

THE ECONOMIC CLUB

O F W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

AFL-CIO President Richard L. Trumka discussed legislative priorities for workers and analyzed global trade agreements.

**Richard L. Trumka
President
AFL-CIO
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DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: We're very pleased to have Rich Trumka, who is the president of the AFL-CIO, a position he's held since 2009. Let me give a brief introduction, if I could, and then we'll have a conversation with him.

Rich is a native of Pennsylvania, southwest Pennsylvania. And he went to – he was a football star in high school, and then had he not gotten injured he might have played at Penn State. But he did go to Penn State undergraduate and graduated in 1971, and then went to Villanova Law School, graduated in 1974. He then came to Washington to work as a lawyer for United Mine Workers, and then moved back to Pennsylvania to become a coal miner. And he did that for a while, and then ultimately was elected to the executive board of the United Mine Workers District Four. And then in 1982, he became the president of United Mine Workers, a position he held until 1995, when he became the secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO and did that to 2009. And then 2009, he was elected president of the AFL-CIO. So, thank you very much, Rich, for coming.

RICHARD L. TRUMKA: Thanks for having me, David.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in the last midterm elections the Democrats won control of the House, and all of a sudden many of the things that you and other members of the AFL-CIO wanted presumably would be supported by the Democrats. But have you gotten what you thought you would get out of the House so far? Have they done many of the things that you wanted to have done?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, they've done a great deal. One, when we had the shutdown, they stood on the side of workers to make sure that we weren't used as pawns. And then they're standing with us now on trade to make sure that we get the new trade bill right rather than fast. It's important to get it right. They've done that. They've stopped a lot of the attacks on us, and they've actually passed – or, introduced a new piece of labor legislation that would make collective bargaining a lot easier to obtain for workers.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, let's talk about the trade bill, or the USMCA,¹ so called, replaces NAFTA. If the vote were held today in the House, would you support the passage of USMCA?

MR. TRUMKA: Would not.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Would not? And therefore, it needs to be renegotiated, in your point of view?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, some of the things that need to be done can be done in the implementing language. Some of the things have to be done by Mexico themselves. And let me broaden out so that the audience understands. Mexico adopted a low-wage strategy. And to keep that low-wage strategy in place, they had these sham unions that were actually part of the government. The sham union would go in with an employer, negotiate an inferior low-wage contract, and workers didn't even know they had a contract, or they were part of a union. So, then there are now 700,000 of those protectionist contracts in Mexico.

¹ USMCA - United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement

If they're going to change, as the agreement requires, they have to have, one, the infrastructure to change that. First, they have to change their labor laws. They did one step of that, but they still have to change them. If they get the labor laws changed in accordance with the agreement, then they have to show us that they have the infrastructure and the resources to be able to do that, because they are – they have four years to eliminate all 700,000 protectionist contracts. That's about 175,000 a year. And we haven't seen them having the ability to do that. So, again, it would be a sham if we agreed to it before they actually had the ability –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. If President Trump called you and said, look, Rich, this is the greatest trade deal of all time. I really need to get this done. Can you support it? I'll take care of the problems you care about later. You would say, I can't support it. Is that correct?

MR. TRUMKA: I would say I was born at night, but not last night. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. All right. OK. What about Medicare for All? Medicare for All is a very popular thing that some people running for president have articulated their support for, and many people in the House are supportive of it. Are you in favor of Medicare for All?

MR. TRUMKA: Yes, we are. We think it ought to start with lowering the age from 65 to 55, covering all those people, and then continue phasing it in.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. What about the new green – the Green New Deal? Do you support that?

MR. TRUMKA: Not as currently written.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh, really? So, you would support something like that. But why do you not support it? Is it too expensive, you think it's not realistic?

MR. TRUMKA: We weren't part of the process. And so, the workers' interest really wasn't completely figured into it. So, we would want a whole lot of changes made so that workers and our jobs are protected in the process.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Now, President Trump was elected with the support of union members. I don't know exactly the percentage, but it's probably more than 25 percent of union members voted for President Trump. If you're a union leader, the head of the AFL-CIO, is it awkward to kind of say I support the Democratic candidate when you know a lot of your members are actually supporting the Republican candidate? Is that a problem?

MR. TRUMKA: No, not at all. He got – President Trump got about 4 percentage points more of our members than Romney did. The problem was, Hillary Clinton got about 9 percentage points less than Barack Obama did. They didn't believe that she would follow through on trade. They didn't believe she would follow through on a couple of their issues. So fewer then voted for them. We go out and we give our members the facts. We say: It's good for you, it's bad for you. Here's what they stand for. We analyze what they stand for and give them the facts, and

they make the decision. My experience has been, if you give workers the facts, they'll make the right decision every time.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, after President Trump was elected you were appointed to and joined the U.S. Manufacturing Council. And then you subsequently left that. But you had some meetings with President Trump. Can you tell us how those meetings went?

MR. TRUMKA: I had several meetings with him. The first meeting I had with him was at the towers before he was actually inaugurated. We went into the meeting, it started – he started the meeting by saying, 93 percent of your members voted for me. How could you endorse Hillary Clinton? [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What did you say?

MR. TRUMKA: I said I'd probably quibble with you about the percentage. But those that voted for you voted for you because they believe you're going to change the economic rules to favor them. I hope you follow through on that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What did he say?

