class, but because of his services to big business in suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of Corporate America. As head of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) from 1982–1995 he instituted the disastrous selective strike policy, which led to major defeats for coal miners, once the most militant sections of the American working class. He oversaw the decimation of UMWA membership, which fell from 120,000 in 1982 to as low as 16,000 in 2009.

During the same period, the unions became integrated into the structure of corporate management, detaching themselves from any connection to the conditions and struggles of workers and developing new, lucrative, sources of income through unlimited collaboration with the corporate bosses.

As head of the AFL-CIO Trumka combined subservience to the employers with rabid nationalism and support for the expansion of wars by the US government and the suppression of democratic rights at home. Under his tenure strikes fell to new historic lows. There were just five major strikes in 2009 and seven in 2017.

Trumka backed to the hilt the policies of the Obama administration, which enforced a massive redistribution of wealth from the working class to the wealthiest social layers in society. This included the bank bailouts following the 2008 global economic crash and the slashing of wages of autoworkers in the restructuring of the auto industry the year after.

Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Trumka pledged to work with the new administration based on support for its rabidly nationalist “America First” and trade war agenda. In August 2018, Trumka and other union leaders met with Trump in the midst of a vicious anti-immigrant campaign by the Republican administration. Trumka

praised Trump’s trade war agenda and did not rule out an endorsement of Trump in 2020. Robert Lighthizer, Trump’s US trade representative and an anti-China hawk, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the deceased AFL-CIO president was “a true giant in the labor movement.”

With the outbreak of the COVID pandemic in 2020 Trumka took a lead role in enforcing the homicidal reopening policy. This included blocking struggles by meatpacking workers, autoworkers, health care workers and teachers demanding the prioritization of saving human lives, including the shutdown of schools and nonessential industry to halt the spread of infection and death.

Trumka and his hand-picked successor as the head of the UMWA, Cecil Roberts, sought to isolate and strangle the ongoing struggle by 1,000 miners at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama. The workers struck in April after voting down by a 1006 to 45 margin a sellout deal Roberts had attempted to ram down their throats. The UMWA, sitting on some \$200 million in assets, is seeking to starve the miners into submission by doling out miserly \$325 weekly strike pay.

Trumka, as head of the AFL-CIO, was seen by the Biden administration as a critical component of its strategy of using the unions to suppress the class struggle of workers against the herd immunity policy of the ruling class in relation to the pandemic and the growth of social inequality. The support of the unions is also seen by the Biden administration as a critical component of the ruling class preparations for conflict with China.

For this reason, the White House created a task force to assist the unions with the goal of avoiding “labor strife.” As part of this turn the Biden administration openly intervened on behalf of the unionization drive at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama. Months after the overwhelming defeat of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Biden’s National Labor Relations Board has called for a revote.

The integration of the unions into the Democratic Party was illustrated by Biden’s recent nomination of Richard Trumka Jr. to a seat on the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Trumka Jr. is an attorney for the House Committee on Oversight and Reform along with the economic and consumer policy subcommittee.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will write further on the significance of Trumka’s career. Below we are reposting an article first published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on September 17, 2009, when Trumka was installed as head the AFL-CIO.

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On Wednesday, John Sweeney, who has led the AFL-CIO since 1995, stepped down and was succeeded by his long-time lieutenant, Richard Trumka, who ran unopposed and was elected by delegates at the AFL-CIO convention in Pittsburgh.

Few workers will take notice of the changing of the guard at the summit of the right-wing trade union apparatus. However, the corporate media and various “left” apologists for the labor bureaucracy have suggested

that the elevation of the former president of the United Mine Workers might lead to a revival of the labor movement.

Similar claims were made when Sweeney succeeded Lane Kirkland, and then proceeded to preside over a further catastrophe for workers and a fall in unionization rates to levels not seen since the beginning of the last century. In 2008, only 7.6 percent of private sector workers were in unions, the lowest rate since 1900.

Trumka's résumé makes him eminently qualified to continue where Sweeney left off. Throughout his career he has suppressed opposition from rank-and-file workers, collaborated with the employers in imposing concessions on union members, and promoted the nationalism and anti-communism which have been hallmarks of the AFL-CIO since its formation more than 50 years ago.

Trumka began his career in the United Mine Workers (UMW) bureaucracy as a member of the legal staff of Arnold Miller, who was elected president in a Labor Department-supervised election in 1972. That election came as a result of an upsurge of miners against the corrupt and gangster-ridden leadership of Tony Boyle, who had been convicted of the murder of UMW dissident Jock Yablonski.

A wave of wildcat strikes throughout the coalfields culminated in a bitter strike in 1974, and then the 111-day walkout in 1977-78, in which miners clashed with Miller and defied a back-to-work order by the Carter administration. Miller was forced to resign in 1979.

According to an account of the memoir of Thomas Geoghegan, another member of Miller's legal staff, "the young turks, including Trumka and [Geoghegan], who'd taken over the Washington, DC headquarters of the UMW, couldn't control the rank and file and they were turned out in disgrace."

