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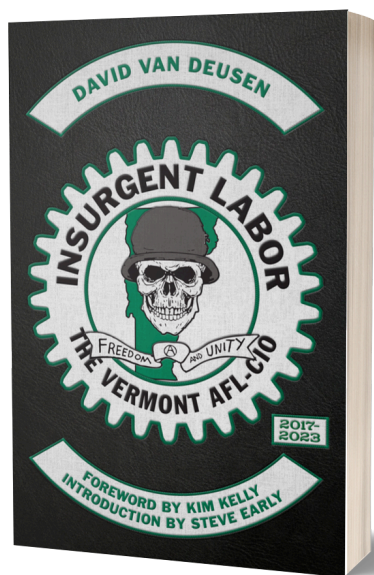
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Buy *Insurgent Labor: The Vermont AFL-CIO 2017-2023*

In 2020, with much of the nation biting its fingernails wondering what to do if Donald J. Trump refused to leave office after losing the presidential election — David Van Deusen, then head of the Vermont State Labor Council, was ready to lead a general strike across his state to help kick him out if needed. It was a bold and defiant move that late AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka hated so much, he **threatened to take over the VSLC**.

“As Dwight Brown, our former executive vice-president from the United! slate once said: ‘If there is a Neo-fascist coup in the United States of America — in our republic — the very least we can do as organized labor is to organize a general strike.’ We never backed down from that,” Van Deusen tells Work-Bites. “We took steps to prepare for a general strike should the coup be carried out. We were ready to take action. We were ready to do what needs to be done as a people — as a working class that believes in, and supports, democracy.”

There wasn't much the Trumka administration liked about Van Deusen and his fellow United! reformers when they were elected in 2019. The national bristled when the VSLC took a strong stance in support Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis — publicly expressed their desire for real meaningful police reform — and pushed organized labor to do more to combat systemic racism across the United States.

Never mind that the reformist slate managed to energize rank and file members and set to work doubling union density throughout the Green Mountain State, Van Deusen says all Trumka really wanted was for the VSLC to be a “vassal of his kingdom.”

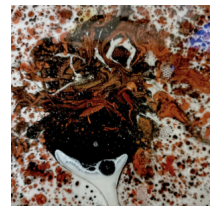
“And we're not that,” he says. “We believe in real union democracy. We went out of our way to build real democracy within our ranks. We've more than doubled the amount of delegates that affiliates get to send to conventions; we greatly expanded the size of our elected executive board; and we've gone to the rank and file whenever there are major decisions that need to be made and asked what their views are, what their opinion is, and typically ask them to vote on such issues.”

Van Deusen chronicles the reformist fight and struggle for union democratization in a new book called, *Insurgent Labor: The Vermont AFL-CIO 2017-2023* from PM Press.

ADVENTURE CAPITALISM

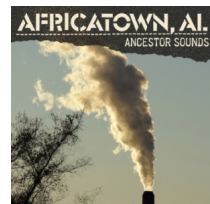


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“We have taken money out a lobbying and put it into a new organizing department, and we have helped organize new shops across Vermont,” the two-term former VSLC leader says. “We helped push a working class agenda across Vermont — a pro union agenda. We won real gains. We passed responsible contractor ordinances where there were zero before United! came in. Now, they’re in three of our cities. On every front, we’re doing what we need to do. We’ve gone from having 10,000 AFL-CIO members in Vermont in 2018 before we got elected, and today there are 20,000 AFL-CIO members in Vermont. So, we’re doing things right — and we want to serve as a model for how other state AFL-CIOs can reinvigorate their members and grow union power.”

The VSLC was also the only AFL-CIO council in the county to show support for the revolutionary forces in Rojava, Syria, and to sign onto a Labor for Palestine statement “calling for the end of Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and for the US to stop enabling Israeli aggression through military and economic aid that is used, in part, to keep Palestinians subjugated.”

“We viewed our own struggle as a continuation of a worldwide fight of the many against the few for a reordering of society whereby economic equity and a more direct democracy would become the foundations on which a more just community is built,” Van Deusen writes in *Insurgent Labor*.



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David Van Deusen rallies rank and file members in Vermont.

A New Working Class Left

Van Deusen sees himself and his fellow union reformists in Vermont as being part of a new kind of working class left that includes people from opposite ends of the political spectrum — but is neither “conservative” or “liberal.”

“We are working class left — that means our focus, our grounding, our anchor, is on those bread and butter issues, and building out social programs that directly benefit working class folks, and returning real democratic power — both in the unions and in society — to working class people,” he says.

The VSLC continues to support changing the AFL-CIO national constitution to allow for a “one member, one vote” system — “as opposed to 500 delegates every few years unilaterally deciding who our next officers are.”

“We need to see democratization,” Van Deusen says. “We need to see money come out of lobbying, which has been ineffective and has not produced results...and we need to see those resources go into organizing... and for the National AFL-CIO to do everything in its power to support its



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affiliates to help us organize the millions of new workers we see in our movement.”

The effort, according to Van Deusen, is an absolute imperative necessity.

“When I campaigned for president for the first time, I said I’m running for president of the AFL-CIO in Vermont, can I have your support? Next question was, what’s the AFL CIO? That’s how far we’ve sunk,” Van Deusen says. “And the fact that our union density [nationwide] is starting to dip down into the single digits, and no major piece of union legislation has passed in Washington, D.C. for generations — that tells me that the strategy that’s been engaged in for the last several decades — is objectively wrong. And that is the opening for the working class left to come in, be rank and file driven, and to make their case with a base of the members, most of which aren’t even engaged right now, but to get them engaged to take back their unions and change the political direction of labor in this country. Not only is it possible — but we absolutely have to do it if we’re going to survive.”

Van Deusen says union reformers in Vermont have turned it around — “the question is — can the rest of the nation turn it around?”

“We invite [current AFL-CIO President] Liz Shuler to look at the policies we’ve adopted, the meaningful emphasis on organizing that we’ve been carrying out, and we invite the national AFL-CIO to learn lessons from us,” he says.

After four years at the VSLC’s helm, Van Deusen declined not to run for re-election last year, and continues to organize in Vermont. United! member Katie Harris now serves as VSLC president.

“On the international scale, I’m also encouraged that a month or two ago, the national AFL-CIO did come out and call for a ceasefire to the ethnic cleansing going on in Gaza,” Van Deusen adds. “So, the way I see it, there are positive developments within the AFL-CIO. And of course, a number of our affiliates, such as the UAW, have taken a pretty dramatic turn to the left in the last few years. Coupled with other internationals and international leaders like Sarah Nelson Nelson from the Association of Flight Attendants and Mark Dimondstein from the American Postal

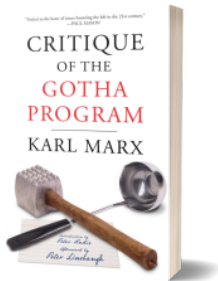
Workers Union — there is a growing working class base within the national AFL-CIO leadership. That gives me reason to be cautiously optimistic, too.”

If working people are really going to reinvigorate and change organized labor in the United States of America, Van Deusen concludes, “We’re gonna have to go back to our roots as a truly effective fighting force on behalf of the working class.”

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