MR. TRUMKA: We started having a conversation about those rules.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, are you in touch with him now very much?

MR. TRUMKA: Yes, with the administration. We deal with them probably on a daily basis.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, going forward, when the next presidential election occurs, do you expect the AFL-CIO will endorse a candidate for the Democratic Party before the convention?

MR. TRUMKA: Not sure. We have a different process this time. We're trying to get all the candidates introduced to our members, to spend a day with them. And what we're doing is a two-step process. We're asking candidates to come out and actually work on the job with our members for a half a day. And then after they work on the job with our members, then spend some time with a group of them and letting those workers ask questions so they can understand where the candidates stand, where they come from, what they support and what they don't. If they do that, then we will invite them to a forum later in the year, probably in mid-September this year, where workers will ask them questions and be able to do follow-up with them. And they'll get the exposure to our members.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. But let's suppose all that happens. Is there any chance that you – the AFL-CIO will not endorse a candidate or that you would endorse President Trump?

MR. TRUMKA: I guess it's possible that we would not endorse a candidate. No matter how I answer that question it's going to get misconstrued.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, that's why I asked it.

MR. TRUMKA: I know. [Laughter, applause.] And you got me on it one time. As I said I was born at night, but not last night. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. All right. So, let's talk about some of the substantive things that you care about as a union leader. Right to work, roughly 26 states are right to work and, like, 24 are not. And a couple northern states, like Michigan and Wisconsin, are now right to work states. Do you think the movement to right to work states is increasing or do you think it's basically stable now and you don't see a movement for more states to become right to work?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, let's talk about how those two states were done. In Michigan, it was rammed through actually in the middle of the night – literally. At 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning they rammed it through. Wisconsin you had Scott Walker² and his crusade that did that. We'll get those both reversed. But the last one that happened was in Missouri. And we put – that was on the ballot. And you had people vote on it. And 67 percent of the people that live in Missouri voted to repeal right to work, saying: It's bad because it lowers wages, lowers benefits, workers are worse off. And in this economy, we don't need to make workers weaker; we need to make their voice stronger. And that means giving them a voice on the job.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, under the Janus case in the United States Supreme Court, Justice Alito, on a five-to-four decision, wrote that if you're in a public service union, and he's speaking for the Court, you no longer have to, I guess, pay a fee to the union, even if you're – you know, you're benefitting from the union's work. You're not a member, you still have to pay a fee. He said that's not appropriate. Is that a fair decision from your point of view?

MR. TRUMKA: No. I mean, first of all, it was disgraceful the way it came about. Justice Alito asked for that case to be filed from the bench. You talk about not being an activist judge, he said: Send me this case, please, I want to overturn a 40-year precedent. No reason. Nothing had changed. He just overturned the precedent. He thought it would be the death blow for unions. But we talked to our members. And we had converted a bunch from fee payers – those that pay a fee, and they were required to – to actually full members. So, when he made the decision and the federal sector became right to work, they thought we would lose membership. We actually didn't. We actually grew in membership because we had talked and continued to talk with our members. They understand the power of it. They understand that that decision was intended to weaken them and their voice on the job. And they said no to it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So why do you think it is in southern states, typically – or maybe border states – there is less union membership than there is in northern states. Is that for some reason you can articulate?

MR. TRUMKA: Yeah. I have a quote that I wanted to give, because I sort of figured you were going to ask me that. This is a quote that says: We discourage any companies that have unions from wanting to come to South Carolina because we don't want to taint the water. Governor Nikki Haley. She also said in her inauguration, or her acceptance speech, that she was going to drive every union out of South Carolina. That's the attitude you have. When we tried to

² Scott Walker (R) served as the 45th governor of Wisconsin from 2011 to 2019.

organize – the autoworkers tried to organize at Volkswagen, you had a governor and a senator who came out and said: If you organize, if you get a voice on the job, we're going to take away your money and your support, billions – millions and millions of dollars, hundreds of millions of dollars, actually. And threatened those workers with that. So, you have that in the South.

But things are starting to change. You just had strikes – teachers' strikes in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma that were successful. We're doing organizing drives in the South where we're winning, in hospitals and at universities and other places. So, the old hex and the old threat is starting to fail because people understand that you must have the person standing beside you if you're going to make a gain.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But of all the automobile companies that are located in the South, typically they're from Germany or Japan as their parent, are any of them actually unionized yet?

MR. TRUMKA: Parts of them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. What about the tech companies – Google, Facebook – companies like that. Are they unionized? Or why do you think it's been hard to unionize them?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, they aren't unionized yet, but the strike at Google was a good sign, to see that kind of collective action. The workers at Google knew that the only way they were going to get ahead is if they came together as a unit and talked as a unit. So that was a good sign. The issue now is converting the collective action to collective bargaining. Now, our secretary-treasurer sent out an open letter into the video game industry. And the response was incredible. The people in the video game industry want a union. They want a voice. They want to be able to bargain collectively for a fair share of what they produce.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Now, when President Obama was elected, many unions were then supporting something called the – what was card notification – card check. And that didn't get very far. Is that something you still want or not? This would enable you to organize more easily, is that right?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, more fairly, without the threats. If you – if you had to go through what a union person – or a person does, a worker does, to get a union – if you had to do that to vote, I'd trust there'd be about five votes out of this entire room because it's so difficult. They take you into a room with your supervisor, and they bang you away, tell you about how bad it is, how your union will drive everything away. And it's the greatest myth in the world, because they act like the union is this third entity. And the union's nothing but the people in that entity. They come together, they get a stronger voice, the bargain collectively, and they get better benefits. That's proven. Because union workers on average make \$150-175 more a week than their non-union counterparts.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, if you organize – and let's suppose I'm working at a company and you're trying to organize it. The benefits that I would get are the ones you just articulated. How much are the costs? I have to pay what percentage of my salary in union dues? Is it a certain percentage you typically get?

