

Unions

Longtime RWDSU President Vows to Continue Fighting for Nontraditional Workers' Rights

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union re-elected by acclamation Stuart Appelbaum as president Aug. 7, the final day of the organization's quadrennial convention, which took place in Orlando, Fla.

Appelbaum has been president of the New York City-based RWDSU since 1998.

In a statement issued Aug. 7, the union said Appelbaum's re-election to another four-year term comes at a time when the RWDSU, an affiliate of the United Food and Commercial Workers, has racked up a number of major organizing victories for low-wage workers in retail and other industries.

"We will continue to pursue political action, build coalitions, and run campaigns that advance a progressive agenda for working people," Appelbaum told convention attendees during his acceptance speech, "and empower the most vulnerable people in low-wage industries to stand up and fight back."

In addition to Appelbaum, three other RWDSU leaders were re-elected to four-year terms—Gemma de Leon Lopresti, executive vice president; Jack Wurm, secretary-treasurer; and Joseph Dorismond, recorder.

The convention, which took place Aug. 4-7, is held every four years. This year's convention drew about 600 RWDSU members, Janna Pea, the union's spokeswoman, told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 8.

The RWDSU represents about 100,000 members nationwide.

"Now we may not be the biggest union in the country," Appelbaum said, "but we are willing to take on the big fights, and that makes us relevant and influential nationally."

Resolution Approved to Support Immigrant Workers. During the convention, Pea said union members approved a resolution vowing to fight for the rights of immigrant workers.

"The exploitation of immigrant workers not only hurts immigrants and their families," the resolution stated, "but drives down wages and working standards for all working Americans."

The RWDSU resolved to "make every effort to negotiate contracts that protect immigrant rights" and to "prioritize organizing immigrant workers."

Trumka: 'We're Winning.' During his speech Aug. 5 at the convention, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said "unionism works."

"RWDSU builds strong careers, strong families, strong communities and a strong future for the United States of America," he said.

"The best way to fair pay, is a union contract," Trumka said. "The best way to retirement security, is a union contract."

"The best way to a better tomorrow, so you can give your family a decent life and health care and a good education," he said, "it all comes back to a union contract."

Trumka also said the conversation about economic inequality, low wages and collective bargaining is changing nationwide.

"All over this country, people are talking about economic inequality, people who never spoke the words before," he said. "The public is debating big issues, like wages good enough so we can really live, and raise a family if we want to. The public is debating collective bargaining. We're talking about rights on the job."

"We've been wanting this conversation for a long time, and guess what?" Trumka said. "We're winning. People like the idea of raising wages."

Mott's, Other Labor Struggles Cited. Trumka also applauded the RWDSU's efforts four years ago at Mott's applesauce and apple juice plant in Williamson, N.Y. (177 DLR A-15, 9/14/10).

About 300 members of the RWDSU employed at the Mott's plant went on strike to secure restored wage levels and the continuation of their pension plan. At issue during the strike was a proposed \$1.50 per hour pay cut, which later was eliminated. The defined-benefit pension plan also was preserved for current employees.

"It was a powerful strike," Trumka said, "and it achieved important immediate goals."

Trumka also cited an ongoing disagreement involving the RWDSU, Guitar Center Stores Inc., Bain Capital, a private investment firm, and Ares Management LLC, a private equity group, "for fair pay and decent health care for the Guitar Center workers" (218 DLR A-16, 11/8/13).

Retail workers at three Guitar Center stores in Las Vegas, Chicago and New York City organized and now

are represented by the RWDSU. The Guitar Center store employees represented by the union have said their primary concerns pertain to the company's compensation policies and working conditions.

Pea, the union's spokeswoman, told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 4 that the company's representatives have "yet to sit down with us and the workers to negotiate a contract."

Christopher Ian Bennett, Guitar Center's vice president of communications and corporate affairs, told Bloomberg BNA Aug. 8: "For 50 years our organization has put musicians and our people first. If the union had any respect for the bargaining process or our associates, they would keep this kind of rhetoric out of the headlines and stop taking cheap shots that nobody takes seriously."

The RWDSU has filed three sets of unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board, Pea said. The charges, filed June 10, allege that Guitar Center has refused to bargain collectively and in good faith with the union regarding workers at the three stores. Pea said the charges have been consolidated and are being investigated by the NLRB's regional office in Chicago.

Guitar Center, based in Westlake Village, Calif., was purchased in 2007 by Bain Capital. Guitar Center officials announced in April that affiliates of Ares Management assumed a controlling interest in the company. Affiliates of Bain Capital retained partial ownership of the Guitar Center, along with representation on its board of directors.

"I want every Guitar Center worker to know the entire AFL-CIO and every one of our affiliates stands behind them in their efforts to win a fair contract," Trumka said.

Focus on Nontraditional Workers to Continue. Fights like these for workers who traditionally have not been represented by a union appear to be fueling the RWDSU's work.

The union said in its statement that in New York, Appelbaum "has helped undocumented car wash workers win strong contracts and he has negotiated contracts for workers at Macy's, Bloomingdale's and other stores that have helped raise job standards in the retail industry nationally."

The RWDSU announced last October that members of the union employed at four New York-area car washes voted to ratify three-year first contracts with their employers (205 DLR A-12, 10/22/13).

In addition, the union said Appelbaum has worked closely with RWDSU members and leaders in the South to win new contracts for immigrant workers in poultry and food processing industries.

In 2012, members of a proposed bargaining unit composed of some 1,200 poultry plant workers employed at Pilgrim's Pride Corp. in Russellville, Ala., voted for representation by the RWDSU (114 DLR A-3, 6/13/12).

Appelbaum said in a president's report released during the convention that the RWDSU efforts' to organize nontraditional workers is part of a bigger picture.

"Our victories will be hollow and short-lived if we do not rebuild the entire labor movement from the ground up," he said.

"[I]n building power for our members we have to look beyond the labor movement" and "build broader coalitions if we are to regain the strength we need to make a real difference for working people," Appelbaum said.

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Text of the president's report is available at <http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=rsmh-9mss62>. Text of the ULP charges are available at <http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=rsmh-9mss7c>, <http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=rsmh-9mss6z>, and <http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=rsmh-9mss6f>.

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