

Young Workers Conference Report

This past month I had the opportunity to attend the IATSE Young Workers Conference in Portland, Oregon. To the membership, who deemed I should go, thank you, I bring back to share new knowledge, some ideas, and severe enthusiasm. The hosts of the conference were friendly and gracious, the presenters were enthusiastic and fielded questions like pros, and the other young workers, our brothers and sisters, didn't hesitate to share all they could. The young workers that join our our local, are the lifeblood of our organization, they are what is going to keep the International an effective union to protect our craft and support our industry in the future.

The conference covered some excellent topics, but the focus seemed to be on activism. Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, Elizabeth Schuler, spoke on the first evening focusing on the young workers across the country and what groups affiliated with the AFL-CIO are doing. They're getting out and being a presence in their communities. Young worker groups are transforming the public image of unions. These sentiments were echoed by Leah Ohkin, Business Representative IATSE Local 764, and Molly Katchpole, IATSE Communications Department. Wearing our bugs in public when doing a canned food drive, paint balling or canvassing brings about potential forums for discussion of what the union is and why we are a part of it. We are Union THUGS (those happy union guys).

Bob Bussel, University of Oregon Labor Education & Research Center, presented on messaging for unions. He had some excellent points about how we frame our speech when we talk about our unions. There was a pretty solid list of terms associated with unions when we hear about ourselves from non-union folks and the media, most of the words have a negative connotation. Collectively though, the attendees had an excellent lexicon when asked to list words we use to talk about union and about what it means to us. When we speak to the non-industry folks we have to be aware of not only the connotations that words carry, but also that we are not using jargon that is nonsensical to the laypersons. We can change the way that folks view our union, and unions in general, based on how we speak with them about what we do and why we are union members.

Several of the sessions were led by Joe Hartnett, Assistant Department Director of Stagecraft, IATSE. He gave a history of the IATSE class, in which we learned such fun facts as: wardrobe locals came about because stage hands didn't want their wives in their unions, and in 1970 the first body mics were used on Broadway. He also covered the structure of the IA. We learned the district break down, and about the International's leadership structure. COMET Training (Continuing Organizing Membership Education Training) explained union density (the percentage of union members in our industry expressed as a percentage of the total workforce) and union market share (the percent of work done by our employers under the terms of a CBA). It was pretty obvious by the end of the session that the more of the union market share the union has in an area, the more leverage they have to negotiate and raise the socioeconomic standards for everyone in the area. The training equipped the attendees to talk to non members about the union in a positive light, and prepared us for the arguments against joining or supporting union friendly legislation. This conference was about action and activism.

One thing that really stood out to me at the conference was the diversity. There was a good mix of genders, ethnic and cultural minorities. The organizers had assigned seating at round tables and each table was a mix of districts and crafts. During the History of the IATSE session, the representative from Local 1 raised his hand to ask a question: “Why aren't there any women Vice-Presidents in the International? Where are the minorities?” The teacher of the session said, there weren't any that were nominated or stepped up for the positions, and technically, our President is a Jew. A gentleman from L.A. mentioned that at an AFL-CIO diversity conference there was a mantra going around “Too stale, too pale, too male.” Being in the city that we are in, and our local itself, we are breaking the norm. We are diverse. We have women in positions of power and responsibility, and perhaps some of them will look beyond the local towards the International and step up to help the membership be better represented on a national level.

A lot of people will argue that “my vote doesn't matter.” It is easy to become jaded. Why did you join the union? Wasn't it to have a say in your contracts, and to have a vote at meetings? We need to encourage people to get registered and go vote. One thing that was really impressed upon us at the conference was how important that is. If we want to keep out the Koch brothers supported politicians then we have to get to the polls ourselves. We have to make a point to talk to our friends and our families, to make sure they are registered to vote and are getting to the polls. A lot of anti-union legislation has passed in recent years, and to get those politicians out of office we have to be voting or our voices will fall on deaf ears. Besides the fact that it is your civic duty as an American citizen, the right for everyone to vote was hard fought. Minorities have a full vote. Women have a full vote. And all we need is to be registered and a photo ID. Get out there, talk to people, and most importantly vote and make a difference.

In solidarity,
-Mikela Cowan