MR. TRUMKA: No, it varies. I mean, you pay generally a monthly flat fee in dues. And it varies with unions. But I can tell you that the amount that you get greatly, greatly outweighs it. The investment is infinitely more.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, if I work for a company and I unionize it successfully, but I don't really want to be a member of the union – let's say it's a right-to-work state – I'm – I can get the benefits of what you're doing, but I don't have to pay for it. Is that right?

MR. TRUMKA: Yeah, I think I really need to explain right to work to people out there. It's a great name. The person who thought up the name was a great marketer, because it has nothing to do with right to work. What it says is: If 98 percent of the people in a workshop vote to be union, you don't have to be union and you get all the benefits. Now, think about this in your business. You have a flower shop and people come in and they say: I want flowers. And you have to give them the flowers, but they walk out, and they don't pay. How long do you think you can exist? That right to work was designed to weaken unions and weaken workers' voice on the job. And so, it works somewhere. But we do a pretty good job at talking to the members. And they come in and we have nearly all the people.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Let's talk about the AFL-CIO as an organization. It was created in 1955 as a merger of the AFL and the CIO. And the first head was George Meaney. So how many members at the peak did the AFL-CIO have? In the late 1970s, roughly 20 million or something like that?

MR. TRUMKA: Probably not quite that. Probably 18 [million].

MR. RUBENSTEIN: How many members does the AFL-CIO have today?

MR. TRUMKA: We have 12.5 million.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So why do you think it's gone –

MR. TRUMKA: But there are three major unions that aren't part of the AFL-CIO that would put the number up. Why has it happened? Well, you know, we need to talk about the entire system. Right after World War II we were rebuilding the country and rebuilding, quite frankly, the world. So, we had a social contract that employers and workers would work together. We would share the benefits. There was a link between productivity and what workers were getting. We had a high percentage in the industry, so when we negotiated a contract everybody in that industry got the benefit of it – union and non-union alike.

And that went through until Ronald Reagan decided he would break the air traffic controllers. And that said to corporate America: It's OK to bust unions. So, they started creating a war at that time. And then, prior to that time, we had two economic systems out there. You had communism and you had capitalism, and they were competing for the world. And both had their best faces on. So, capitalism was, like, look how we work. We share everything with workers. It works great. And then the wall fell. And there was no more communism. So,

capitalism went for the final victory. They decided to try to eliminate unions. They elected people like Scott Walker, who did nothing but everything he could to stop people from having a voice on the job. And that had a dramatic effect on us.

The rules of the economy were changed. And I really at some point, I hope you give me the chance, to put a frame of where workers are today and the threat that it is to democracy itself.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, OK, let's talk about that. Of the 12.7 million members you have, and there are three big unions that are not part of you, SEIU, the Teamsters –

MR. TRUMKA: And carpenters.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And the carpenters. So, the three big unions.

MR. TRUMKA: And NEA, that never was.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. NEA. All right. So today if I worked – a union worker typically makes how much more than a non-union worker in the same kind of industry. Is it –

MR. TRUMKA: About \$175 a week. If you're a woman, it's probably a little more. If you're a Latino, it's probably a little more. They do better than their non-union counterparts.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. The AFL-CIO, of your 12.7 million members, how many are men and how many are women?

MR. TRUMKA: It's about evenly split, about 50/50. And if you add people of color, it would be more women and people of color than –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And just – if you just take – how many are white? Of the 12.7, how many are white, how many are people of color, of that 12.7 million?

MR. TRUMKA: Probably 60/40 people of color.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. Now, anybody who's a member of the AFL-CIO union, any of them make minimum wage? They're all above minimum wage?

MR. TRUMKA: Yes, they're all above minimum wage.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you support the increase in minimum wage.

MR. TRUMKA: We do.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: To what level?

MR. TRUMKA: Fifteen dollars would be a good start, and then index it with inflation so that it continues to grow.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And is there any chance Congress would do that, do you think, or?

MR. TRUMKA: I think there's a real chance. Because it's happening in different states right now. And that's generally what happens. Several states do it, and then finally the federal government says, oh, maybe we ought to look at this, and then they do something.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, Amazon recently increased its minimum wage, I think, to \$15, more or less. But they are not unionized, I think, largely.

MR. TRUMKA: No, they're not.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, is there an effort to unionize them, or you're trying to?

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And which union would actually do it? Or is it different unions can organize?

