

On September 16, 2009, Richard L. Trumka was elected President of the AFL-CIO by acclamation at the Federation's 26th convention in Pittsburgh, Pa., and re-elected in 2013 by AFL-CIO convention delegates in Los Angeles. His election, following 15 years of service as the AFL-CIO's Secretary-Treasurer, capped Trumka's rise to leadership of the nation's largest labor federation from humble beginnings in the small coal mining communities of southwest Pennsylvania.

Twelve-year-old Richard Louis Trumka was sitting on the porch of his grandfather Attilio Bertugli's house in Rices Landing, Pa., complaining bitterly to his grandpap about how badly Mine Workers were being treated. It was the 1960s, and the miners were on strike.

"What do you plan to do about it?" his grandfather asked.

"When I grow up, I could be a politician," Rich replied. His grandpap feigned smacking him across the back of his head. Chastened, young Trumka offered a second opinion: "I could become a lawyer and stand up for workers' rights."

His grandfather, a longtime miner, allowed how that was a better idea, but added something that has stuck with Trumka ever since. "If you want to help workers," his grandfather said, "you first need to help people."

Rich Trumka not only grasped the wisdom of his grandfather's counsel, it has been the encompassing vision of his leadership in the labor movement ever since: Unions must strive to uplift everybody in their pursuit of fair treatment for workers, as they did in building the world's strongest middle class, and as they must once again by leveling the playing field and restoring job growth and prosperity for working people.

'The Mines Humble Man'

Born July 24, 1949, Trumka grew up in the Pennsylvania coalfields during the '60s. Like many of his generation living in his community, his prospects coming out of high school were "steel, auto, the mines or the military." Rich followed his grandfather Attilio and his father, Frank, into the mines. They proved worse than he had imagined: "Cold, damp, dusty – sound bouncing all around," he recounts. "A dungeon of impending danger."

His grandfather and father, both of whom were union activists, offered him advice he hadn't anticipated, either. They told him that in return for demanding the right to be respected, you owed your employer a full day's hard work.

Working side by side at times with his father, he witnessed the family's work ethic put into practice. Frank Trumka was highly regarded by his co-workers for his astute judgment and tireless work ethic, once setting a long-standing record for filling the most coal cars in a single shift. He worked with the utmost efficiency, Rich recalls, "with movements as graceful as a ballet dancer."

Rich worked in the mines for more than seven years, working his way through Penn State University, where he graduated in 1971 with a Bachelor of Science degree, and eventually got a law degree from Villanova University in 1974. He worked on the legal staff of the United Mine Workers for four years before returning to mine work in 1979, doing pro bono legal work for local families in the Nemaquin area during his hours away from the mine.