



AFL-CIO Mobilizes Young Workers

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AFL-CIO's youth movement

- Organized labor needs younger workers; younger workers need representation and voice.
- The AFL-CIO has mounted major efforts to attract, educate, involve, and empower young worker-leaders.
- At the 2013 AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles, delegates reaffirmed and formalized the union's commitment to youth outreach.

The future of the American labor movement depends on mobilizing young workers and repositioning unions so that they are more appealing to young people across demographic groups and occupations. The AFL-CIO sees youth outreach as imperative to its future. The federation is embedding it in organizing strategies, issue campaigns, and public policies that will revitalize unions and widen the pathways to collective action for all workers. Yet the task of reshaping union structures and revising traditions to be more relevant to the Millennial Generation, which includes those born between the early 1980s and early 2000s, is a challenging one. Since 2009, the AFL-CIO has made a concerted effort to take on this challenge, supporting an ongoing initiative that is engaging and preparing young trade unionists nationwide for leadership roles.



Richard Trumka, AFL-CIO president

“We need a unionism that makes sense to the next generation,”

and representation to better meet their needs. And we will!”

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka told delegates at the federation's 2009 convention.¹ “These men and women need a strong voice. But when they look at unions, they don't see themselves—only a grainy, faded picture from another time. The labor movement can't ask the next generation of workers to change how they earn their living to fit our model of trade unionism. No! We have to change our approach to organizing and representation to better meet their needs. And we will!”

Unions and young workers need each other. Young people need the influence and institutional power of unions to counteract the many economic and social problems that challenge their generation. Unions need young people to replace the members who are retiring and aging out of the workforce, to contribute new ideas and approaches, to engage in political action, and to become active in issue campaigns, such as raising wages. Without the influence of unions—the AFL-CIO alone represents some 12.5 million workers in 56 international unions and its commu-

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—Richard Trumka



nity affiliate, Working America—groups of young workers face the prospect of confronting corporate power as isolated individuals, rather than as a collective force.

The economic and social problems facing the Millennial Generation are well documented. Unemployment levels remain high among young workers. During the 2009–2011 period, 56 percent of 22-year-old recent college graduates were underemployed, working jobs that do not require a college degree.² A Demos study found that 5.7 million workers between the ages of 18 and 34 were unemployed in 2012, with another 4.7 million underemployed (working part-time or dropping out of the labor force altogether).³ High unemployment and the tendency for more young workers to be employed in low-wage jobs have led to greater numbers living with their parents and a delay in their ability to start their own households.

Unemployment among the young is “hitting them at a time when it’s really important for them to step into adulthood,” explains AFL-CIO Young Worker Program Coordinator Tahir Duckett. “Not buying their first house, living at home with their parents—that’s a drag on the entire economy.”⁴

The AFL-CIO initiative developed in two stages, starting with demonstrating the need for a program and building support among affiliated unions. That phase was guided by the analysis of survey results and the forward-looking activities of a state labor federation. Once the institutional pieces were in place, stage two focused on building the capacity of young worker groups from the ground up.

Stage One: Identifying the Challenge and Building Support

A 2009 poll found that workers under the age of 35 were struggling to get

ahead financially and were less likely to work in jobs in which they received health care benefits and paid leave. Conditions were especially precarious for low-income minority workers, 70 percent of whom lacked sufficient savings to cover two months of living expenses.

Though these financial difficulties contributed to a drop in optimism about the future, other attitudes suggested that young people are open to the sort of collective action advocated by unions. Nearly 75 percent of young workers called for improvements on the job. A majority agreed that employees were more likely

Timeline of AFL-CIO Young Worker Initiative

Date	Activity
July 2009	Publication of report, <i>Young Workers: A Lost Decade</i> , by AFL-CIO and Working America; start of stage one of initiative
September 2009	AFL-CIO convention: Passage of Resolution 55, “In Support of AFL-CIO Programs for Young Workers”
Spring 2010	Young worker listening sessions held around the country
June 2010	First Next Up Young Workers Summit (Washington, D.C.) attracts 400 participants
February 2011	Young Workers Advisory Council holds first meeting
October 2011	Second Next Up Young Workers Summit (Minneapolis, MN) attracts 800 participants
August 2012	Cornell University report concludes that young worker groups “represent a hopeful and potentially significant development,” becoming well-positioned to contribute to a more inclusive, dynamic labor movement in the United States
August 2012	Young Worker Leadership Institute holds first workshop and attracts 62 participants
May 2013	Youth Economic Policy Forum sets policy agenda for AFL-CIO young workers and allied organizations
October 2013	AFL-CIO convention: Passage of Resolution 19, “Investing in Our Future: Young Workers and Youth Engagement,” signals continuation of initiative and determination to establish more young worker groups nationwide; start of stage two of initiative; resolution adds a young worker seat to the AFL-CIO General Board
June 2014	Second Young Worker Leadership Institute provides training in power analysis, communications, education in common sense economics, and leadership skills for 40 participants
July 2014	AFL-CIO reports that some 40 state and local young worker groups are active, and 19 international unions are developing young worker organizations of their members

to get workplace problems solved when they approach employers as a group rather than as isolated individuals.⁵

