

## Trumka tells National Press Club

# AFL-CIO redefines fight with right as 'moral struggle'

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI)—AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka is redefining workers' battle with the radical right wing as a moral struggle, saying it involves the nation's future.

But since the struggle also has a political aspect, Trumka adds the labor federation is planning to overhaul its political program to make it a year-round operation.

Trumka cast the conflict in states coast-to-coast in both political and moral terms in a major speech May 20 at Washington's National Press Club. His comments emphasized the struggle, but his answers to post-speech questions turned to politics.

The moral struggle, he said, appears in state and federal budget proposals and schemes to curtail voting rights, most of them introduced and supported by right-wing Republicans. He called the budgets "a despicable canvas of cruelty."

"In Michigan, a state senator thinks foster children should be required by law to purchase second-hand clothes — from the \$79 annual stipend they get for clothing. In Maine, the governor thinks more children should go to work. In North Carolina, the Legislature thinks we should balance the budget on the backs of autistic children," Trumka said.

"In Arizona, the state Senate president floats the idea of locking up protesting public employees in desert tent city jails. In New York, a billionaire mayor proposes to fire 5,000 teachers rather than tax the bonuses of the Wall Street executives who brought down the American economy."

Trumka said the proposals indicate "not just meanness, but destructiveness" and "a willful desire to block the road to the future."

All of the politicians and political bodies he criticized but one — New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a GOP-turned-Independent — are Republicans or GOP-run.

In Washington, D.C., the Republican-controlled House's budget at-



RICHARD TRUMKA

tempted to cut federal spending by \$4.3 trillion over the next decade, in areas such as Pell Grants and worker training — while cutting taxes for the rich by \$4.2 trillion and barely reducing the federal deficit, Trumka said.

"Think about the message these budgets send: Sacrifice is for the weak. The powerful and well-connected get tax cuts, so they can become more powerful and more well-connected."

Trumka portrayed the labor movement as standing against such schemes, and for the American Dream "that all of us will be treated fairly, that we will look after each other, and that we will all have a share in the wealth we all help to create."

He said instead of having a national conversation about putting America back to work — creating wealth, increasing income and revenue, and closing the federal budget deficit — "the debate here is about how fast we can destroy the fabric of our country."

To change that debate and to defend the moral position, labor must engage in politics, especially since last November's election brought to power politicians whose "real passion was for eliminating the rights of working people and destroying their unions — who are standing in the way of their agenda," Trumka declared.

The first step in the political fight for

labor's moral agenda, he said, will be in the biggest battleground so far: Wisconsin, where unionists have filed successful recall petitions against at least six members of the Republican majority in the state Senate.

The Republican-dominated Wisconsin Legislature passed a bill put forth by GOP Gov. Scott Walker stripping 200,000 state and local workers of collective bargaining rights.

"First, we are going to use that (workers') voice to end the Scott Walker agenda as a viable political strategy by

winning the recall elections," followed by "citizen vetoes of destructive legislation, and retaking state houses," Trumka said. "The next step will be holding elected leaders accountable on one question: 'Are you for improving or degrading life for working families?'"

That means the AFL-CIO will not only go into battleground states, Trumka told reporters following his speech, but also support true friends even in non-battlegrounds — and find challengers to labor's political foes.

"It doesn't matter if candidates and

parties are controlling the wrecking ball or simply standing aside to let it happen," Trumka said. "If leaders aren't blocking the wrecking ball ... then working people will not support them."

Doing so will mean remaking the AFL-CIO's political apparatus into a year-round operation focused on the moral issue of helping workers, Trumka told reporters. "We hope to coordinate spending by our affiliates in much more targeted ways. We will change the way we spend money, the way we do things and the way we function."

## Update on the war on public employees

The workers' rights battle continued in state capitols around the country in April and May as Republican majorities passed anti-union laws — and unions revved up opposition, repeal and recall campaigns. Polls have continued to show an edge in public support for union rights.

In Wisconsin, the draconian anti-union law that set off a defensive uprising was struck down May 26 by a Dane County Circuit Court judge. The law takes away nearly all collective bargaining rights from public-sector workers. But Republican lawmakers violated Wisconsin's open meetings law when they passed it — holding a surprise vote without a hearing, public testimony, or even two hours public notice — and that renders the law void, the judge ruled. The Wisconsin Supreme Court is set to hear a separate lawsuit over the case on June 6.

