

Labor Leader Trumka Eyes Changes, Pushes Agenda

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Downtown's newest labor boss is making bold predictions during his first weeks on the job, assuring passage of a liberal health care overhaul by the 2010 State of the Union, followed by imminent consideration of contentious "card check" legislation.

Newly minted AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka also is not ruling out launching television advertisements or rallying his members against a Democratic-backed health care bill if it taxes benefits, does not include a public insurance option or if it does not force companies to cover their employees.

"I would take nothing off the table right now for what we are willing to do," Trumka said last week. "We're making hundreds of thousands of phone calls, [writing] hundreds of thousands of handwritten letters. We're educating the general public, and we're having meetings with legislators."

Trumka's comments came during a wide-ranging interview with Roll Call on Thursday, during which the third-generation coal miner also spoke about possible personnel shake-ups at the AFL-CIO, the still-fractured labor movement, and what his coalition has in store for the 2010 election.

For now, Trumka pledged that top AFL-CIO lobbyist Bill Samuel's job is safe, but he declined to discuss the future of Samuel's deputies or other employees in the government affairs office.

"Bill is not going anywhere, that's what I'll tell you," Trumka said. "If not the best, he's one of the best lobbyists in the city."

Lines in the Sand

While somewhat coy about the AFL-CIO's internal affairs, Trumka is outspoken about where his group stands on health care reform. He said the federation's members are dead-set against legislation cleared by the Senate Finance Committee that would tax health care plans costing more than \$21,000 per year, a proposal that could disproportionately affect generous union health insurance plans.

“We’ve already paid a lot, and we think it’s bad policy to tax our benefits to pay for people,” Trumka said. “The rich have gotten a free ride, and the model that’s created in the House side is a good model, and we think it’s the way to go.”

Trumka added that by taxing expensive health insurance plans, Members would hurt older, sicker workers the most because those are the employees who most need premium coverage. “It’s not because they’re luxurious plans or Cadillac plans,” he said.

“It puts the cost of reform on the middle class,” he continued.

“It actually puts it on the oldest and sickest and the small-business employees when the focus should be making the insurance companies compete differently.”

Once a health care reform bill has been sent to President Barack Obama’s desk before the State of the Union, Trumka pledged the Employee Free Choice Act will be next. The card check bill, which would make it easier for workers to unionize, continues to be the target of a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign by the measure’s opponents, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business groups.

Trumka confirmed that he spoke late last week with Democratic leaders in both chambers about the prospects for card check.

“We’re committed to getting health care done ... and then we’ll get to the Employee Free Choice Act in the wake of that,” he said. “I feel very confident that in the wake of health care, you’ll see that we’ll get the Employee Free Choice Act done.”

Trumka declined to address specifically whether his group would support a proposed EFCA compromise that strips the bill’s most contentious provision: an accelerated process for workers to form a union.

“The majority sign-up is front and center in the bill right now,” he said.

Appalachian Roots

The 60-year-old leader of the nation’s largest labor group grew up Appalachia, just miles from the West Virginia border in southwestern Pennsylvania. After high school, Trumka followed his grandparents, father, six uncles and a dozen cousins into the coal mines, where he recalls doing “virtually every job.” The miners’ union eventually sent Trumka to college and later to law school. The Penn State alumnus went on to become the president of the AFL-affiliated United Mine Workers of America. Trumka became John Sweeney’s No. 2 at the federation 14 years ago and succeeded him as its president in September. He said the contemporary labor movement has a lot to learn from his years navigating through dark mine shafts.

“When you work underground, you depend on the people around you. You learn real solidarity, and you carry that with you,” he said. “You learn how insignificant you are and that things work best when you work from the bottom up, not the top down.”

Trumka said he continues to work with the Service Employees International Union and other former AFL-CIO affiliates that quit the group in 2005 to form the rival federation Change to Win. But Trumka said his contact with former Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.), who has been tasked with brokering a possible reunification, is limited. Bonior’s son is an SEIU employee.

“They’re not interested in coming back,” Trumka said of the SEIU. But he’s not giving up on wooing other Change to Win affiliates.

“We’re working with everybody, all of the other unions, to figure out a way to bring them back,” he said.

SEIU spokeswoman Michelle Ringuette declined to discuss the state of the ongoing talks but said, “Rich Trumka has a long history standing up for workers.” “We share his challenges and successes right now, and we’ll all be able to help workers navigate through a changing economy,” she said.

Kimberly Freeman Brown, executive director of the labor coalition American Rights at Work, said Trumka has a “very clear vision as to where he wants to take the AFL-CIO.” Brown’s group includes both AFL-CIO and Change to Win affiliates.

“He is a real tell-it-like-it-is person,” she said. “He’s the right leader at the right time for workers.”

Political Renovation

The AFL-CIO also is planning to launch a “major, major, major” jobs initiative and devote a \$5 million budget surplus to retooling its political operations. Trumka explained that the federation’s political shop typically goes dormant in odd-numbered years, but it will soon be in operation full time. A key plank of the federation’s economic campaign will be encouraging lawmakers to pass a second stimulus package for small and medium-sized businesses.

“Nothing is going to change, and no one is going to believe it unless there are jobs being created,” he said. “That’s going to be the major focus of the federation and hopefully the entire country.”