Other polls during the 2007–2009 period concluded that Millennials tended to view unions as important institutions that are necessary to protect workers and help them obtain their fair share of gains in productivity.⁶

In Massachusetts, labor leaders had been active in Frontlash, a 1980s AFL-CIO youth group, and recognized the need to convene young activists and cultivate aspiring leaders. State officials proposed a youth outreach program to build an engaged community of young unionists. During its inaugural Futures Convention in early 2008, participants from across Massachusetts heard stories about how seasoned leaders had become committed to trade unionism, listened to speeches from elected officials, planned social activities, and elected a young unionist to sit on the Massachusetts AFL-CIO Executive Council. Futures Conventions have continued annually since then.

Drawing upon the enthusiasm and interest generated by their Futures Committee, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO proposed a resolution at the 2009 AFL-CIO convention to train young leaders and “actively develop initiatives and programs aimed at bringing young workers into the labor movement” at all levels. Delegates embraced the resolution.

To kick off the national young worker program, the AFL-CIO sponsored a number of regional listening sessions in spring 2010, building momentum for the first Next Up Young Workers Summit that summer. That gathering attracted 400 participants, who began a conversation about how to involve young people in the labor movement and drew up a game plan for training the next generation of leaders. Attendees offered a variety of proposals, from pushing for college tuition reduction and health care portability to focusing on causes such as

immigration reform that appeal to young activists.

Attendees expressed their commitment to going home and recruiting other young people. Activists from Oregon, for example, left the Next Up conference to form Young Emerging Labor Leaders (YELL), which brought together activists from fourteen unions at their own convention that year. Since then, YELL has participated in workers’ rights hearings, volunteered in election campaigns, defended public employee rights, demonstrated against anti-union corporations, and created space for young union members to hone their leadership skills.



A report on the first summit was presented to the AFL-CIO Executive Council, which agreed that year to host another summit, establish a National Young Workers Advisory Council (YWAC), prepare a toolkit to guide young worker groups, and engage in other media and organizing activities that would spread the groups to multiple locations.⁷

When the YWAC convened, its members learned about the formation of young worker groups in several areas and began to plan the second Next Up Summit, which drew some 800 union activists to Minneapolis. Sara Steffens of Communication Workers of America District 9 reported that this meeting “didn’t feel like your average union conference,” with alternative music blaring between speeches, a smartphone app supplementing the paper agenda, and participants live tweeting their reactions to speakers.

Some of the most compelling discussions, she said, emerged from the event’s “Unconference” feature that allowed participants to propose workshop sessions on the fly and determine which attracted the greatest shared interest by voting. Participants supported the message of Occupy Wall Street, marched in solidarity with local public transit workers, and explored growing ties between the labor and environmental movements. The California delegation alone comprised fifty young activists from at least ten unions who agreed to establish a statewide young workers program.⁸

With two national summits, an official advisory body, a comprehensive toolkit to guide local groups, and the continued support by the AFL-CIO’s top officers, the initiative had established the infrastructure necessary for young worker groups to blossom. More than forty young worker groups now are active in twenty-four states across the country, according to the AFL-CIO’s Tahir Duckett. While the groups align their work on issues with national AFL-CIO priorities, they are also immersed in local struggles and devising creative ways to attract young unionists. Washington’s YELL holds paintball fights for members. Chicago’s Young Workers sponsors a labor history pub crawl. Baltimore’s Young Trade Unionists holds a career day for high school students and sponsors an annual stewards and awards dinner.

And by building community and a sense of purpose, some young worker groups already have contributed to impressive victories. In Boston, young workers played an important role in the election of Elizabeth Warren to the U.S. Senate. They targeted young workers for persuasion and turnout while using the election period to build their organization and establish partnerships. By election day, they had mobilized 135 young workers, contacted more than 3,000 voters in neighborhoods, and communicated with more than 1,700 by phone.

In Minnesota, the young worker group has partnered with students, a worker center, and other activist organizations to fight back against aggressive foreclosing of homes in their community, demonstrating to compel banks such as Wells Fargo to meet with affected homeowners. Young labor activists have helped to organize home care workers and adjunct faculty members, for example, to participate in the Raise the Wage Minnesota campaign. When the 2014 legislative session closed, young workers celebrated the first raise in the state minimum wage in ten years.

And in San Jose, California, young workers partnered with community allies, student groups, and the central labor council to push for a ballot measure to raise the minimum wage—a measure they eventually won with 59 percent of the vote.

