



Unions helped to turn the tide of Oregon politics

That wasn't a political sneaker wave that hit Oregon on Nov. 7 this year. It was the cresting of a new tide.

Think back to 1990, when we last saw a sea change of this magnitude in Oregon politics. Voters approved Measure 5 and drove Democrats from power in the State House of Representatives.

Four years later, that political tide broke through the east wing of the Capitol when Republicans took control of the State Senate, and a senator from Burns announced, "It's time to go after the unions."

That tide never quite reached the governor's office, but it continued to surge through the sluice gates of ballot measures in the years that followed. One wave of initiatives after another eroded state resources, forced the state to bail out schools and almost sank the Oregon Health Plan.

Other initiatives threatened to sweep unions off the political landscape. But our unions fought back and began to stem the rising tide at the ballot box.

By 2002, the tide began to turn. With labor's help, Ted Kulongoski retained the governor's office for Democrats, who fought back to gain a 15-15 tie in the Senate. That was also the year that we — Oregon's union movement — took back the ballot from Bill Sizemore.

In 2004, Democrats gained control of the Senate.

Then, last week, they regained majorities in both chambers of the legislature under a pro-worker Democratic governor. And we — Oregon's union movement — finally stopped the waves of anti-government and anti-worker ballot measures that had pounded the shores of Oregon politics for 16 years.

Sixteen years is a long time. And it's hard not to gloat as we survey the battered hulks of a spent agenda.

Measure 41 (a deceptive tax cut that would have decimated state resources), Measure 45 (term limits) and Measure 48 (a spending limit designed to cash out the revenue dividends of a rebounding economy) would have passed in the 1990s. Two of their predecessors did. But, this year, they were swamped by voters who saw through their false promises.

Then there's the shipwrecked Republican candidate for governor who outspent his opponent two-to-one but ran aground with a recycled anti-government agenda which promised more tax cuts for the wealthy and more "efficiencies" for working people. His campaign became a ghost ship of old, failed ideas.

There are no tide tables in politics. Shifts happen, but they are hard to predict. Still, the waves of this year's tidal shift in Oregon gained momentum from a decade-long political organizing campaign by a fighting union movement. We didn't just surf the waves in Oregon this year; we helped to create them.

As a result, we have re-established a pro-worker direction for state government at a time when our economy is rebounding and state revenues are rising. We are well positioned now to reverse the damage done to our grade schools since the passage of Measure 5 and to jumpstart our entry into the renewable energy/alternative fuels economy. But we are not going to reverse 16 years of erosion in a single election cycle — for two reasons.

First, we've become a state with low business taxes. Even with an improving economy, we won't have the resources to do much of what the governor wants to do, from expanding Head Start to making college affordable for working families, without more tax effort from Oregon businesses.

Second, the political landscape has changed. When anti-government Republicans controlled both chambers of the legislature, they were able to bypass gubernatorial vetoes and go straight to the voters with proposals that built bulwarks against the tide they knew would eventually turn against them. As a result, we now have a constitution that requires a three-fifths vote of the legislature to raise revenues and a two-thirds vote to suspend the corporate kicker.

This new landscape puts the governor's proposals for raising corporate taxes beyond the reach of strictly partisan votes in the legislature. He'll have to stay in campaign mode year-round, reach out to moderate Republicans and use the tools of previous legislatures — going directly to the voters — in order to make our tax system more fair for working families and provide the resources we'll need to fulfill the promise of what he calls our "era of great possibilities."

Also, there is danger in getting ahead of the tide. Progressives riding this year's blue wave will have to navigate carefully. There is still great skepticism about government's ability to make life better for its citizens, especially when it comes to tax reform.

Still, I think this tide has a lot of staying power. We've gone from a "time to go after the unions" to a time when unions will be major players in shaping a progressive agenda for working families.

If you were part of Labor '98, L2K, Labor 2002, 2004 or 2006 or the Defend Oregon coalition this year, congratulations. You helped to turn the tide. Now let's make sure that we channel that tide to an ever better Oregon.

Tim Nesbitt is a former president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Bush puts twice rejected mine executive in federal safety post

WASHINGTON, D.C. — President Bush named former coal industry executive Richard Stickler to head the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) — a job the U.S. Senate twice refused to grant him.

Because Bush couldn't get his appointment through Congress, he gave Stickler a "recess appointment" while members of Congress are out of town.

The Senate sent Stickler's nomination back to the White House twice because of his troubling mine safety record — the mines he managed from 1989 to 1996 incurred injury rates double the national average.

Back in late September after the second time the Senate refused to confirm Stickler's nomination, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) said:

"We're again sending a message to the Administration that America's miners deserve better, and we hope that this time it will listen. The fact that the nomination has twice failed to receive Sen-

ate confirmation reflects a strong lack of confidence in the president's choice for this critical position. By continuing to insist on a nominee with a weak safety record, the White House is playing political games with mine safety. We must not let them win."

Bush's recess appointment is an affront to all working people, the national AFL-CIO said.

It comes in a year that has seen at least 39 coal miners killed on the job, more than in any full year since 2001.

Bush has made more than 120 recess appointments since taking office in 2000. Many of them have been controversial.

The most recent prior to this was Paul DeCamp, a former attorney for Wal-Mart, to head the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor. He also appointed three of the five-person National Labor Relations Board while Congress was on break.

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