MR. TRUMKA: That might be a group of unions. They're so big it would be a group of unions. And remember, Amazon, their profits doubled last year. And they paid zero in taxes. Sixty of the 500 Fortune 500 companies paid zero in taxes last year. So, they can afford more than that. And they actually afford to pay their fair share in society as well.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, when President Trump ran for election, the highest percentage that he got in any state was West Virginia, because he said he was going to bring coal mining back. How has that effort worked so far?

MR. TRUMKA: It hasn't worked so well so far. I mean, there was a lot of hype. But, look, coal is being hurt for a couple of reasons. One is competition with natural gas. Abundant natural gas right now is beating it in the marketplace. And then you have the fact that it is a fuel that is perceived as being a dirty fuel. We have the technology to burn it cleanly. And I would anticipate sometime in the union – in the future, you will see coal being burned cleanly. But until then, it'll continue to go down.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, would you anticipate that if he ran for reelection President Trump would still win West Virginia handily, or it's not as clear?

MR. TRUMKA: He may win West Virginia, but it won't be by the same margins. I think working people by and large are starting to walk away because he talked about doing things, he talked about resurrecting manufacturing. We haven't seen that. He talked about infrastructure. We haven't seen that. He talked about changing trade, we're in the process and the jury's still out. We haven't seen a bill or a trade agreement yet that is actually good for workers and can be enforced by workers. There were a number of regulations that he has done away with, made our jobs less safe. So, I think he'll probably get less votes unless in the next two years he decides to actually become worker-friendly.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And the secretary of labor. In a Republican administration probably that's not your first call, but do you ever meet with the secretary of labor?

MR. TRUMKA: Oh, frequently.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you're pretty happy with the job he's doing? He's doing the best he can?

MR. TRUMKA: [Chuckles.] [Laughter.] The best he can? Under the circumstances?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, whatever you want to say. [Laughter.] You like him personally?

MR. TRUMKA: I'd say – do I like him personally? Oh, yeah, I like him personally.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah. But you don't think he can get done the things that you want him to do?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, he can. I hope he does. I mean, he – the record the first two years hasn't been really good because he's taken regulations that were designed to protect workers and he's either weakened them or taken them off the mat. He took the overtime rule that had been passed, changed it, and that cost – 8.2 million Americans won't get overtime because he changed that regulation. I'll bet those 8.2 [million] are not happy about that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, everybody loves – like, everybody talks about the weather, nobody can really do anything about it. Everybody loves infrastructure, but nobody seems to be able to get a bill out of Congress that does something on it. Why can't we pass an infrastructure bill out of Congress? Aren't you supportive of that?

MR. TRUMKA: We're very supportive of that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What do you think the problem is?

MR. TRUMKA: The Republican Party won't pay the money. They won't figure out a way to pay for it. They're afraid to raise even the gasoline tax. The gasoline tax hasn't been raised for a long time. It needs to be raised. And, another thing, funds need to be dedicated to it. Look, we need about \$4.5 trillion to make our infrastructure the world's best. We used to be in the top five. Now, we're in the bottom, I mean, 15 or something like that, and we're dropping. We need about \$2 trillion to rehab the old infrastructure and get it usable, and about \$2 trillion more to get us into the next century. So that has to be done. And every day that we don't do it, we fall further and further behind as a country. It's sad because everybody says yes, yes, we have to do infrastructure. But they won't – they won't put the money up to do it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: In the first year of his presidency, President Trump got a tax cut through. So, I assume you were happy with the tax cut.

MR. TRUMKA: [Chuckles] No, we weren't happy with the tax cut. I mean, it was \$1.5 trillion giveaway. And he gave away to people like Google, who doubled their profit last year and paid zero in taxes. I mean, the – and it rewards outsourcing, by the way. That tax bill rewards outsourcing. And people – middle class people that are now doing their taxes are finding out it's hurting them. It's not what it was cracked up to be. That was a tax bill designed for the rich by the rich, rather than for workers by workers.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Now, President Trump in his campaign for president said he wasn't going touch Social Security, and Medicare, and other entitlements. I assume you support not reducing entitlement benefits.

MR. TRUMKA: Yeah. That's what happened after the tax cut, remember? Mitch McConnell said, hmm, now we have a \$1.5 trillion deficit. It's time to look at Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. He put his hand on it, and got burnt, so he's moved away from it. The American public doesn't want or need Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security cut. They need them increased.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, what would you say are the AFL-CIO's top two or three priorities? If you were to say these are the two or three most important things you want Congress to do, or the administration, what are those two or three most important things?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, you – first of all you want – our issues are we want to have the ability to organize to have a voice on the job so we can increase wages for the country and everybody else. You want – you want to elect good people to that job. And so, we're starting to run our own. In the last election, we got 960 union people elected to office – two to the U.S. Senate, three to governors, 18 to the House of Representatives, and 940-some to state legislatures, so that our issues can be represented there. So that's an important issue. Infrastructure is an important issue that needs to get passed for the good of the country. Changing the labor laws so that people can have the ability to negotiate and get a fair share.

Look, there's something wrong with an economy when at the peak of the economic cycle workers aren't even getting the productivity gains that they made – at the peak of the economic cycle. That tells you that the system isn't working for a lot, a lot of people. And, David, this is where I'm going to do the frame. I'm going to make you wait for me on this one, OK?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MR. TRUMKA: Look, workers believe that neither the political system nor the economic system are working for them. They think it doesn't work for them. Now, Harvard did a study of Millennials. And they asked Millennials: How important is it to live in a democracy? And 30 percent of Millennials thought it's important to live in a democracy. Seventy percent said it's not important. And of that 70 percent, 24 percent said it's bad to live in a democracy.

