Opinion
News



Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, attends the conference "Erroneous Autonomy: The Dignity of Work" Jan. 10, 2017, at The Catholic University of America in Washington. (James C. Webster)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Since the somber news broke that Richard Trumka, the president of the AFL-CIO, had died, the tributes have been many, including one here at NCR by Fr. Clete Kiley, the nation's foremost labor priest and a good friend of Trumka's. He was a leader of extraordinary commitment, intelligence and savvy.

Rarer in Washington, Trumka was straightforward and unpretentious: He knew whatever power he wielded in the nation's capital flowed from the men and women of the labor movement and he never pretended he was better than anyone.

There are not many times in life to which one can point as specifically seminal, a moment when something new begins, or something once strong is given new life. For me, one such moment involved Trumka.

In the late autumn of 2013, I attended a planning session for the first "Erroneous Autonomy: The Catholic Case Against Libertarianism," an academic conference sponsored by the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America.

I was a visiting fellow at the Institute. Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute; Kiley, a senior fellow; and I were discussing the program for the conference and, specifically, who should introduce the keynote speaker, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga. Kiley looked up and said: "Why don't we ask Rich Trumka?" It was a seminal suggestion.

A few months later, the Erroneous Autonomy conference was held. Trumka gave a rousing introduction to Rodriguez, articulating the gratitude of the labor movement for the church's teachings on the dignity of work and enthusiastically welcoming the early teachings of Pope Francis. He quoted the Holy Father who had recently said, "Solidarity, this word that strikes fear in the developed world, it is almost a dirty word, but it is *our* word." Rodriguez was clearly captivated by Trumka.

Originally conceived exclusively as an effort to begin building a Catholic intellectual bulwark against libertarian ideology, that conference also became a critical first step in reconstituting the church-labor alliance that had atrophied over the years following the death of legendary AFL-CIO chaplain Msgr. George Higgins in 2002.

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Several members of Trumka's team were very enthusiastic about church teaching on the moral issues implicit in economic systems. Labor, like the Catholic Church, understands that in the past few decades, our society has lost sight of the fact that economic laws are made for man, not man for the sake of economic laws.

NCR's own Tom Roberts interviewed Trumka after that conference, and penned a lede which captured some of Trumka's enthusiasm for the new pope: "It's easy to make the country's most powerful labor leader go almost schoolkid giddy. Just say, 'Pope Francis.' "

The second Erroneous Autonomy conference was held the next year at the AFL-CIO headquarters. Cardinal Donald Wuerl gave the keynote address and, just as importantly, the audience, including the media, could witness the easy camaraderie that existed between him and Trumka — two sons of western Pennsylvania whose life work had brought them to the nation's capital. Elizabeth Dias, then writing for Time magazine, observed: "It was hard to tell whose standing ovation came faster, Trumka's or Wuerl's."

In addition to Wuerl, then-Archbishop Blase Cupich of Chicago, Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego and six other bishops attended that second conference. When they all stood in front of the WPA-style mosaic in the Gompers Room, posing for a picture with Trumka, one of his aides leaned to me and said: "He is in heaven. His inner-altar boy is hosting a cardinal, an archbishop and seven bishops. He is in heaven."

Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley delivered the keynote at the third Erroneous Autonomy conference, which was held on campus at CUA in 2017. The cardinal recounted his early years as a priest, when he led the Centro Catolico in D.C. He recounted the plight of workers brought to clean the homes of diplomats, living in a situation he called "virtual slavery."

O'Malley, who has a shining sense of humor, added: "When I would speak to these offending diplomats they would always say, 'Oh Father, *lo tratamos como un miembro de la familia*. — 'We treat her like a member of our family.' My rejoinder was always, 'I am so glad I am not a member of your family.' "

I remember watching Trumka guffaw at that line. I do not think he realized how funny the cardinal was, nor how far back his commitment to workers went. The two of them developed an easy rapport.

Those three conferences kindled important relationships that led to some significant achievements over the years. Earlier this year, the Diocese of Manchester sent a letter opposing anti-union, right-to-work legislation and my labor friends said the intervention opened a floodgate of opposition to the proposed law from other religious organizations and the law did not pass. That was a decision that helped real people defend their dignity and the dignity of their work.

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In 2018, the U.S. bishops' conference took the rare step of breaking with the Becket Fund, filing an amicus curiae brief in the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Janus* v. *AFSCME*. The court ruled against the public sector unions, but friends in organized labor were so grateful that the Catholic Church stood with them in solidarity in that case.

When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017, the AFL-CIO sent a planeload of supplies and volunteers to help the struggling citizens of the island. They were welcomed at the airport by Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves of San Juan. He knew some of the leaders of organized labor because they had helped the religious leaders on the island navigate the island's economic crisis and federal response to it, making sure that undue austerity measures affecting workers and the poor were avoided.

The last time I saw Trumka in person was at a dinner in Newark with Cardinal Joseph Tobin after Trumka had given a speech marking the fifth anniversary of the election of Francis. Trumka and the cardinal hit it off from the start and the next day, Tobin gave Trumka a tour of Newark's magnificent Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, which the union leader had never seen.

A week before he died, I learned Trumka was slated to go to the Vatican next month to participate in a meeting about climate change. As he had done with the issue of immigration, Trumka was critical in repositioning organized labor away from some obscurantist policy stances it had adopted earlier on climate change.

He knew that the transition away from fossil fuels was essential and knew, as well, that the sustainable energy economy needed to produce good-paying jobs if the working women and men of this country were going to embrace it. He was thrilled when O'Malley installed solar panels at the chancery in Braintree, Massachusetts, and did so with union labor.

Last week, NCR published John Gehring's excellent — and frightening — report on this year's Napa Institute meeting. There, wealthy libertarians, conservatives, and their ecclesial and academic allies plotted how they can purchase the church. Trumka knew it is not for sale and that the Catholic Church's deep commitment to human dignity made it impossible for the church to embrace laissez-faire economics. The academic conferences Schneck and Trumka had organized merely explicated the theories Trumka knew in his heart.

In the past several decades, many liberal Catholics have left the Catholic Church because they could not abide some of its teachings, nor the slow pace of efforts to reform the church. Richard Trumka was not among them. I am sure he had difficulties with some of the church's teachings, as do most of us, but he chose to focus on the good the church could do, and on all the work that remains to be done.

It is not only the working men and women of this country who have lost a great champion. Those of us committed to rebuilding the once vibrant relations between labor and the Catholic Church have also lost a hero. Rebuilding that alliance was only a slice of the work Trumka did for workers, but it was an important slice, important to him, important to the workers, important to the church.

We shall miss the man and his commitment. We owe his memory our own commitment to carry on the work.