

Richard Trumka (1949-2021): A dedicated servant of Corporate America

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In the wake of the sycophantic eulogies to late AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, it is worthwhile to review the biography of a man whose life embodied the transformation of the US unions from working class organizations into corrupt appendages of corporate management and the state.

The universal praise that Trumka has won, from Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America on the nominal “left,” to the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, comes not despite this record, but because of it. The suppression by the unions of organized resistance to the class war policies of big business has helped lift the stock market to record heights, filling the portfolios of the wealthy and their well-heeled political and media hangers on.

Trumka embodied the reactionary instincts of a corrupt and privileged labor bureaucracy, steeped in anti-communism and nationalism, that long ago separated the unions from any connection to the defense of workers.

Trumka started his career as a lawyer, not a miner. He worked on the staff of Arnold Miller, who was elected UMWA president in a Labor Department-supervised election in 1972. The US government saw Miller as a “safe” alternative to the corrupt, gangster leadership of Tony Boyle, which had organized the murder of Boyle’s chief opponent, “Jock” Yablonski, in December 1969.

Miller, however, was forced to resign in the wake of the bitter 1977-1978 national coal miners strike in which miners defied a Taft Hartley strikebreaking injunction imposed by Democrat Jimmy Carter. Miners twice rejected contracts supported by Miller, and he faced a mounting rebellion by the rank-and-file.

The stand taken by the miners against the Carter administration led big business to conclude that the militancy of the American working class had to be decisively curbed in order to restore the competitiveness of US industry facing global economic pressure. In 1979, Carter appointed Paul Volcker as head of the US Federal Reserve who drove up interest rates to unprecedented levels. Mass layoffs and industrial bankruptcies spread. In 1979, the United Auto Workers agreed to unprecedented concessions to Chrysler.

The attacks escalated with the firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers by newly elected President Ronald Reagan in 1981. The AFL-CIO refused to defend PATCO, encouraging a wave of unionbusting throughout the US.

After Miller’s resignation, Trumka went back to work in the mines in order to be eligible to run for union office. His chance came in 1982, when he won election running against UMWA President Sam Church, reviled for a 1981 sellout deal with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association. While Trumka was elected on a platform of “no concessions,” he in fact presided over a series of disastrous defeats. He abandoned the tradition of national strikes in favor of a “selective strike” policy that left miners isolated in unequal struggles against mine owners backed by police and armed thugs.

Trumka preached collaboration with the bosses, insisting that miners

had to help slash labor costs so that US-based coal companies could undercut overseas competitors. In place of the militant traditions of mass picketing, Trumka substituted toothless civil disobedience stunts and appeals to corporate stockholders.

Trumka’s treachery, which paralleled the betrayals being carried out by unions across the US, reflected the response of labor bureaucracies around the world to the deepening crisis of world capitalism. Based on their pro-capitalist and nationalist program, the American unions worked to slash wages and benefits in order to boost the declining competitive position of coal, steel, auto and other US industries.

The events in the US were part of a global process involving the transformation of nationalist labor bureaucracies into direct appendages of the corporations. This was epitomized by the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The A.T. Massey and Pittston strikes

In the A.T. Massey strike of 1984-85, Trumka refused to mobilize the union’s 100,000 strong membership in support of the striking workers. He eventually called off the strike, caving to management and leaving hundreds of miners fired and blacklisted.

In the wake of the strike, five A.T. Massey workers were framed up for involvement in the shooting of a scab coal truck driver. Four of the miners were eventually convicted and sentenced to decades in prison. UMWA Local 2496 President Donnie Thornsby, David Thornsby, Arnold Heightland and James Darryl Smith were only released starting in 2007. A fifth miner, Paul Smith, was acquitted. Trumka never lifted a finger to defend the men or assist their stricken families.

In 1989, nine miners on selective strike at Milburn Collieries in West Virginia were arrested and framed up on charges of arson, bombing and conspiracy. The UMWA pressured eight of the nine miners to plead guilty, while a ninth miner refused to plead guilty and was later acquitted after it was revealed at trial that a government provocateur had staged the incident.

