



Channeling Sam Gompers

Advice to state candidates who want to speak to working families on schools, health care and jobs: Try channeling that old labor war horse Samuel Gompers.

Listen to what Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor, said in 1893: “We want more schoolhouses and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice.”

To Gompers’ call for more schools and jobs that pay a fair wage, you might want to add affordable health care and retirement security. But, with those few updates, you pretty much have a political agenda that would get the nod from 90 percent of working families in the 21st century.

Still, it’s not the list of issues that matters so much as how you present them.

Fast forward 113 years and ask Gompers to comment on our school funding problems. Do you think he’d say anything like the following?

“We want more schoolhouses, if we can enact systems development charges to build them; more books, if we can divert the corporate kicker to buy them; more learning, if we can establish a sales tax to keep our schools open for a full school year.”

No way. But that’s exactly how progressive politicians in Oregon often talk about their “agenda for working families.”

Progressives have been sucked in to the supply side of politics, the territory of taxes and balanced budgets, where the anti-government forces have all the advantages. The supply-siders cut the taxes that support education; then they blame teachers’ health and retirement benefits when we have to close schools. They cut the funds that support the Oregon Health Plan and promote high-deductible health insurance schemes to shift more costs to working families.

Then, they ask those who support good schools, affordable health care and all the things that government

should be able to do for working families, “How are you going to pay for it?” And, because you want to be fiscally responsible, you take that question seriously and try to answer it.

At the federal level, the Bush Administration has had no such compunctions about cutting taxes for the wealthy and financing its war in Iraq. As a result, they’ve racked up new debts totaling \$23,000 for every household in the country. Those debts will burden our children and grandchildren. But imagine if every household’s \$23,000 was used instead to make college affordable for working families and guarantee health care for all children? We lost an opportunity to make life better for future generations because we didn’t demand these things first and figure out how to pay for them later.

Back at the state level, where we have to live with balanced budgets, progressives agonize over “unfunded mandates.” How can you propose smaller class sizes, for example, without detailing how you’re going to pay for them? That’s a valid question, but it is also a crippling one. When you accept the constraints of a state budget continually eroded by special-interest tax breaks, you never get to make a compelling case for what government can and should be doing for working families before it cuts taxes for corporations.

To his credit, State Rep. Mitch Greenlick is channeling Gompers with an initiative for universal health care that he is sponsoring for the November ballot. His initiative would establish health care as a constitutional right and tell the Legislature to figure out how to pay for it. That’s an unfunded mandate that’s worth a full legislative session to work out.

And when it comes to schools, say you want a full school year, up-to-date textbooks and classrooms that are not overcrowded — and that you won’t leave Salem without them. We had that kind of education system a gen-

eration ago in Oregon, so why not now?

By the way, our state constitution doesn’t say that you have to balance expenditures to match available revenues. It says just the opposite (in Article IX, Section 2) — that “the Legislative Assembly shall provide for raising revenue sufficiently to defray the expenses of the State.” In other words, first figure out what we need, then figure out how to pay for it.

And, if you have to talk about taxes, say, “We don’t need new taxes, we need old taxes, when the rich and the corporations paid their fair share for our schools and our health care.”

We are a far richer country today than we were when Gompers concluded, “We do want more, and when it becomes more, we shall still want more.” But, as the productivity of our workers and the wealth of our country have increased, demanding more has given way to doing more with less and settling for smaller and smaller shares of what Gompers called the fruits of our labor.

So, this is not the time to become entangled in debates about how we’re going to pay for the things that can make life better for working families. Listen to Gompers. This is the time to stoke the demand side of politics. Demand more, because America’s working families deserve more.

Note: In my March 3 column, “The ABCs of Health Care Reform,” the A-E designations I used to describe the categories of health care coverage in Oregon were accidentally deleted in the final formatting of my text for this newspaper. As a result, my descriptions of these categories were difficult to follow. For a more intelligible version of that column, with the letter designations restored, go to this newspaper’s Website at www.nwlaborpress.org and click on “Opinion.”

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Oregon State Rep. Diane Rosenbaum (seated at the head of the table) leads a discussion on political lobbying during a workshop at the Tradeswomen Leadership Institute.

Women learn leadership, advocacy skills at institute

Thirty-seven tradeswomen from 12 local unions attended the Tradeswomen Leadership Institute last month at the Sheet Metal Training Center in Northeast Portland. The institute was designed by Oregon Tradeswomen Inc. and the Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon to help build the leadership and advocacy skills of union women working in the construction, mechanical and utility trades.

In attendance were apprentices and journey-level craftswomen carpenters, electricians, elevator constructors, laborers, operating engineers, plumbers, roofers, sheet metal workers, steamfitters, utility workers and welders.

Participants heard leadership stories from a panel of tradeswomen that included Jodi Guetzloe-Parker, an organizer for Laborers Local 320, Cyndi Chan of Sheet Metal Workers Local 16, Jill Tracy, a foreman and member of Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, and Christie Kern of Carpenters Local 247, who formerly taught at the Willamette Carpenter Training Center and is now a compliance officer for the Fair Contracting Foundation.

Other workshops focused on political lobbying, identifying leadership skills, public speaking and how to conduct a meeting.

Guest instructors for the lobbying workshop were State Representatives Diane Rosenbaum and Chip Shields, State Labor Commissioner Dan Gardner, Deputy Labor Commissioner Annette Talbott, and Terry Richardson, labor liaison for Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams.

“It was such a success, we plan to make this an annual event,” said Connie Ashbrook, executive director of Oregon Tradeswomen Inc.



UA Local 290 holds family safety seminar

The Ninth Annual Donald Dunn Memorial Safety Seminar was held recently at the Plumbers and Fitters Local 290 Training Center in Tualatin.

More than 200 members and spouses attended the day-long event, which started in 1998 after Local 290 member Donald Dunn was killed in an industrial accident. His widow, Jeannie, and her attorney, Jeffrey Mutnick, approached the training center with an idea for a safety training program that included family members, since families are so deeply affected by on-the-job accidents.

Together they set up a nonprofit trust to ensure the seminar would always be funded. Trustees are Local 290 member Tony Barsotti of Temp-Control Mechanical, Clark Vermillion of Hoffman Construction, Bob Kimes of the Local

290 Training Center and Mutnick.

This year’s seminar was entitled “Work Life and Beyond: A Psychological View” and featured keynote speakers Dr. Drew Broadkin, a clinical associate professor in the Departments of Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences & Medicine at the University of Washington, and Dr. Autumn Krauss, an assessment scientist at Unicru, a technology company located in Beaverton.

Dr. John Rosecrance and Dr. Peter Chen of Colorado State University co-produced the seminar with Local 290’s Training Center. Rosecrance has worked with Local 290 for many years doing carpal tunnel research.

In the photo to the right, participants undergo carpal tunnel testing.