Trumka, who had obtained a law degree, returned to work in the mines in order to build up his credentials as a rank-and-file miner and accumulate the required time in the mines to run for office. His chance came after miners again rebelled, this time against the 1981 sellout agreement brought by UMW President Sam Church.

In 1982, Trumka won a landslide victory over Church. Upon taking office, he pledged, "The rank and file says no more backward steps, no takeaway contracts, organize the coal mines, bring stability to the union, and that's what we are going to do, beginning tomorrow."

Over the next 13 years however, Trumka worked to break down the traditions of working class solidarity and militant struggle in the UMW and transform the union into an adjunct of the coal industry. In 1983, the UMW abandoned its traditional policy of "no contract, no work" and industry-wide strike action in favor of the policy of so-called "selective strikes" against individual companies.

This paved the way for the isolation and defeat of the 1984-85 AT Massey strike and the 1989-90 struggle at Pittston coal, which opened the way for a wave of violence by the coal companies and the state that culminated in the frame-up and murder of militant miners.

Rather than organizing mass picketing to defend the 1,500 Pittston strikers and spreading the struggle across the coalfields, Trumka ordered miners to carry out civil disobedience stunts, such as sitting in front of the mine entrances until state troopers hauled them off to jail and appealing to Pittston shareholders at corporate meetings.

While he cowered before the coal operators and the government, Trumka used threats and physical attacks against his opponents, above all the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, which was fighting to mobilize all miners in a national strike to defend the Pittston strikers.

In June 1989, rank-and-file miners in southern West Virginia launched a wildcat strike to break the isolation of the Pittston workers. Roving pickets, many wearing ski masks, fanned out to shut down union and non-union mines. At its height, 50,000 miners paralyzed coal production east of the Mississippi.

In response, Trumka issued a desperate plea to the coal bosses and the government, telling the *Charleston Gazette* that Pittston's intransigence threatened to destroy the stability and competitiveness the UMW had brought to the coal industry.

If the company succeeded in breaking the UMW, he warned, "When it comes back, I think the form of union probably will be different. Its tolerance for injustice will be far less and its willingness to alibi for a system that we know doesn't work will be nonexistent."

Behind the scenes, Trumka conspired with the first Bush administration and Democrats like West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller to crush the wildcat and impose a sellout on the Pittston miners. Once again, the crushing of the miners' rebellion was used to launch a corporate-government counteroffensive against the miners, culminating in the murder of West Virginia coal miner John McCoy in January 1990.

Trumka responded with indifference and contempt, not only refusing to call a traditional memorial day to honor the fallen miner, but deciding to boycott the funeral, which was attended by thousands of miners. The UMW did nothing to demand the arrest of the killers—who are free to this day—and even cut off strike benefits to McCoy's widow and children.

Summing up this treatment by the UMW president, McCoy's sister, Donna Carter, said, "By doing absolutely nothing now—and from the day John got killed, Trumka did absolutely nothing—he shares as much of the responsibility as the man who shot the gun."

Trumka would leave the UMW in 1995 to take a higher position in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. He left having overseen the destruction of what was once the most powerful and militant union in the US. When he was elected UMW president in 1982, the union had 120,000 active members. Today it has around 16,000. Former UMW strongholds in the coal states of West Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania are plagued with poverty, chronic unemployment and ill health.

One other episode of his biography is worth nothing. After becoming secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, Trumka was implicated in an illegal scheme to help finance the 1996 reelection bid of Teamsters President Ron Carey. According to the testimony of Carey's campaign manager, Jere Nash, Trumka personally approved a plan under which the Teamsters would give \$150,000 in union funds to Citizen Action, a liberal lobbying group backed by the AFL-CIO, in return for an equal amount in contributions steered by several union officials to Carey's campaign.

Trumka refused to testify about the alleged contribution-swapping scheme, either before the New York federal grand jury or before a congressional subcommittee which held hearings on the affair, citing his Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination. Although AFL-CIO by-laws require that any union official invoking the Fifth Amendment be disqualified from office, the labor federation took no action against the man who is now its president.

Trumka has spent the last 14 years as Sweeney's right-hand man, developing the closest relations with big business and working to "put out fires," i.e., suppress working class struggles throughout the country.

In February, he was named to the White House Economic Recovery Advisory Board, a body which includes corporate executives from General Electric, Oracle and UBS, and is headed by former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, who spearheaded the assault on workers during the Reagan years.

In an effort to divert growing social anger against unemployment, Trumka plans to push "Buy American" chauvinism even more aggressively than his predecessor. "Mr. Trumka is already displaying a far more aggressive stance on trade than Mr. Sweeney did," the *New York Times* noted, citing his close ties to the Steelworkers union, which successfully pushed for the White House to impose trade tariffs on Chinese tire exports.

It is perfectly logical that such an individual should be brought in to head the AFL-CIO, a bureaucratized, anti-democratic, corporatist

apparatus that is thoroughly hostile to the interests of the working class. It underscores the transformation of the official unions into tools of the corporate and financial elite and the historic failure of the attempt to establish a labor movement on the basis of anti-communism, nationalism and an alliance with the Democratic Party.



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