In the 1989-1990 strike against Pittston Coal Company, Trumka again imposed a selective strike policy and organized a defeat. Trumka even ordered Pittston miners in some locations to continue working, effectively scabbing on their brothers on the picket line. While coddling the coal operators, the UMWA leadership targeted supporters of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, and their newspaper the *Bulletin*, enacting in violent red-baiting in an unsuccessful attempt to keep them off the picket lines.

One day after a mass rally in Charleston, West Virginia, in which Workers League supporters distributed a statement calling on miners to defy Trumka and spread the Pittston strike, a wildcat walkout ensued that

at one point involved 50,000 miners in 11 states.

Trumka made himself scarce during the wildcat, afraid to speak in front of militant miners demanding decisive action in support of the Pittston workers.

In the midst of the wildcat action, Trumka issued a desperate plea to the coal bosses and the government, warning that the union's effort to bring stability to the coalfields was being undermined by Pittston.

In a candid and revealing statement, Trumka warned that if the union was broken, "When it comes back, I think the form of the 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."

In other words, the role of the unions was to "alibi" for a system that doesn't work, capitalism.

Trumka eventually secured a return to work based on the lying claim that Pittston was retreating from its demands. He eventually signed a sellout deal with Pittston, dictated by the George H. W. Bush administration, granting all management's major demands, including around-the-clock, seven-day production and an end to contributions to the UMWA 1950 Benefit Fund.

In the wake of this betrayal, UMWA miner John McCoy was killed in an ambush by company thugs while picketing a nonunion mine near Welch, West Virginia. Over 700 miners attended the funeral, but Trumka and UMWA Vice President Cecil Roberts refused to show. Three weeks later, the UMWA cut off strike benefits to his widow and children.

Trumka likewise abandoned another West Virginia miner, Jerry Dale Lowe, who was arrested and tried for the shooting of a nonunion contractor at an Arch Mineral mine in Logan County, West Virginia in 1993. The UMWA collaborated with the prosecution in helping railroad Lowe, who ultimately was sentenced to 11 years without parole on federal charges of interference with interstate commerce.

The results of the defeats inflicted on the coal miners, the most militant section of the American working class, were devastating. UMWA membership plummeted while strikes virtually ceased. Nonunion coal production spread in former union strongholds such as eastern Kentucky and West Virginia.

However, as union membership plummeted, the UMWA, like other unions, established ever-closer corporatist ties to management. While betraying workers' interests, the UMWA secured new, lucrative sources of income through these measures.

In the following decades, Democratic and Republican administrations have moved to scrap health and safety protections won by miners in previous years, such as limits on coal dust exposure. This has led to a resurgence of deadly and incurable black lung among miners in the Appalachian coal regions.

Trumka left the UMWA in 1995 to take a post as AFL-CIO secretary treasurer, the number two man behind the newly installed president, John Sweeney. Under Sweeney, the unions continued to hemorrhage members while living standards for workers declined further. To help shore up the union apparatus, Sweeney enlisted the support of various pseudo-left groups, such as those around Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

In 1996, Sweeney was caught up in a scandal involving a scheme to illegally divert Teamsters dues money to the re-election campaign of TDU-backed Teamsters President Ron Carey through the intermediary of Democratic Party-aligned donors. The election was later voided.

Testimony revealed that Trumka was involved in discussions over funneling AFL-CIO money to the Carey campaign as part of the scheme. In 1997, Trumka invoked his Fifth Amendment right to refuse to testify on the matter. Sweeney, however, refused to sack Trumka, despite union rules requiring the dismissal of union officials invoking the fifth.

Trumka's tenure as AFL-CIO president

Trumka was elevated to the presidency of the AFL-CIO in 2009. Almost immediately after being sworn in, Trumka oversaw the restructuring of the auto industry and the halving of wages for new-hires imposed by the Obama administration, with the support of the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO.

