

Unions invite politicians to learn ABCs of labor

SALEM — Oregon's labor lobbyists ramped up their level of organization with a kind of "Unions 101" seminar March 7, in which they educated elected representatives and their staffs about why unions matter — and what matters to unions.

The event was sponsored by the United Labor Lobby, a group of union lobbyists which meets weekly for lunch when the Oregon Legislature is in session. The seminar, taught by Bob Bussel, director of the Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon, drew as many as 100 legislators, candidates and their staff assistants to the Salem Conven-

tion Center.

Bussel told them union workers tend to have better pay, benefits and working conditions, and that's not just good for union members, it's good for the community. It means union workers have higher morale, do better work and gain experience because they stick around longer with their employer. They don't have to leave town to get a better job; they are able to buy their own home and put down roots in the community. They're able to support a family, and have the free time to be involved in their kids' lives, to volunteer in the community. Extra pay means more money to spend in the commu-

nity; it means they're better able send their kids to college.

Union contracts don't just help members; they help non-union workers as well, because they help raise standards for the industry.

And despite myths to the contrary, union political efforts aren't just about narrow union-member-only interests; unions are a political bulwark for all working people and for healthy communities, he said.

Bussel took a look at the bills the Oregon AFL-CIO tallied to rate legislators last year. Just 12 percent were specific to unions; 40 percent pertained to all workers, and 48 percent

pertained to all Oregonians.

What does labor want? Bussel shared a story about a famous quote from Samuel Gompers, founder in 1886 of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in which he said, "What does labor want? More!" Was Gompers acknowledging that unions are greedy? No, Bussel said — his quote was totally taken out of context. Here's what he really said: "We want more schoolhouses and less jails, more books and less arsenals, more learning and less vice, more constant work and less crime, more leisure and less greed, more justice and less revenge."

In Oregon, labor's agenda — as presented by Oregon AFL-CIO Political Director Duke Shepard — starts with its top priority — expanding the right of workers to unionize. Also on the list is getting union rights for farmworkers; ensuring adequate funding for unemployment benefits; expanding access to health care, including the state prescription drug purchasing pool; regulating payday lenders, which prey on the poorest workers with high interest rates; and working to get a fairer system of taxa-

tion in Oregon — one which would bring in enough revenue to fund the services the public wants.

But unions' influence is on the wane, as its numbers are down from a peak 33 percent of the U.S. workforce in the 1950s to 12.5 percent today.

In the 2004 election, the Oregon AFL-CIO worked to reach the 227,000 Oregonians who were voting members of union households, and 89.9 percent of them voted in that year's election. But labor can't afford to go it alone — less than one in six workers in Oregon belongs to a union (15.7 percent).

That means — union lobbyists say — that politicians who agree with labor's agenda had better figure out a way to help unions rebound — by changing a law that union organizers say has been stacked against unions since 1947.

That law is known as the Taft-Hartley Act, which puts restrictions on unions which curbs their ability to organize workers. It was passed by a Republican-controlled Congress over Democratic President Harry Truman's veto.

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Union conference set March 25 to promote manufacturing jobs

TANGENT, Ore. — Gov. Ted Kulongoski and national AFL-CIO Industrial Unions Council Executive Director Bob Baugh will be the featured speakers at a union conference Saturday, March 25, to promote manufacturing jobs.

Kulongoski announced in January a manufacturing workforce strategy that will refocus attention on training programs and education at the workplace so that employees are better prepared to compete in the changing world of manufacturing.

At the conference, representatives of industrial unions will learn ways to help their employers tap resources to improve skill training and apprenticeship

programs. Participants also will learn how to detect early warning signs that a company is at risk of a buyout, layoff or closure, and the resources available to minimize the impact.

The conference will be held at the IBEW Local 280 Training Center, 33309 Hwy. 99 East, in Tangent. Registration is free and opens at 8 a.m.

For more information, or to register, call Denny Scott at 503-228-0235, or Verle Steele at 503-585-6320 in Salem or 503-224-3169 in Portland.

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