

America's top union leader pops into Portland

National AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka was in Portland March 27-28 for the Oregon AFL-CIO's 2019 Organizing Summit.

"Something is happening in America, brothers and sisters," Trumka told union leaders in the summit's keynote address March 28. "Fed up with an economic and political system that doesn't work for them, workers are turning to each other — to us. Every single day, more and more working people are realizing that the single best way they can improve their lives...is to join a union."

A recent survey by MIT Sloan researchers and the National Opinion Research Corporation found nearly half (48 percent) of nonunionized workers would join a union if given the opportunity. That marks a sharp increase from about a third of the workforce expressing this preference in 1977 and 1995, the last two times this question was asked on national surveys. The scale of this change indicates that 58 million American workers would want to join a union if they could, quadruple the number of current union members.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that 2018 was the biggest year for collective action in



Oregon Building and Construction Trades Council officials Robert Camarillo (left) and Jimbo Anderson (right) met with national AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka at a labor reception at OHSU's new Knight Cancer Center in Southwest Portland.

three decades, Trumka said. There were strikes and organizing wins in every sector and every region.

"We elected more than 960 union members to public office," Trumka said. "Workers are in motion."

The Organizing Summit was a training for unionists on organizing tactics, messaging around common sense economics, and how to build worker power in the wake of the Supreme Court's anti-union *Janus* decision.

"As unionists, as organizers

and as activists, everything we do comes back to one simple mission: lifting up the lives of working people," Trumka said. "The best and most enduring way to do this is with collective bargaining and a contract on the job."

Trumka joined local labor leaders the night before at a reception at the new Knight Center for Cancer at Oregon Health & Science University. Organized labor helped raise money for the Knight Center, which was union built and now is union maintained.

Our history can inspire today's young workers

By Ron Verzuh
Pacific NW Labor History Association



A hundred years ago in 1919, the labor movement made history with the Seattle General Strike. Then the Winnipeg General Strike rocked the West with a 36-day struggle marked by violent clashes. Workers in the Pacific Northwest supported the strikers, and some launched sympathy strikes.

The general strikes created labor heroes, along with a few labor martyrs, and they inspired new generations of workers to join unions. Labor educators turn to historical events like the strikes to teach union members that they have inherited hard-won rights.

When I was 18 years old, I joined my first union. I worked in a large smelter where the pay was good and I didn't think much about unions. Then I learned about the general strikes and other events in labor history from my union steward.

He taught me about our long and sometimes radical history of winning and defending workers rights. He made it a living lesson, showing how we make our own history every day. He taught me that safer workplaces, better labor laws, fighting discrimination, and demanding respect and dignity for everyone were victories recorded in the annals of labor history.

Learning about the 1919 strikes was my first lesson in that history, and it inspired me. It was a lesson I never forgot. Now 100 years after those strikes, I celebrate labor history, but I wonder who is there with me.

Recently I was shocked to hear some university professors say, "Students won't sign up for a course called 'Labor History.'" So the professors buried it in business courses, if they include it at all. When mass media outlets replaced the old "labor beat" with the more business-oriented "workplace reporter" they buried the daily record of workers' struggles.

In today's high schools, workplace issues are not part of the curriculum. Labor history? Not even a mention. Too often young people hear unions called dinosaurs standing in the way of progress. Some social media insist that unions have "outlived their usefulness."

I fear that young people will fail to question the anti-labor rhetoric flowing from Fox News and other conservative propaganda outlets. I also fear that they will reject labor history, perhaps seeing it as a plot to hoodwink them into believing unions are good.

In fact, as labor history shows, unions are good. "In Oregon," notes a recent article in the Northwest Labor Press, "having a union at work means an extra \$4,701 a year, and better benefits." That means a richer economy all around.

When teachers struck in West Virginia in 2018, the strikers invoked local labor history to inspire workers to hold the line to victory. Labor history helped get them get a better deal.

In 2019 let's remember the 1919 general strikes as part of the ongoing struggle against regressive social and political forces. Let's encourage young people to learn from that 100-year history.

Ron Verzuh is a Canadian historian and trade unionist currently living in Oregon. He is a past vice-president of the PNLHA.

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