Under Trumka, strike activity in the US fell to new lows, with just five large strikes in 2009 and seven in 2017. At the same time, social inequality reached new heights. By 2016, the net worth of the richest 400 Americans had risen to \$2.4 trillion while wages stagnated, temporary and part-time work expanded and student loan debt soared.

Disillusionment with Obama paved the way for the election of the far-right demagogue Donald Trump in 2016. Trumka immediately sought to find common ground with the Trump administration on the basis of strident American nationalism and trade war against the foreign rivals of US capitalism, in the first place China.

Trumka accepted an appointment to Trump's Presidential Council on Manufacturing, sitting side-by-side with a 'who's who' of top corporate executives. He later criticized trade war measures taken by the Trump administration against China as insufficiently aggressive.

He later lent his support to the restructuring of the North America Free Trade Agreement. The replacement for NAFTA, the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, is a protectionist bloc directly aimed at China as well as America's European rivals.

Trumka's last years were marked by a resurgence of class struggle in the US, with the eruption of teachers' rebellions in West Virginia and other states in defiance of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. In 2019, workers at General Motors carried out a 40-day strike, the first major auto walkout in decades. In every case, the AFL-CIO worked to isolate and defeat the struggles of workers.

With the eruption of the global pandemic in 2020, the AFL-CIO collaborated with the Trump administration and big business to impose the homicidal policy of workplace and school re-openings, which is continuing to take a terrible toll on human life.

Under the Democratic Biden administration, Trumka and the AFL-CIO put their full resources behind suppressing mounting worker opposition to the herd immunity and austerity policies of the corporations. The AFL-CIO has worked to isolate and betray a series of militant strikes, including Hunts Point workers and graduate students in New York, St. Vincent nurses in Massachusetts and Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama.

Since taking office, the Biden administration has sought to shore up the unions as a critical bulwark against growing social discontent. Biden's program, embraced by the various pseudo-left organizations, is aimed at the further corporatist integration of the unions into governmental/business structures in the interests of suppressing the class struggle and preparing for war. This was underscored by the appointment by Biden of a task force to encourage the institutionalization of the unions, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Treasury Secretary and former Fed Chair Janet Yellen.

Just before his death, Trumka recorded a speech addressed to Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, who have been on strike five months after rebelling against a sellout contract foisted on them by Trumka's successor as president of the UMWA, Cecil Roberts. Trumka engaged in his trademark demagoguery, declaring, "I stand with my brothers and sisters at Warrior Met... I'll stand with you for as long it takes for you to win a fair contract."

In reality, the AFL-CIO has not lifted a finger to aid the Warrior Met miners, while the workers have been starved on a strike pay of \$325 per week.

The walkout at Warrior Met is part of an emerging insurgency against the very trade union apparatuses that Trumka served for so long. In the background of the worried paeans to Trumka from the Democratic Party and the establishment media are concerns that the unions are losing their ability to suppress the class struggle.

This was evident in the five-week strike by Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia, who voted down by massive margins sellout contracts brought back by the United Auto Workers. With the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Volvo workers established the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which is independent of the UAW. The committee quickly emerged as the focal point of opposition to the attempts by the UAW to isolate and betray the strike. It issued appeals for support to Volvo workers in other states as well as globally.

It is critical for workers to assimilate the lessons of this record and draw appropriate conclusions. In the first place, workers need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves. These committees, uniting workers in different factories and industries, establishing global links, must advance demands corresponding to the needs of workers, not the profit requirements of big business.

This points to the necessity of fighting for socialism, the reorganization of society based on production for human needs, not private profit.

In opposition to the reactionary nationalism peddled by the unions, workers of all countries must unite in defense of their shared interests. This is doubly true under conditions of a global pandemic, escalating climate disaster and preparation for world war.

We call on workers to take up the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Only a unified international movement of the working class, independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions, can secure the future of humanity.



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