And you go, oh my God. How could that be? Well, this is the first generation of people that have lived their entire lives under the rules of globalization as currently structured. They've seen their parents' wages cut, health care cut, retirement cut. Some of them have probably seen

their people lose a home. So, they're starting to equate capitalism and democracy with insecurity, poverty, and low wages.

Then they were told, OK, but it'll be different for you. You go to school and everything will be great. So, they go to college. They come out with a mountain of debt. They can't find a job, or they find a job and they have three, or four, or five employers in a week. And it doesn't work for them. Look, the rules of this economy are designed for the people at the top to do exceptionally well. The people in the middle, not so much. And the people at the bottom, not so much.

What is happening right now is really a threat to the system of capitalism and democracy. Unless the rules get changed, and we can bring everybody along, we are in jeopardy of imploding. Now, listen, I ask this question all the time. What happens when an economic system cannot or will not provide a rising standard of living for the vast majority of its people? History tell us that system gets changed one way or the other. The election of Donald Trump is the first sign of that happening.

He said, I'm going to change the rules. And people believed him. Now, he changed the rules, not necessarily the way they thought they would. But he changed those rules. They're looking for those rules to get changed. And if it doesn't, the people at the top that keep grabbing with both hands and making it all, while the people from three-quarters or even 90 percent down get left behind – 62 percent of Americans haven't had a raise in over a year. Sixty-two percent. I'm telling you, it's something that we have to consider, and we have to change.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But we've had 110 consecutive months of job creation. And the unemployment rate is now 3.8 percent. Why aren't you happy about that?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, two reasons. One, the actual rate is probably higher because it doesn't have people that have dropped out. We count it differently now because we use the military. So, the actual rate is a little bit higher. But even that, that should be rising wages. But you're not seeing it. Inequality in this country is growing. It's striating the country dramatically. And we are not changing it. The answer to this is to give more people a voice on the job so that they can negotiate with their employer and get a fair share of what they produce, so that their wages increase. If their wages increase, they become buyers. They buy things. They create demand. That demand creates jobs. And the spiral is upwards, as it was after World War II forward until the change came.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, suppose that Congress passed an infrastructure bill, and we're going to put money in to build new bridges and toll roads. But they said: Davis-Bacon³ is not applicable. In other words, Davis-Bacon – you're in favor of Davis-Bacon, right?

MR. TRUMKA: Sure. Let me explain to them.

³ The Davis–Bacon Act of 1931 is a federal law that establishes the requirement for paying the local prevailing wages on public works projects for laborers and mechanics.

First of all, Davis was a Republican, Bacon was a Republican, and it was signed by a Republican president, Herbert Hoover. And what Davis-Bacon says is the federal government should not come into a community and use its buying power to drive down wages. They should pay the wage that prevails in that economy. It's not the same, because it could be lower in the South and higher in the North. That has been good for the country for years because it drives things upwards and prevents us from using our tax dollars to drive my wages down.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But if Congress passed a bill and said no Davis-Bacon, you would not support that, I assume.

MR. TRUMKA: We would not.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MR. TRUMKA: It would drive wages down. It would be counterintuitive and bad economically.

And the other thing we would ask in that infrastructure bill is if they really want to spur the economy, buy products that are made in the United States. Build a bridge with American steel. Build a bridge or other things with American-made products so that you spiral upward rather than use our money to stimulate somebody else's economy.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, speaking of that, the president and his administration are negotiating a deal with China on trade. Is there anything in there that you particularly insist that should be in there to make it acceptable to you?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, they're in the process of doing that. They haven't completed it yet. Currency manipulation is one way. Second way is something we have to do to be able to enforce the thing, because no matter what they agree to it's unenforceable. It's like the Mexican trade agreement – well, the new NAFTA – it has no way to enforce it, and so it's a failing bill. It looks good, but it doesn't mean anything because you can't enforce it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Let's talk about your own background. You grew up in southwest Pennsylvania, and your father and grandfather worked in the coal mines?

MR. TRUMKA: Both grandfathers.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Both grandfathers. So, when you were growing up, you thought you were

–

MR. TRUMKA: And six of my uncles and 10 of my cousins.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you have a coal-mining family.

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you were growing up, did you – did they say we don't want you to work in the coal mines because it's not that healthy or safe, or they said this is what you should do?

MR. TRUMKA: They hammered me every day to get an education, and they would say the coal company can take anything away from you but what they can't take away from you is an education. And then when I couldn't play football anymore –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You were a high school football player.

MR. TRUMKA: I was.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you were a fullback, or?

MR. TRUMKA: I played – yeah, I played monster man. It was a hero. It's a combination –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Monster man, that's what I played too. I was the monster man.
[Laughter.]

MR. TRUMKA: I heard that about you.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, I was a big monster man. It was peewee. [Laughter.] It was – I peaked at seven. But so – [laughter] –

MR. TRUMKA: I do that with my grandkids now when I play.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you – when you were doing this Joe Paterno said maybe you could play at Penn State?