To follow up the national summit meetings, YWAC organized the first of two Young Worker Leadership Institutes (YWLI) in Washington, D.C. Sixty-two participants in the August 2012 workshop received hands-on training in organizing and developed a strategic plan to become involved in issue and organizing campaigns.

For Daniella Castro, an engineer and activist in Next Generation Bay Area, attending the YWLI was her first experience with unionism. “The young workers at the YWLI were really inspiring,” she told Rebecca Band of the California Labor Federation. “Somehow these young men and women manage to work hard, play hard, and still find time to raise a family. I believe this group of young people has the potential to rock this labor movement ... and I learned that the people up top at the AFL-CIO want this change, and they will support us in working towards it.”⁹

To elevate the concerns of young workers in policy circles, the AFL-CIO and youth organizations sponsored a Youth Economic Policy Forum (YEPF)

that began to build a platform to guide further action.¹⁰ Nearly fifty influential young policy leaders met in May 2013 and identified major challenges, including the rising cost of post-secondary education, the difficulties faced by young people in finding jobs, and the prevalence of contingent and precarious work that makes young workers vulnerable to workplace exploitation. The forum concluded that government policies need to be oriented toward raising wages, strengthening social protection programs, and ensuring that affordable higher education is accessible to workers at all stages of their lives.



Stage Two: Spreading Young Worker Groups

The enthusiasm of young worker activists was incorporated into the 2013 AFL-CIO convention, held in Los Angeles, where the YWAC sponsored a Young Workers Speak Up! action session that included an open dialogue about how to adapt union strategies to youth concerns and “utilize creative organizing strategies to bridge the generation gap.” The YWAC hosted a Hunt for Justice that took young union members onto the streets of L.A. to support car wash workers’ organizing efforts and learn about their collaboration with a com-

Delegates [to the AFL-CIO’s 2013 National Convention in Los Angeles] reaffirmed their commitment to youth outreach.

munity health clinic. Young workers also participated in an activist art project, painting cardboard cutouts of workers and then joining a multi-generational effort to deposit about 150 of these cutouts in prominent public places.

Convention delegates reaffirmed their commitment to youth outreach, passing a resolution of recognition

and support for “youth-oriented strategic initiatives and partnerships developed nationally, in workplaces, on campuses, and in concert with a broad array of like-minded student, youth, advocacy, and community organizations.” The convention recognized the YWAC as the AFL-CIO’s Young Worker Organization, a representative of which would assume a seat on the General Board. The resolution established the goal of tripling the number of young worker groups by 2017.¹¹

The standing of young worker groups has ebbed and flowed since that 2013 convention. Many have flourished, strengthening their relationship with state labor federations and central labor councils, becoming the chief mechanism for establishing alliances with other youth groups and fueling issue campaigns for fair wages and a sustainable economy with shared prosperity. Others have experienced challenges as leadership has transitioned into more responsibility at work or at home. A Cornell University study found that the future of the young worker groups would depend on whether they were able to craft a sustainable model, navigate the complex relationships endemic to a turbulent labor movement, and develop greater clarity about their strategic vision so that their activities could be scaled up and influence the direction of the entire labor movement.¹²

With a sharper vision for the direction of the program, the second YWLI

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convened in June 2014 and trained young workers on how to better lead organizations that can drive a youth economic agenda in their communities. Participants received training on leadership skills, from power analysis and strategic planning to communications and navigating labor's political landscape.

Kevin Lux, an IBEW member from Oregon, called the training "easily the most inspiring event I have ever been a part of." The forty participants, representing thirteen international unions, returned home paired up in peer coaching relationships and armed with work plans designed to help them maintain their network and support structure as they build agenda-driving organizations on the ground. These leaders will also receive ongoing support from both the National Young Worker Coordinator and the Young Worker Advisory Council.

Will the Millennials Come Back to Organized Labor?

Carmen Berkley, former executive director of the Generational Alliance and now head of the AFL-CIO Civil, Human and Women's Rights Department, is hopeful but cognizant of the difficulties involved in making labor truly relevant to contemporary youth. The Millennial Generation has been raised to turn their backs on labor unions, she says. "If our generation stands together and demands fair working practices, we would not only be setting ourselves up for future economic success, but we would [also] be setting up success for future generations," she argues.

"Let's not get it twisted. Labor needs us as much as we need them. As the labor movement clings to [its] aging membership, they know they have a lot to change. ... Transformation of the economy starts with the value of the worker,

and the value of the worker starts with our generation joining a union."¹³

To that end, the AFL-CIO plans to continue to focus on developing young workers to lead organizations that can drive a youth economic agenda by supporting affiliate organizing campaigns and pushing political, legislative, and issue campaigns that matter to young workers.

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