

# POLITICO Pro Q&A: AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler

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SAN FRANCISCO — AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler, who has helmed the organization since former President Richard Trumka's unexpected death last year, is just weeks away from her first convention as its leader — and a crucial vote that will determine whether she retains the job for the next four years.

As the federation's first female president, she is working with women's advocacy groups and trade unions to make sure that some of the recently enacted [funding for infrastructure](#) goes to employing women in the historically male-dominated construction and manufacturing fields.

She is also spearheading a new focus on the future of work: ensuring that workers navigating newly created roles in growing sectors can turn to their unions to get the information they need on workforce development, job searching and more.

And with the midterms fast approaching, Shuler has led the federation in flipping its political lens from the national to the local levels by polling workers in various areas on what matters to them specifically, rather than surveying the country at large — and training their local union officials on how to talk to them about broader issues like inflation, rather than specific candidates.

POLITICO labor reporter Eleanor Mueller sat down with Shuler at the Institute for Women's Policy Research summit in San Francisco to discuss those and other issues facing organized labor.

*This transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

## **The AFL-CIO is hosting its convention in Philadelphia next month. What can people expect?**

We're at the height of our planning: recruiting our speakers, getting all the entertainment nailed down, all the logistics. We've been really focused on: What are the clear messages coming out each day? We've honed in on organizing and growth being the top priority. So that will be the first big day on Monday — what is labor is going to do in this moment, with all this activism around us, the opportunities, workers taking risks, and the big investments we want to make as the trade union movement and focusing in on what we've learned and learning from our failures.

The next day is going to be around the clean energy economy and the future of work. I said I do not want it to be just a bunch of vendors with sad candy dishes; I want it to look like a mini CES. We're showcasing the future of work and technology. Each union is bringing in their best examples of tech, like flight simulators for the pilots and virtual welding and all of the tools and technology that our members are right in the middle of as we're transitioning to a whole new stage of the economy. So that's gonna be really cool. I went to CES for the first time and I was just blown away. I was like: We need a worker voice in this hall. No one's talking about the impact on workers. I went and toured an automated restaurant, where everything was done with no people, right from your server, which was a robot to how they're making your food in an automated kitchen. Everything was done without people. And no one talked about: Where are the people and what are they going to do? We want to co-create that future.

That's what I keep thinking is the next frontier for us in the labor movement: being relevant for what's coming. Workers are going to be fluid between industries; they're going to need training; they're going to need a place to go that's trusted that has their best interests in mind. The labor movement can be that place where you can find that next job, you can figure out what you need to do to get there. And sometimes it'll be jobs that we don't even know what the jobs are. So we can be that place where people can find their way.

The third day is going to be getting young people engaged in the movement. We'll [also] have some announcements around our sports unions.

**Are you anticipating any kind of division ahead of the election given recent criticism that's arisen from the likes of AFA-CWA President Sara Nelson, [who has previously indicated a desire to run for president](#)?**

Our process is that anyone can run for any office at any time. I don't anticipate [a challenger], but you never know. You never know. I'm just really focused on bringing unity because I think that's what's most important in this moment: all of our 57 unions that have different philosophies and cultures and views of the world together around an agenda. Because if we're not together, then we're not as effective. So unity will be paramount — and then also showing that the labor movement is on the cutting edge where we're actually planning for the future and figuring out creative ways to hold corporations accountable.

There's all this energy around Amazon right now. And yet, the corporate thieves still kind of get away with all this bad behavior. To me, it's less about elected officials holding these companies accountable and more about consumers and the public. We have movements that develop around sexual harassment like #MeToo and around police brutality like Black Lives Matter. Why don't we have movements that come together across communities that say, you cannot violate workers' rights and get away with it? It seems so basic, but it just hasn't risen to that level yet. And so I think that's something too that we can continue to build on with all this momentum we have.

**Should the Biden administration be doing more, [as Sen. Bernie Sanders \(I-Vt.\) has recently argued](#), to hold employers like Amazon accountable for their labor practices, whether union- or safety-related?**

It's really a shared responsibility. It's the administration; it's Congress; it's corporations; it's consumers; it's workers. We all are partners in the future we want to create together. And I think employers are getting off scot-free in some cases.

People don't realize that employers are responsible for a safe work environment. And when people die, it's essentially because safety laws haven't been enforced. And so we need to remember who really is responsible here. It is the corporations.

