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Promising a New Day, Again

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

The [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), the nation's largest labor organization, has often been criticized for being "male, pale and stale" — dominated by cigar-chomping, golf-playing chieftains.

But as Richard L. Trumka assumes the group's presidency on Wednesday, he says he is determined to improve labor's image and woo a younger generation that either thinks of unions as irrelevant, or does not think of them at all.

Mr. Trumka — a burly former coal miner who comes out of one of the nation's oldest unions, the United Mine Workers, and looks like [Mike Ditka](#) — acknowledges that reversing labor's seemingly inexorable slide will be a challenge. Still, he thinks the weak economy, long stagnant or declining wages, the prospect of a jobless recovery, and the continuing exodus of jobs to developing countries will all bolster the case for unions.

"The generation of workers 18 to 34 probably needs union more than any generation ever before because of what's happening with this economy," said Mr. Trumka, 60, a forceful speaker who packs far more charisma than his immediate predecessor, [John J. Sweeney](#), 75.

Of course, waiting for unions to rise to their former strength may be like waiting for Godot.

When Mr. Sweeney assumed the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s presidency 14 years ago, he also pledged to greatly expand labor's ranks. Instead labor's numbers fell somewhat because of many of the same forces Mr. Trumka will face, including factory shutdowns, corporations battling to beat back unions and workers' fears that their workplaces will close if they vote to unionize.

"It would be incredible if Trumka succeeded, but if he does not succeed he will have a lot beyond his control to

blame it on,” said Gary N. Chaison, a professor of labor relations at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. He said that the crisis of Detroit’s automakers had given labor’s image a beating.

“Labor has a lot of catching up to do,” he said.

Michael Lotito, a management-side labor lawyer with Jackson Lewis, said Mr. Trumka could only revive labor’s fortunes if Congress passes pending legislation that would make it easier for unions to organize workers. Labor and its Democratic allies have struggled to round up the 60 votes to overcome a potential Senate [filibuster](#). But union leaders say the votes will be there once a replacement is named for the late Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#).

But Mr. Trumka plans to rely on new means and new messengers too. So while organized labor has traditionally done much of its communicating through picket signs and handbills, to reach the young it will rely more on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

One step in putting a fresher face on labor is Mr. Trumka’s choice of Liz Schuler, 39 and a cheery and articulate former clerical worker, as the federation’s youngest ever secretary-treasurer, the group’s second in command.

By focusing on young workers, Mr. Trumka and his team are admitting many members of the millennial generation and younger are not keen on unions.

“They don’t hate us, they don’t like us, they just don’t know us,” said Ms. Schuler, long a top assistant to the president of the [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers](#).

Mr. Trumka’s priorities will include ways to lift not just unions, but workers, among them pushing for a tougher posture on trade — like [President Obama](#)’s newly announced punitive tariffs against Chinese tires — expanding the federation’s already powerful political operations, and seeking to unionize more low-wage minority workers.

For the first time ever, two of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s top three officials will be women. Its executive vice president, Arlene Holt Baker, who is African-American, is an emissary to low-wage minority workers, who are generally more inclined to join unions.

Mr. Trumka does not always fit the new image. He can come across as macho — he fills his office with pictures of football players and labor heroes. And he is sometimes called bull-headed — he once led a violence-ridden nine-month strike against Pittston Coal in West Virginia in which 4,000 workers were arrested for sitting in and seeking to block strikebreakers by studding roads with bent nails.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O., a grouping of 56 unions representing 10 million workers, has commissioned several studies on what makes young workers tick. (One study found that one in three Americans between 18 and 35 lives at home with their parents.)

“We haven’t done a good job communicating with this group,” Mr. Trumka said. “It’s not going to be an overnight thing.”

Surprisingly, one issue the Trumka team is debating, in response to findings from focus groups, is whether to use the word “worker” in talking with the under-35 generation, because so many of them, especially young professionals, do not define themselves as “workers” or as members of particular occupational groups — say, steelworkers or autoworkers.

Although the percentage of workers in unions has slid to 12.4 percent, about one-third the number of a half century ago, Mr. Trumka thinks the time is ripe for unions to increase their numbers.

“I think the American public is more willing to look at the way to curb excessive corporate power that’s gone unchecked for years,” he said. “The public knows that unions are the best curb on that.”

Like his predecessors, Mr. Trumka cannot tell member unions what to do, for instance to focus on organizing more young workers. But he can use his bully pulpit.

“Rich will lay it on the table, he’ll out people if they’re not doing enough organizing,” said Gerald W. McEntee, president of the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#).

Like Mr. Sweeney, Mr. Trumka will continue to press Congress to enact a health care overhaul. But Mr. Trumka promises to be far more quotable when doing so.

For example, here in Pittsburgh, where Mr. Obama spoke on Tuesday at the A.F.L.-C.I.O. convention, Mr. Trumka defended the president's health plan.

"We do have death panels," he said. "They call them insurance companies."

Mr. Trumka hopes to make the federation's vaunted political operation more effective by transforming it from an operation largely during the summer and fall of Congressional and presidential campaign years to a 52-week-a-year operation that can be instantly called upon to do legislative work on the federal, state or local levels.

Mr. Sweeney came out of a service sector union representing janitors and hospital workers, while Mr. Trumka comes out of the mine workers — his father died of black lung disease — and out of a region, southwestern Pennsylvania, where manufacturing was king.

With his industrial bent, Mr. Trumka plans not just to reach out to a new generation, but to focus on expanding labor's traditional base by seeking to revive the nation's manufacturing sector, through, for example, expanding green industries.

"You can't be a world-class country and have a world-class economy unless you produce things," Mr. Trumka said. "As we've lost manufacturing jobs in this country — we've lost millions since 2000 — we've lost a lot of R. & D., and when you lose the R. & D., you lose your technological edge, and when you lose that edge, you start to lose everything."

Mr. Trumka is already displaying a far more aggressive stance on trade than Mr. Sweeney did. Mr. Trumka talks with relish about trade policy and works closely with the Pittsburgh-based [United Steelworkers Union](#), which has been the main force behind efforts to penalize China on tires and other exports.

Mr. Trumka applauded President Obama's decision, saying, "The trade laws that weren't enforced in this country for eight years under George Bush have had a devastating effect on manufacturing."

