Opinion



The 1911 May Day parade in New York City parade paid special tribute to the victims of the recent Triangle Waist Co. fire about two months earlier. A sign in Yiddish notes "146" — the number of fire victims at the garment factory. The workplace disaster galvanized the American labor movement. (Library of Congress/Bain News Service collection)



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August 23, 2021
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On Friday, Aug. 20 the AFL-CIO executive committee selected Liz Shuler to fill out the rest of Richard Trumka's term as president of the AFL-CIO. Shuler, who rose through the ranks of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), had been Trumka's No. 2 for many years and was the obvious choice to move to the top slot after Trumka's untimely death earlier this month. The election of a woman to lead the American labor movement is an important milestone.

Friday also kicked off a contest for the long-term direction of the labor movement. Ten months from now, the AFL-CIO will select a president for a full term and, more importantly, confront some perennial issues about the direction the labor movement should take.

Trumka was deeply steeped in Catholic social teaching and recognized the degree to which that teaching and the labor movement had helped form each other throughout the 20th century. It is obvious to see how the alliance occurred at the intellectual level. From Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum in 1891 through Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical Quadragesimo Anno to Pope Paul VI's 1971 Octogesima Adveniens and Pope John Paul II's 1981 Laborem Exercens and 1991 Centesimus Annus, papal teaching about the right to organize has been clear and the dignity of work and of workers is one of the core tenets of Catholic social doctrine.

That teaching is brought alive in our Catholic intellectual life through conferences like the "Erroneous Autonomy" conferences Trumka and the Catholic University of America's Stephen Schneck organized in 2014, 2015 and 2017, and through annual lectures such as Notre Dame's McBride Lecture. In 2017, Fred Redmond of the United Steelworkers delivered that lecture and he also joined the AFL's leadership ranks on Friday.

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Richard Trumka, longtime president of the AFL-CIO, who died Aug. 5 at age 72, was deeply steeped in Catholic social teaching on the right to organize and the dignity of workers. (CNS)

Pope Francis has taken this intellectual and moral tradition to new heights. You might say he is the strawberry on the cake on the Catholic-labor alliance. In a videotaped message to the International Labor Organization earlier this year the pope linked workers' rights to his understanding of integral human ecology.

> In our haste to return to greater economic activity, at the end of the Covid-19 threat, let us avoid the past fixations on profit, isolation and nationalism, blind consumerism and denial of the clear evidence that signals discrimination against our "throwaway" brothers and sisters in our society. On the contrary, let us look for solutions that will help us build a new future of work based on decent and dignified working conditions, that originate in collective negotiation, and that promote the common good, a phrase that will make work an essential component of our care for society and Creation. In this sense, work is truly and essentially human. That is what it is about, being human.

The pope's entire speech is worth a read. My only quibble is with his derogatory comment about the Enlightenment, which, in the current context, needs amendment but not disparagement.

The church-labor alliance was not merely a highbrow, intellectual affair. Many union locals held their first meetings in the basement of a local Catholic Church and many a Catholic wedding celebrated the reception at the union hall down the street. Many dioceses still require union labor on big jobs. On issues such as immigration, the church and organized labor work hand-in-glove, defending the rights of immigrants and condemning xenophobic attempts to blame them for our country's ills.

At Politico, Rebecca Rainey sketched the choices facing organized labor, but they do not fall as neatly as she suggests into two differing camps. It is true that some in the labor movement think more resources need to be dedicated to organizing on the ground and less on trying to affect policy in Washington, a position with which I agree wholeheartedly. It is a truism of political life that political power outside the Beltway always translates inside, but political power inside the Beltway does not

always count for a hill of beans outside.

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Differences in organizing philosophies were a big part of the reason that some unions abandoned the AFL-CIO in 2005. UNITEHERE and the United Foor and Commercial Workers (UFCW) both rejoined the AFL-CIO under Trumka's leadership. Shuler is uniquely placed to help keep the labor movement together.

There is also a question of whether the labor movement should form a pan-left alliance with groups like NARAL Pro-Choice America. Many rank-and-file members in the labor movement support the AFL's historic refusal to take a position on abortion rights. Rainey seemed to conflate this issue of forming a pan-left alliance with that of focusing on organizing, but that misses the mark. There are people in the labor movement who want to emphasize organizing and who also oppose abandoning the labor movement's focus on economic, not social, issues just as there are those who want to focus on D.C. politics but who want to do it arm-in-arm with pro-choice and other liberal groups.

To be sure, labor organizers should reach out beyond the narrow confines of the workplace to find allies in the community. Workers may face problems with transportation getting to work, and community organizers are allies in that struggle. They may have inadequate health care options, and advocates for better health care become natural allies. It is not enough to organize workers; you also need to organize their families, and their families have needs like childcare and they have connections throughout a community. Local churches, local sports leagues, local immigrants' rights groups are especially strong allies to have.

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The future of the labor movement, like the future of the Catholic Church, rests with the growing Latino population in this country. As Democrats found out to their

surprise in November, many Latinos do not support liberal social policies. It would be a disaster if the AFL-CIO were to form any kind of alliance with pro-choice abortion rights groups, making it harder to organize among Latinos, who tend to provide the new membership in expanding unions like UNITEHERE.

Even in the short term, it is obvious how the Catholic Church can help organized labor in ways pro-choice groups cannot. If the Protecting the Right to Organize Act is going to pass, or even come close to passage, it will need Republican votes in the Senate. Catholic leaders can help secure those votes. NARAL Pro-Choice America can't. The U.S. bishops' conference should formally support the PRO Act now, as a sign of solidarity with organized labor and in tribute to the memory of Trumka.

At the local level, the Catholic Diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire played a critical role in defeating an anti-union so-called "right-to-work" law earlier this year. Could abortion rights' groups have achieved that? In a legislature where Republicans control both houses?

The alliance with labor is good for the Catholic Church also. It helps keep us in touch with our roots among America's working class. It allies the church with the other largest advocate for solidarity in society. It balances the increasingly sinister influence of wealthy Catholics. It identifies us with the lunch bucket issues that concern our fastest growing demographic, Hispanic Catholics.

Pope Francis' vision for a healthier human society recognizes a prominent place for organized labor because unions have long been a bulwark against the worst excesses of modern capitalism and laissez-faire culture. For labor unions as for the Catholic Church, solidarity is the oxygen without which they cannot live. The alliance is natural and, dare one say, supernatural: Dignified work is a blessing as well as a mark of human justice.

As the AFL-CIO negotiates its future, I hope its leaders will always see in the Catholic Church an ally, and that the leaders of the Catholic Church will always look for ways to nurture this alliance that has benefited both church and union throughout our history.