MR. TRUMKA: I talked to Paterno. I talked to coaches, yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

MR. TRUMKA: But I got hurt anyways, and so I –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But you went to Penn State anyway.

MR. TRUMKA: Yeah. But I –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And what did you – OK.

MR. TRUMKA: Let me come back to the thing about – you asked me the question about my dad. So, I went and got a – I went to the mine and got a job, and it was a bright, sunny day in July, and my dad was sitting on the porch. And I came running up all excited: Dad, dad, I got a job, I got a job! He said, that's great, son. Where did you get a job at? And I said I got a job at the mine. And he got this faraway look – some people call it the thousand-yard stare – and he

said the following words to me. He said, the day you drop one drop of sweat or lose one drop of blood in that mine, it'll crawl in your soul and you'll never be able to get rid of it. And I thought that was a crock, quite frankly, but there was something to that. Once you get in a coal mine with people and you face elements together, you really do get tight. You get close together and work together.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Was he saying don't do it because once you get there you can't get out of it, or?

MR. TRUMKA: Exactly.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. But you said I got a job and so I'm going to do it.

MR. TRUMKA: I did.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And when you're a coal miner – so you were a coal miner when you were in high school or in college?

MR. TRUMKA: College, and law school, and thereafter.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right, so in college. So, when you go down in the coal mines, what's the biggest risk? Is it black lung or is it the mine caving on you?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, it's all of those. I worked at the face, so you're always worried about collapses, mine falls. There's also explosions from gas and from dust, and then black lung is a prevalent thing. Australia decided that they would eliminate black lung, and they haven't had a new case of black lung since 2006. Our country is still getting new cases of black lung every day because, one, the laws aren't enforced; two, they are inadequate to do the job; and, three, they always lag about five years behind the technology.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you're a coal miner, you're going down in the coal mines, how many hours a day does one do that before you say it's just not safe to do it more, it's too hard to do? Is it a couple hours a day, eight hours a day, five hours a day?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, a normal shift is eight hours, but we do have 10-hour shifts and we do have 12-hour shifts.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you wear a mask to keep the black lung from coming in, the coal?

MR. TRUMKA: Sometimes, yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. So, what did you major in in college?

MR. TRUMKA: Accounting and economics, and a minor in English.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you graduated from – in 1971 from Penn State and then you decided to go to law school?

MR. TRUMKA: Yeah. The union helped me go to law school.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you went to law school at Villanova, and then after you graduated what did you want to do? Did you want to come to Washington, or that's where you came?

MR. TRUMKA: I only went to law school for one reason: I wanted to be a UMWA⁴ lawyer. I didn't want to be a lawyer in general; I wanted to be a UMWA –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You didn't want to be a corporate lawyer or do M&A?⁵

MR. TRUMKA: No. Had no interest. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Something important like that?

MR. TRUMKA: You know –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So –

MR. TRUMKA: So, I went straight to the legal department at the Miners.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you went to live here?

MR. TRUMKA: Mm hmm.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you're living here for four years. You're practicing law for the United Mine Workers. And then you decide you want to be maybe a union official, so you go back to Pennsylvania and you start working in a mine again. Is that right?

MR. TRUMKA: Yes, but I had – we helped get a guy elected – his name was Arnold Miller – because we changed the Mine Workers from very autocratic to the most democratic organization out there. A guy by the name of Jock Yablonski gave his life so that we would have that ability. Arnold got elected as the first president. I helped him get elected. I was on his staff. I had philosophical problems with him because he started drifting back in the wrong direction, so I resigned. I went back in the mines with the intention at that point of running for office in the Mine Workers.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you went back to the mines, but didn't people tell you, you know, going back in the mines is not that safe, and you don't have to; you're a lawyer? Did you ever think twice about going back into the mines?

⁴ UMWA - United Mine Workers of America

⁵ M&A – mergers and acquisitions

MR. TRUMKA: No, I never did, because I told you I didn't want to be a lawyer; I wanted to be a UMWA lawyer. And so, I had a great practice. I did federal cases for the Mine Workers, appeals cases, everything. I had a great practice and was doing fine. And I decided when I had to go back, I had to go back to the mine.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You didn't want to practice law in Washington, D.C. and be a good lawyer here?

MR. TRUMKA: No.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, you go back to the mines, and then you get elected as a union official. Is that right? And then from – just a couple years after that you get elected to be the head of the entire Mine Workers, right?

MR. TRUMKA: Right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And was that a contested election, or was –

MR. TRUMKA: Yes, very contested.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. And so, you did that for a number of years and then you became in 1995 the secretary-treasurer. What does the secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO do?

MR. TRUMKA: It's like a COO.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. And then –

MR. TRUMKA: CFO.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. And then you became in 2009 the head of the AFL-CIO.

MR. TRUMKA: Mm hmm.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, is your job as the head of the AFL-CIO to get people more unionized or to be the representative of – for the country of the union workers? What is your main job as the head of the AFL-CIO?

MR. TRUMKA: Representing workers from all the different sectors that we have affiliates. We have 55 affiliates, 55 different unions in different sectors. So, my job is to be their spokesman, to watch out for them, try to create a climate where working people can actually get a fair shake.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So as –

MR. TRUMKA: That includes legislation. That includes political stuff, collective bargaining stuff, anyplace where there's collective action.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, you've met with President Obama as well. And was he helpful to the AFL-CIO compared to President Trump, or how do you compare the two?

