

David Bonior, a former congressman, works for reform in U.S. labor law

David Bonior, head of the union-backed group American Rights at Work, visited Portland May 5 as a guest of the City Club of Portland, an influential non-partisan civic affairs organization.

The City Club hosts weekly forums to educate members, and Bonior was joined by Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain and Service Employees Local 503 Executive Director Leslie Frane for a panel on "The Troubles of Unions — Do They Matter?"

Unions are in trouble, the speakers said, and that *does* matter — to every worker.

Frane said former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich was onto something when he said "Organized labor is an aging doddering prize fighter ... but it's the only fighter in that corner of the ring." There's no other advocate for working people in society, Frane said.

Organized labor made it possible for America to have a sizable middle class, Chamberlain said. As unions have declined in numbers and clout, the middle class has begun to lose ground, and America is polarizing economically, he added.

Bonior, who served 13 terms as a Democratic U.S. congressman from Detroit, left office after losing the Democratic primary for Michigan governor in 2002. A longtime ally of labor, he became chair of American Rights at Work when the group formed in 2003. The group's focus is the reform of U.S. labor law to make it easier for workers



DAVID BONIOR

to unionize.

There's a bill in Congress to do that — the Employee Free Choice Act. It would require employers to recognize a union if a majority of workers sign authorization cards. The two sides would then have a year to bargain a first contract; if they failed to agree, both sides would make their case to an arbitrator, who would issue a binding decision. Lastly, the act would increase penalties on employers who violate worker rights.

In the House, the bill has 216 co-sponsors — two members short of a majority — and a companion bill in the Senate has 43 co-sponsors. In Oregon and Washington, all Democratic members of Congress are co-sponsors, while no Republican members are co-spon-

sors. Bonior said the bill is likely to pass the House if Democrats retake that body this November. Its fate in the Senate is less certain, because in the Senate, 40 members can often block legislation. Also, President Bush would almost certainly veto such a bill. So Bonior's group is thinking long-term — to 2008 and beyond.

The labor movement has been unable to win improvements to the National Labor Relations Act, the nation's basic labor law, for 59 years, ever since a Republican-dominated Congress passed the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 over Democratic President Harry Truman's veto. Union organizers say the law is stacked against unions, and employers have learned how to prevent workers from unionizing. A labor attempt to rewrite the law passed the House in the late 1970s but fell victim to a filibuster in the Senate. Bonior, who was in Congress at that time, says President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, didn't fight hard enough for it. Nor, he added, did Democratic President Bill Clinton fight hard enough to support a bill banning striker replacements.

On the other hand, Clinton pulled out all the stops to pass NAFTA, which President George Bush Sr. had negotiated. As House Democratic whip, Bonior spent over a year fighting against NAFTA.

In recent years, organized labor has made reforming the labor law a top political priority.

Williams Controls plans to lay off half its workers and move jobs to China

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Williams Controls — site of an 11-month strike that ended nearly three years ago — plans to lay off half its Portland production workforce and move work to its facility in Suzhou, China.

The company manufactures throttle controls used in heavy trucks, buses, and off-road equipment. It sells to Freightliner, Volvo, Navistar, Caterpillar and other companies.

About 52 members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 492 will be shown the door over the next 18 months, with layoffs expected to begin in late July. Five salaried employees will also be fired.

After the layoffs, about 48 union workers will remain, plus about 80 salaried workers in engineering, finance and administrative positions.

"It's very difficult to let employees go," said Williams CEO Patrick W. Cavanagh in a press statement. Cavanagh, whose salary, bonus, 401(k) contribution and relocation allowance totaled \$847,000 in 2005, will remain with the publicly-traded company. "But in order to remain a viable competitor in our marketplace, we must structure our operations to enhance our offering to customers and improve our competitive position."

In fact, the company's "competitive position" is quite strong. Williams is the leading producer worldwide of electronic throttle controls. Its product is in high demand because of worldwide trend toward more stringent emissions standards. In March, the company set a monthly sales record of over \$7.1 million. But that's not good enough for the company owners, said Local 492 Vice President Michael Rivenes, because work can be done more cheaply in China.

Under the current labor contract, the Portland workers make \$13 to \$25 an hour, plus fringe benefits that include health care insurance and pension.

"They can make it cheaper, but we still believe we can make it better," Rivenes said.

The company set up operations in China last year, and now is moving manufacture of its pneumatic throttle controls to China, leaving the manufacture of electronic throttle controls in Portland. Rivenes said it's mostly the higher-skilled jobs that are going away — including 10 die cast workers, 20 machinists and four to five tool and die workers. Meanwhile, the company is hiring for four engineering, design, and accounting positions.

Williams has been in Portland 69 years, and Rivenes said many of the production employees have 20 to 30 years of commitment to the company.

The union is working with the State of Oregon and the AFL-CIO affiliated Labor's Community Service Agency to petition the federal government for dislocated worker benefits.

"This is happening everywhere in America," Rivenes said. "These guys, the managers, we used to hang out with them on the playground. But they've pretty much forgotten their little brothers and turned their backs on their country."

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