



Navigating the Labor Movement: From Legislation to Transportation Leadership

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Stepping into the Labor Movement & Transportation

As a young staffer for Louise Slaughter, the first legislative issues I handled were labor and trade. I do not come from a union family or background, so what I learned about the labor movement in those first months challenged the images of unions that are often portrayed in history classes, and opened my eyes to the realities and vibrancy of the modern labor movement. The more I learned, the more I came to believe that growing the labor movement and expanding the opportunity for workers across the country to form and join unions—and reap the benefits of a union contract—was one of the most important economic issues facing our country. While certainly not a panacea, strong unions can help address many of the inequities that have festered in this country, simply by helping to create more economic opportunity and stability for working people. Even as I rose through the ranks in Rep. Slaughter’s office, and eventually became her Chief of Staff, I continued to handle the labor portfolio.

When I left Capitol Hill in 2011, I knew that I wanted to work in or around the labor movement. Despite never having done any transportation policy, TTD took a chance by hiring me as a Legislative Representative. Once again, after diving into the policies, I fell in love with the subject matter. I was not only working on what I felt was the most important domestic economic challenge in our country, I was doing it in an industry that every single American relies on. I took a shine to transportation labor, and I suppose they took a shine to me as well, electing me Secretary-Treasurer in 2017, and President in 2021.

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Taking the Leap into Leadership

Every step of my career prepared me for my current position. My experience in Congress, particularly with the Rules Committee when my boss was the Chair, gave me unique insight into how to influence legislation and get important things accomplished. Often, my failures provided the most lasting lessons. Whether it be how to diplomatically resolve policy or personality disagreements, or simply what questions to ask and who to ask in order to

have the most complete set of information before taking action. You can never assume you know all the answers, and instead need to understand differing perspectives, and the motivations for how people arrived at their positions.

Being in leadership in any industry can be challenging, and TTD often has to confront conflicting priorities from our affiliated unions. The most difficult decisions are on those rare occasions when we are unable to find an alignment between those priorities and are forced to simply sit that particular fight out. We will never pick winners or losers between affiliates when a consensus cannot be reached. It's certainly frustrating when that happens, but it helps us maintain the credibility that when we take a position, it is on behalf of all 37 affiliated unions.

The most important aspect of building and maintaining strong relationships of any kind is frequent, open, and honest communication. I try to make sure I am never just telling someone what they want to hear, but instead providing my honest assessment of a situation or issue. There are a lot of very talented people in the labor movement, but none of them, to my knowledge, communicate through ESP. So you're not going to know what people are working on, what their priorities are, or how they want to move forward unless you're maintaining an open dialogue, and doing so with every union that has a vested interest in the issue being discussed. Finally, disagreements happen. As long as you keep the conversations respectful, and keep them within the federation, these disagreements can often yield stronger positions that best reflect every perspective, and can lead to better outcomes for today and the future.

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Emerging Challenges, Evolving Opportunities

The transportation industry is in a constant state of evolution. There are some evergreen issues (e.g., the need for more funding, stronger safety measures, protecting workers from assaults, etc.) that are constants. But even within those evergreen issues, the nuances and details will change year to year or even month to month. The only way to stay on top of the changes and ensure that your position best addresses the realities within the industry is to read constantly, and maintain connections within the industry—both labor and management. The reality is that unions and our employers often share the same end goals. The differences result from disagreements over how we get there. By better understanding what industry leaders see as the future of their companies/agencies/coalitions, we are able to better craft policies that will ensure that workers are a critical part of that future. That is true with emerging technologies such as electric vehicles, as well as with broader issues such as growing passenger rail or public transit networks. When we have a clear vision for how workers are part of that future, it strengthens our ability to advocate for our members and ensure that they share in the growth and opportunities that are often provided by change.

Transportation has always evolved to meet our needs. Transportation unions have adapted to change for over 100 years, and will continue to do so even as we see a transition to green technology, autonomous technology, or even AI. One thing remains certain: there will always be a need to move goods and people throughout the world, and workers will always be needed to make sure it is done in the safest, most effective way possible. The details of the work may change, but the people will be necessary. And the union workers who I am fortunate enough to represent are better positioned than anyone to guide these transitions. They have the expertise and the lived experience needed to understand what the challenges will be, where the opportunity is, and what is or is not within the realm of possibility. To that end, my message to anyone seeking leadership positions in transportation is to view organized labor as a partner. The biggest successes in my career have come when labor and management find common ground and work together toward the shared goal.

About the Author



In 2021, [Greg Regan](#) was elected President of the Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO. As America's largest transportation labor federation, TTD represents 37 unions and millions of workers across all areas of transportation. TTD focuses on federal legislation, regulatory matters, and policy issues that impact transportation workers. In his current position, Greg leads and oversees TTD's daily operation and serves as the organization's spokesperson and chief strategist. Under Greg's direction, TTD works with elected leaders on both sides of the aisle and focuses on substantive, policy-driven solutions. He is a leading labor expert on issues related to aviation safety and security, and led TTD's fight in 2015 for Amtrak reauthorization legislation that

protects and promotes our national passenger rail service and its skilled workforce. Originally from Rochester, New York, Greg holds a B.A. in Public Policy from Hamilton College. He lives with his wife and dog in Washington, DC, and is an avid golfer, hockey player, canner, woodworker, and supporter of (mostly) losing sports teams.