

What Role Should Organized Union Labor Play in Politics and Why?

It is imperative that union labor is well organized and unified in order for its mission to be successful. The AFL/CIO mission as expressed in its Constitution represents people who work by “improving the lives of working families, bringing fairness and dignity to the workplace and securing social equity in the Nation.”¹ As an underdog fighting corporate America and its pursuit to maximize profits, unions must fight to protect the dignity and welfare of its members through collective bargaining. For unions to compete against the collective power of big business that has bankrolled those in charge on Capitol Hill, the best political response for organized union labor is to fight for pro labor-oriented candidates and policies within the two major parties.

Organized union labor must form political action committees, fund Super Pac’s and hire lobbyist to help do the bidding so their voices can be heard by Congress. In order for unions to gain or at least retain benefits they have worked so hard for, they must endorse and support pro labor politicians. From the grass roots level of building campaign signs, knocking on doors and handing out leaflets, to national television advertisements, the union’s success grows exponentially in its strength of solidarity.

The bottom line is this; union labor must counter corporate greed and the government that it is intimately connected to. Labor union’s collective bargaining provides union members with a platform to negotiate better wages, working conditions, and health benefits. This isn’t just a national fight, but a movement at the international level as well. Support from the AFL-CIO President Rich Trumпка and the lobbying efforts of all U.S. unions provided the impetus for the failure of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the North American Trade Agreement

¹ AFL/CIO home page. www.aflcio.org/About-Our-Mission-and-Vission. (accessed February 2, 2017).

(NAFTA). Exposing bad trade deals such as TPP and NAFTA is an example of how and why unions play an important role in politics and produce shared prosperity for America.

I am very appreciative of the AFL/CIO, the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) and in particular Local 452 (VFD), my father's union, and Local 112 (LAFD), my grandfather's union. I owe a great deal of gratitude to all the brave union leaders that preceded them for the past 99 years for providing union workers and their families with the benefits we all share today. I recognize that anti-union "right-to-work" (RTW) laws are spreading quickly. On Feb. 8, the Washington State Council of Firefighters (WSCFF) in Olympia rallied with 1,100 union supporters to oppose anti-union SB 5692. New Mexico HB 432, an anti-union (RTW) bill was killed after dozens of union members testified against the legislation. The IAFF and in particular the WSCFF have made recent advancements in expanding coverage of presumptive occupational diseases for firefighters (RCW51.32.185). The union's lobbying efforts have also addressed "toxic flame retardants, beating back constant attacks on the defined benefit retirement systems and defeated anti-worker initiatives."² Union backed I-1443 raised the Washington minimum wage to \$13.50 and gave workers the right to paid sick leave.

It may be more important than ever to put partisan politics aside. We have seen the POTUS support unions on one side, e.g. opposition to NAFTA and TPP, yet on the other side we see the Republican Party Platform support destructive right-to-work laws. Harold Schaitberger, the General President of the IAFF said, "Your executive board cares much more about our union and its success than any one politician or partisan race."³ For the union's mission to be successful and collective bargaining to thrive, organized union labor will always defend its constitution by playing an important role in politics.

² Fire Fighter Quarterly, vol.99, no.3, pg.5

³ Ibid.