MR. TRUMKA: He was. I mean, he was a person of great integrity, and I had tremendous respect for President Obama. Unfortunately, he surrounded himself with a whole caterer of Wall Street elites and they sort of didn't understand working people. So, he spent the last year of his term fighting with us over TPP,⁶ and it probably cost the election in 2016.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You were against TPP.

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But you didn't think that would help our trade with Asia?

MR. TRUMKA: No, it wouldn't have. It would have been another giveaway. It would have enabled China to get all the benefits of that agreement with none of the responsibilities.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you were happy when President Trump pulled out of TPP?

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What about – when he pulled – President Trump pulled out of the Paris climate agreement. Are you supportive of his pulling out? Or you – what is your view on climate change?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, it has to happen. I mean, it's a reality. The country and the world faces a real issue, and we can't walk away from it or pretend it doesn't exist. We have to figure out ways to fix it and to stop the poisoning that we're poisoning. And what we can't do is walk away from the people that were there.

Take coal miners, for instance. For years and years and years coal miners fueled this country and fueled the world, and every one of you got the benefit of what they did. Now we want to get rid of coal, so you want to eliminate it, so you eliminate all of their jobs. What happens to them? What happens to their families? Shouldn't there be some kind of fair, just transition? Shouldn't we take care of the pension plan at least to keep those people that fueled this country – shouldn't they have a pension plan that's safe? Shouldn't we help them make it happen?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Now, speaking of pension plans, many of the state pension funds are underfunded – in fact, most of them – and many of the people who are the beneficiaries are your union members. Not all. So, are you – do you think that state legislatures should increase pension – or increase taxes to pay for higher pension benefits or cut benefits? Or what do you think we should do to eliminate the problem we have of pensions not being fully funded?

⁶ The Trans-Pacific Partnership, also called the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, is a defunct proposed trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States.

MR. TRUMKA: There's no universal answer about you raise taxes and it goes away, that's – or you cut taxes and it goes away. That's just not it. You have a pension. You made a promise. You had to fund it. And a lot of the governors sort of walked away from their funding obligation. They didn't do what they should have done, and then you get a problem. So, then we get a problem and people say, oh, cut their pensions. The people who are drawing the pensions didn't do anything wrong, and it's too late for them to go back and do something different. The fair thing to do is to honor that agreement.

Look, a pension is an important thing, and we have a pension crisis in this country. Most people aren't making enough money to be able to save anything and they don't have a pension plan. So, whenever they get older, it's going to happen. They're going to need help somewhere. So, it's either pay me now a little bit or pay me a lot later. So, we need to address the pension crisis in this country, and we need to do it quickly.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, at roughly – when I was in the government, roughly – at the end of the 1970s, roughly 25 percent of working people were unionized. I think that percentage is now 12 or 13 percent or something like that.

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Why do you think it's gone down from 25 [percent] or so to 12 or 13 percent?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, the attacks like the Nikki Haley from government, the bad labor laws that we have in the country that – even they aren't enforced properly. And corporate America decided to declare all-out battle on us after the wall fell to do away with us because we're the last group on the field that stops them from having unfettered control of the economy, unfettered control of economics, politics, and all of that stuff. So, all of those things coming together took a toll on us.

The good news is collective action is back on the rise. The good news is last year MIT did a study and 50 percent – actually, 48 percent – of all the workers out there said they would join a union tomorrow if given the chance. That's 60 million people. Sixty million people say I would join a union tomorrow if given the chance. They won't get the chance because the system is – currently prevents them from having that chance.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: The Democrats, as I said, control the House now, but the Democrats do not control the Senate. Are you going to put more of your efforts into holding onto the House and trying to get the Senate or the White House? What is going to be your political ambition in 2020?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, we'll – our members will dictate that, and we will probably focus on all three. The president is important, the Senate's important, and the House is important. All of those things are important to the country and to workers. So, they create pro-worker policies, that's good for us and it's good for the economy. Bad stuff for workers is also bad for –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: The people who are running for the Democratic nomination, do they come by to see you and say I'd like you to get to know me and –

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And do you think there are enough candidates running on the Democratic side? [Laughter.]

MR. TRUMKA: Enough? Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So are you impressed with a lot of the people that have come by to see you, or are you –

MR. TRUMKA: Yes, I have been. I mean, I listen to their policies. I mean, different personalities, unfortunately in this country, personalities probably has a greater effect on who you vote for than the issues and the policies that they represent. It's an image that you create. But when you listen to the policies of a lot of the candidates that are running right now, they're very, very impressive and they're worthy –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Are you upset that nobody –

MR. TRUMKA: – they're worthy of thought, analysis, and consideration.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Are you upset that nobody with a private equity background is running for president? [Laughter.] Does that upset you?

MR. TRUMKA: No, because I've found out over the years that heads, they win, tails they win. [Laughter.] No matter who gets elected, they co-opt them. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I got it. OK. [Laughter.] So – well, that might be the case sometimes. I don't know. But – [laughter] – so what is the greatest pleasure of being the head of the AFL-CIO?

MR. TRUMKA: Getting to come and talk to you – [laughter] –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. All right. But other than – other than that, what do – what do you enjoy the most about it?