Meanwhile, three Republican state senators who voted for the law face a July 12 recall vote, thanks to volunteers who gathered over 15,000 signatures needed. Wisconsin's Government Accountability Board reviewed recall petitions for three other Republican senators on May 31, but had not set a recall election date for them as of press time.

Earlier, the two sides battled it out in a special state Supreme Court election April 5 in which challenger JoAnne Kloppenburg came within a few hundred votes of defeating incumbent conservative David Prosser, a former Republican speaker of the Assembly. In the primary, Prosser had 55 percent of the vote to Kloppenburg's 28 percent; but the race became a proxy for supporters and opponents of Republican Gov. Scott Walker and his anti-union campaign.

A race for Milwaukee County executive also became largely about Walker and his policies. In that case, Democrat Chris Abele defeated Republican state Rep. Jeff Stone for the seat Walker held before he was elected governor in November. Stone voted for Walker's bill, and lost the election 39 to 61 percent.

Here's how the union battle fared in other states:

### OHIO

We Are Ohio, a coalition of union



In Ohio, AFSCME members display thousands of voter-signed referendum petitions collected by the We Are Ohio coalition. The group will be asking voters in November to overturn a recently-passed law that strips public employees of their collective bargaining rights.

supporters, is gathering signatures to refer anti-union Senate Bill 5 to voters on the November ballot. The group has until June 30 to collect 231,000 valid signatures; as of May 20, it had 214,399, but it's aiming for 400,000 to make sure enough of them are valid. In a mid-May poll by Quinnipiac University, 54 percent of Ohioans favor repeal of SB 5. Sponsored by Republican Gov. John Kasich and passed by a Republican-led Legislature, SB 5 strips collective bargaining rights from about 360,000 Ohio public employees.

Meanwhile, a Republican state senator who faced heavy criticism for his vote in favor of the bill announced May 24 that he will leave office in July. SB 5 passed by one vote in the Senate.

### NEW HAMPSHIRE

In April, the Republican-led House and Senate passed so-called "right-to-work" legislation that would weaken private sector unions, but Democratic Gov. John Lynch vetoed it May 11. As of press time, Republicans had not yet been able to hold their supermajority together to override the veto. It takes two-thirds to override. If they do override the veto, New Hampshire would become the 23rd "right-to-work" state, and the only one north of Virginia. Right-to-work is misnamed because it doesn't actually give anyone a job or a right to one; instead, it makes dues optional for

union-represented workers, thereby reducing union resources.

### INDIANA

On April 20, Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels (R) signed a law that limits teacher collective bargaining to salary and benefits. Under the new law, unions may not bargain over teacher evaluation procedures, and contracts may not extend past the budget biennium.

### TENNESSEE

On May 21, a bill curbing teacher collective bargaining rights passed the state House 55-40 and Senate 19-12 and was expected to be signed into law. Both chambers are controlled by Republicans.

### IDAHO

The Idaho Education Association is working with a parent-led group, Idahoans for Responsible Education Reform, to collect signatures to put a series of education "reform" bills passed by the Republican-controlled Legislature to a vote of the people in 2012.

The new laws signed by the governor kill all union contracts in place for Idaho teachers on June 30, prohibit future collective bargaining over benefits and salaries, eliminate teacher tenure, and creates a merit-pay system.

The union also has filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the legislation.

## Employer fined \$1.24 million for exposing workers to asbestos

CICERO, Ill. — A \$1,247,400 fine has been issued to AMD Industries Inc after five unprotected and untrained workers allegedly were required to conduct asbestos removal, exposing them to this cancer-causing material.

The penalties — 19 willful and eight serious health citations — were issued last month by the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration following an inspection at AMD facilities in December 2010. OSHA was responding to a referral from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

Workers allegedly were exposed to materials containing 20 to 50 percent asbestos.

"Asbestos exposure can be deadly," said Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health Dr. David Michaels. "AMD Industries knew it was assigning workers to asbestos removal work and failed to take the most basic safety precautions. This employer did not provide protective respirators or even warn the workers of the risk to their health from removing the material."

A willful violation exists when an employer has demonstrated either an intentional disregard for the requirements of the law or plain indifference to employee safety and health.

AMD Industries has until June 16 to comply, request an informal conference with OSHA's area director or contest the findings.