

Today we're speaking with Liz Shuler, the secretary treasurer of AFL-CIO. Liz is not only the chief financial officer for the AFL-CIO, she has a special interest and responsibility in working with young people to introduce the Labor Movement to them and to learn from them about what they would like to see the Labor Movement of the future look like.

So I'm the secretary treasurer, which is the chief financial of the AFL-CIO. We have 57 affiliated unions. And I actually came up through one of those unions, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, as a rank and file member. And my responsibilities here are to manage the money and make sure that we're using the dues money wisely and building program, making sure that our finances are in order.

But in addition to that finance hat, I also work to engage, educate, mobilize young people in our movement, particularly focused, as a woman officer, in making sure that we are engaging women in our Labor Movement and really speaking out on issues that affect women in the workplace, and then in terms of innovation, what can we be doing as a labor movement to change as the workplace changes and evolves? And that can include anything from workforce development and training to issues around the on-demand economy. There's so much happening in the world of work.

Well, the young people in the Labor Movement-- I was a young person when I first started in my union at 23 years old-- often feel that they don't have as much of a voice in our Labor Movement. And I wanted to figure out a way to change that and make their ideas and opinions and thoughts and approaches woven into the fabric of what we do every day. So we started a young worker program we call NextUP about six years ago. And the intent was to figure out ways to get young people engaged in their own unions, but also making connections with young people outside the Labor Movement so that we're all working together to advance the interests of young people in this economy.

And we've been building young worker groups all across the country through our AFL-CIO structure. So in most major cities and pretty much every state, we have a young worker group that's giving voice to young people. They're leading in politics, in legislation, in organizing, and really being a voice and a presence for the Labor Movement in their local communities.

I'm really proud of the work they've done to put together a young worker economic platform so that they can hold politicians accountable on the issues that matter to young people in the economy. And of course, front and center is job opportunities, making sure that when people graduate from high school or even graduate from college that we have good jobs waiting for them. And often, we know young people are grappling with a lot of student loan debt when they've gone through college and how are our elected officials responding to that and really connecting

the Labor Movement to the issues that matter to young people?

Well, the course is a real opportunity for young people to connect on what is the future of work going to look like? What are we doing as working people to influence that? And in the labor movement, of course, front and center is collective bargaining and how can we strengthen collective bargaining and how does the role of collective bargaining influence work in general? We know the unionized workforce has been shrinking, but in a time of the greatest inequality we've seen, it's more important than ever that we grow the Labor Movement and get our fair share of that growth in the economy.

And so I think for young people who are looking at what can I do to influence, what can I do to help, taking a course like this, educating themselves, but then also taking that education and moving it into action. And I think when I talk to young people, they often feel powerless and don't see the Labor Movement as a vehicle for that kind of action. And so I think the message is that yeah, there are opportunities. There are places you can go to exert your power. And the power of coming together in the power of collective action, nowhere is that better on display than with the Labor Movement.

Young people in the Labor Movement have a very unique perspective. They often are some of the only young people in their peer group that have a decent job that pays benefits, that gives them the training they need without going into debt. So I think that they can do a service to other young people who may not know those opportunities exist by lifting up the possibilities of what the Labor Movement can offer. They also have a unique perspective on what's happening in the economy.

As we know, this generation has suffered disproportionately with the lack of opportunity. The unemployment numbers have hit them, I think, at double the rate of the average who's out of work. And we want to come together as a society to figure out, what kind of jobs do we want to see in this country as we go forward in the future? Do we want low-road, f jobs or do we want opportunities to really support your family and put food on the table?

And I think young people are feeling that so acutely and so they have ideas and thoughts to share on how we can rebuild the economy. So I think that this is a great opportunity to bring people together, have their voices heard, make sure that we're getting our politicians' attention on this because those elected officials are the ones that write the rules and pass the policies. And so if we're going to rewrite the rules of the economy, we need to get more and more young voices in that conversation.

I think there is so much opportunity at this moment in time as, of course, the workplace is changing and evolving. So is the Labor Movement and so is the progressive infrastructure in the country. And I think the message is that we don't just have to sit back and wait for change to happen and feel like we can't be a part of that change.

I think it's important that you see the Labor Movement as a vehicle for that possibility of bringing people's voices together. And as an institution, we can do that. But we can't do it alone. We need to be working together in collaboration and in partnership with all kinds of organizations. And the more people we bring together, the more powerful our voices are.

So I think for young people who are looking for an avenue and a way to make change, certainly look to the Labor Movement, but look in your communities. Look at all the different organizations that are lifting up voices in different ways. Look at your local businesses, for example. We often think that labor and management are at odds with each other, but could we be more powerful if we were working together in collaboration on the things that matter to creating better jobs, high-road, high-wage jobs? And so I think that young people will play an integral and important role in making that happen.