

AFL-CIO leaders get earful at first-ever labor youth summit

More than 400 young union activists from around the country met top AFL-CIO leaders at a June 10-13 "Next Up" Young Workers Summit in Washington, D.C.

Called by AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler, herself 39, the summit was aimed at figuring out how labor can better appeal to younger workers. Shuler, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, and Executive Vice President Arlene Holt Baker spoke, but kept their remarks short, saying they were there to listen. They got an earful.

No single topic united participants, but leaders took notes as they heard a smorgasbord of proposals. Organized labor must respond to a changing workplace, participants said, pushing for pension and health care portability and more flexible work schedules. Labor could help young workers by advocating tuition reduction and student loan

forgiveness. Some said the union movement should trumpet achievements "that have happened within our lifetimes" — not 75-year-old gains like the 40-hour workweek. Others said labor should adopt a flat, not hierarchical, structure; and communication should be two-way, not just top-down. Some advocated greater outreach to non-union allies in community activist groups, so that when unions seek support, it will be there.

"We [in the labor movement] need to be where people are already organizing," said participant Travis Giobbi, 35, a second-year apprentice with Portland-headquartered Painters Local 10.

Labor should embrace causes that appeal to young workers, some said, like immigration reform and ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; that could link younger activists with older workers in their unions. Unions should men-

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for young leaders, others suggested, providing pathways to leadership. A practical idea: Child care at union meetings would help young parents attend.

On one item, all seemed to agree: hold more youth summits. Only, next time, young labor activists should be put in charge of organizing it. Too much at this conference felt "out-of-touch," participants said. "Youth culture" references were sprinkled throughout summit promotional materials, but often missed the mark by at least a decade.

For a series of open-ended workshops, participants were divided into four color-coded groups with band names: Pink, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Green Day, and Black Eyed Peas. The lure to attend a "Poolside Networking BBQ" at the Capitol Skyline Hotel was that the cast of MTV's Real World: DC had partied there.

"That might have meant something to me if I'd been 13," said Jaimie Sorenson, 32 and president of Oregon AFSCME's largest local — Local 328 at Oregon Health and Science University.

Participants also took issue with the



At the AFL-CIO's Next Up Young Workers Summit, young labor activists from Oregon meet AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler (herself a member of Portland-based IBEW Local 125): Pictured, from left, are Elyyss Argueta of AFSCME Local 88, Jaimie Sorenson of AFSCME Local 328, Shuler, Oregon AFL-CIO communications director Elana Guiney, and Travis Giobbi of Painters Local 10.

name of the conference: "Next Up" seemed to suggest that young people would be coming along later.

"People said, 'I'm not next up. I'm here now,'" Sorenson noted.

Hand-held devices enabled instant tallies of participants' responses to questions, some of which seemed to defy expectations. Summit organizers may have thought young people would prefer to connect with the union movement via social media like Facebook and Twitter, but the tally showed a preference for the most traditional method of all: one-on-one contact.

In the end, Sorenson and other participants gave AFL-CIO leaders high marks for making the effort, and for active listening. And attendees left expressing enthusiasm for going home to recruit fellow young people — to join unions, and to get active with unions they already belong to.

In Oregon, a just-formed committee of young unionists — Young Emerging

Labor Leaders (YELL) — is planning a youth summit to take place in August under the auspices of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

"This summit definitely needed to happen," Giobbi said. "The union movement is getting older. Younger members are not being recruited fast enough."

Shuler, a member of Portland-based IBEW Local 125, told the Labor Press that the AFL-CIO will be drafting a blueprint based on ideas generated at the conference, which will be circulated on among attendees and be taken up as a resolution to go before the AFL-CIO Executive Council.

"One of our main objectives was that these young workers feel like they're being listened to," Shuler said. "This is the beginning of a longterm outreach program."

(Editor's Note: Mark Gruenberg of PAI also contributed to this article.)



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