MR. TRUMKA: I really enjoy representing workers and being with workers. I loved being on a picket line a couple of weeks ago with [Stop & Shop] workers, and I just love representing them, and you know, interacting with them and then representing them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And what's –

MR. TRUMKA: Legislative, political, economic, all of it. All of it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And what's the downside of being president of the AFL-CIO?

MR. TRUMKA: Travel.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You travel a lot.

MR. TRUMKA: I travel about 70 percent of the time.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And crossing a picket line, there was a Stop & Shop strike which has just been settled yesterday, I guess.

MR. TRUMKA: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, what percentage of people actually cross a picket line in our country? When there's a picket line, do, you know, 50 percent of the people keep going, or 20 percent go by, or do you know?

MR. TRUMKA: Well, at [Stop & Shop] I happen to know the numbers because there was – they did a study: 75 percent of the customers, loyal customers, did not cross the picket line, and that contributed to the strike being settled as quickly as it was.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. So, when you're not being the head of the AFL-CIO, what do you do for relaxation? Do you do – you know, do you join picket lines? What do you just – [laughter] – just to keep yourself from, you know, being the head of the AFL-CIO? What do you do for fun and pleasure?

MR. TRUMKA: I hunt, I fish, I play with my grandkids, and I read a lot.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you're hunting what? What do you hunt?

MR. TRUMKA: Various animals and birds.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you're a good shot and all that?

MR. TRUMKA: I'm not as good as I'd like to be.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And your grandchildren, do they want to be members of the AFL-CIO? You're teaching them about that, or?

MR. TRUMKA: Of course. They hear me talk about it. They hear us converse at the table. They understand it, yeah. That's how I learned about it. I learned about the United Mine Workers around the table. Everybody in my family was a member, and so they would talk about it. That's how I learned.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, are you optimistic about the country's future, or are you worried about it because of some of the issues you've talked about?

MR. TRUMKA: I'm more optimistic now than I've been in years because of the level of collective action that's going on out there. People are realizing that the system doesn't work for them, economics or politics, and so they're turning to each other to get things done. More young people than anybody else support unions. Our approval rating is higher than it's been in decades. People are saying collective action is the answer. And economists are saying collective action is important to raise wages so that they can become consumers and create demand, and that demand will create jobs, and those jobs will lift everybody up. So, I am optimistic right now. Young people are more receptive to unionism than we've seen in a long time.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, you've been the head of the AFL-CIO since 2009.

MR. TRUMKA: Right.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And you and I are roughly the same age. So how many more years do you intend to do this?

MR. TRUMKA: I don't know. Whenever the membership tells me to leave or whenever I think it's time. Look, it's a – it's a high-energy job. It requires a lot of energy, and it requires a lot of travel, and it requires a lot of reading because I cover all of the industries, so I have to have a smattering of knowledge about all of it. And that's tough, I know. I love what I'm doing, and we'll see.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, when you do retire, whenever it might be – 10 years from now – you would not go and join a private equity firm.

MR. TRUMKA: No, it won't – it won't be 10 years from now.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: It won't be 10 years.

MR. TRUMKA: No.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. But you would never join a private equity firm or something important like that? [Laughter.]

MR. TRUMKA: You know, if I did, I'd be afraid to shave in the morning. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Well, I want to thank you for a very interesting conversation, all right? Thank you.

MR. TRUMKA: Thanks. [Laughs.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Thank you. [Applause.]



Richard L. Trumka
President
AFL-CIO

Richard L. Trumka is president of the 12.5-million-member AFL-CIO. An outspoken advocate for social and economic justice, Trumka is the nation's clearest voice on the critical need to ensure that all workers have a good job and the power to determine their wages and working conditions. He heads the labor movement's efforts to create an economy based on broadly shared prosperity and to hold elected officials and employers accountable to working families.

In 1982, at age 33, Trumka ran on a reform ticket and was elected the youngest president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).

There, in addition to reforming the UMWA's fractious bureaucracy, he led one of the most successful strikes in recent American history against the Pittston Coal Company, which tried to avoid paying into an industry-wide health and pension fund.

Trumka was elected AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer in 1995, and held that post until 2009, when he was elected president.

Trumka's economic advocacy extends from the kitchen table and spans the globe. He has rallied international labor support for workers struggling for justice, and he has fought to end unfair trade practices and restore U.S. manufacturing strength. As secretary-treasurer, he carved out an innovative leadership role that continues today, working with programs that invest the collectively bargained pension and benefit funds of the labor movement to ensure they serve the long-term interests of workers.

Trumka's commitment to improving life for working people began early. He grew up in the small coal-mining town of Nemaquin, Penn. Nearly all the men in his family, including his father and grandfather, were coal miners. Trumka followed them into the mines, working there as he attended Penn State and Villanova University law school.

Solidarity and his determination to improve life for all working families have driven Trumka's life as a labor leader. Comprehensive immigration reform is a central part of that goal. Trumka's work on behalf of immigrants is just one signal of his deep commitment to securing economic and social justice for all working people.

As Trumka looks forward, he envisions an economy of shared prosperity for all working families—an economy of rising wages, equal pay, respect at work, safe jobs, secure retirement, and the freedom for all workers to form or join unions and bargain collectively.