Companies aren't going to do anything out of just the goodness of their heart. They have to be forced to; they have to be called out. In this day and age, brand is so important. Companies really respond to that. So I think we have more power to leverage there.

**What do you see as the path forward for large-scale, pro-union labor law reform — particularly if Democrats lose the House and passing [the Protecting the Right to Organize Act](#) becomes even less likely?**

We're going to keep pushing. Sometimes it takes a sustained effort to get things done. As we know, things don't happen overnight. Congress is notorious: You never get a bill passed the first year. And we've been fighting for labor law reform for decades — back to the Employee Free Choice Act, when we first started this conversation in the early 2000s. Yes, we want the reforms — but it's also a hell of an organizing tool to get people motivated, to get them to focus on where the real action is, which is at the grassroots level, electing the right people and connecting the dots to the issues.

We're doing a huge renewed effort in our political program this year on getting back into the worksites and doing face-to-face conversations on issues. Not talking about candidates. We have a whole lead time before we can talk about candidates. We're going to talk about issues — and our first issue is inflation. Yeah. Everyone's talking about it. But workers are not to blame. Actually, it's the supply chain; it's price gouging that's going on because of short supplies that companies are taking advantage of; it's the pandemic; it's all of these reasons.

So we did an education piece that we're getting in all these work sites. And then we're actually going to start what we call a hyperlocal feedback loop, so that when we open up the ears in the workplace, people are like, 'Oh, you're talking to me about inflation? That's interesting.' So then we can unearth: What are the issues that are really driving people locally? It's actually the opposite of what we've done in the past, which is we do research and polling at the national level. Now it's gonna be percolating up. And we're using technology, of course, to do that relational organizing piece where we map out who knows who, what moves who. And then each month we're doing an issue education piece so that we start to re-establish credibility and trust, because it's so polarized out there.

People are sometimes afraid to have conversations with their co-workers because it devolves. So we're doing a deep dive into training in our labor councils to de-escalate, demystify, give workers the confidence to have these conversations, and know

that if it gets a little tense, you equip them to have the confidence to have those face to face conversations. It's the only way we're going to unlock this deeply divided country we're living in when we're all in our algorithm bubbles and people just aren't hearing each other or talking to each other. It's truly at the heart of all the threats around democracy.

**Is that what spurred the shift in focus to a local level — bridging divides?**

Correct. The labor movement can be the place where we bring people together. We can be the healer; we can be the place where you can disagree, and do it respectfully and then come out the other side. Where else are those conversations going on? The worksite is the place, and the labor movement is the center of that. We're unique in that way. It's this network that we have that no one else has.

**How is the AFL-CIO working with its allies to make sure that funding included in the bipartisan infrastructure package is spent ensuring the jobs also go to women and not just to men?**

The Department of Transportation is exemplary in this. They have been intentional. They've been working with us and other community partners to really bake in the standards as the money's going out the door. They have the most money for infrastructure. We're baking into the bid specs some requirements that take it to the next level so that it's not just business as usual. Yeah. And we are the eyes and ears on the ground: The labor movement is to make sure that that enforcement happens, because you can on the front end do whatever you want. But how does it really land in the community? So then that's also part of our job. OK, is this really happening? And so it's a partnership.

It's a huge opportunity for construction, but also in manufacturing. We're starting to talk about, with COMPETES, investing in chip manufacturing and you know, this idea that we can give ourselves a competitive advantage by starting to have a domestic manufacturing strategy, which we have not done for decades. And now we found ourselves in the supply chain crisis going, 'Oh my gosh, I can't even make a mask here or a ventilator.' We're doing a partnership on manufacturing with IWPR and Chicago Women in Trades, because women also think in terms of manufacturing that those are sort of dirty jobs for men; physically demanding; not suited for women for some reason. But they're highly paid, highly skilled. They're using technology. So we're trying to figure out how we can unlock the potential for particularly women, women of color, who want a sustainable job to help support their families. This is absolutely an industry that's growing now. So we're trying to get to the bottom of some of those barriers in manufacturing. They're probably very similar to what we've seen in construction.

Once we started seeing the investments come, it's like, 'Wow, how do we make sure this money goes to women?' You have to be intentional. Because we've seen it already in the past: When money goes out the door and we don't have the systems in place, the requirements attached to it, it's that same old, same old. So I think this time around is going to be different.