

Unionists rub elbows with lawmakers at legislative forum

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

A chance to chat up Oregon lawmakers and coordinate labor's lobbying efforts drew over 100 union members to a Feb. 3 legislative conference in Portland. Oregon House Speaker Jeff Merkley and a half-dozen other legislators attended the four-hour session, as did Labor Commissioner Dan Gardner, who labor leaders regard as a rock-solid ally. Political consultant Steve Novick, who is mulling a 2008 run against Republican U.S. Senator Gordon Smith, also addressed attendees, earning an enthusiastic reception.

The conference is a biennial event organized by the Oregon AFL-CIO and the Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon. This year, participants were notably optimistic, thanks to the leadership change in Salem: Democrats control both houses and the governor's office, giving unions their best chance in years of winning substantive improvements to Oregon labor laws.

Gardner shared an anecdote that illustrated just how different the political climate is in Salem this time around. Two years ago, the labor commissioner watched as Republican Karen Minnis, who was then speaker of the House, squashed an incredibly minor bill he had introduced. His agency, the Bureau of Labor and In-

dustries, accepts legal service when servers can't locate farm labor contractors who operate migrant worker camps. Gardner wanted to expand that to all migrant worker camps, not just those where the residents are employees of the owner. The bill passed the Senate and the House committee, only to have Minnis tell her caucus, "It's Dan Gardner's bill. I want you all to vote no." Merkley, who was then House Minority leader, paid Minnis a call to argue for the bill on its merits, and related back to Gardner her response: "What makes you think it has anything to do with the merits of the bill?"

Such ugly partisan pettiness is out of fashion now that the Democrats are in charge again, Gardner said. Democrats will need Republican votes to pass revenue increases, so while they intend to use their majority to pass legislation, revenge isn't on the agenda.

Instead, the agenda is filled with pro-active proposals.

Gardner's office, for example, is supporting bills to:

- Require overtime pay after 8 hours in one day, instead of after 40 hours in one week. [The bill has an exception for work weeks that contain four 10-hour shifts.]

- Require state contractors to submit a personnel plan showing how many Oregonians they or their subcontractors intend to employ to accom-



House Representative Greg MacPherson (right) hears from Kevin Card, legislative director for the Oregon Council of National Association of Letter Carriers at a Feb. 3 union legislative conference in Portland. Card, it so happens, is also the person who delivers mail to MacPherson's Lake Oswego address.

plish the work [This is meant to avoid repeat of a recent case where Oregon's food stamp hotline was answered by a call center in India.]

- Allow nursing mothers to take a 30-minute unpaid work break to pump breast milk while on the job.

The Oregon AFL-CIO, meanwhile, is pushing a set of bills to make it eas-

ier for nonunion workers to unionize.

House Speaker Merkley, a member of the AFL-CIO community affiliate Working America, told attendees he personally would introduce what is the capstone of the "freedom to organize" package: a bill called the Worker Freedom Act. The Worker Freedom Act would make it illegal for Oregon em-

ployers to require their employees to attend anti-union meetings. Such meetings are a staple of consultant-led "union-avoidance" campaigns but are perfectly legal under federal labor law.

Other bills in the package include:

- "Card-check" elections for public employees — state and local government workers would automatically get union representation once over half of a unit signed union authorization cards.

- A ban on using tax dollars to fight unionizing campaigns — public agencies, as well as private employers that get state contracts or grants, would not be allowed to pay consultants or attorneys in order to prevent unionization.

- Support for the Employee Free Choice Act — the Legislature would go on record in a non-binding resolution of support for a bill in the U.S. Congress that would add teeth to workers' rights protections in America's basic labor law.

To stay informed about labor's activities at the Oregon Legislature, sign up for the Oregon AFL-CIO's Weekly Update by sending an e-mail request to afl-cio@oraficio.org.

Bruc Holte of ILWU appointed to Port of Portland Board

Bruce Holte, a 19-year member of International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 8, has been appointed to the Port of Portland by Gov. Ted Kulongsoski.

Holte, 47, of Canby, served two terms as president of Local 8.

He also serves on the Canby Planning Commission.

The appointment is pending Senate confirmation. If confirmed, Holte will join two other union members on the Port Commission. They are Grant Zadow of Electrical Workers Local 48 and Ken Allen, executive director of Oregon AFSCME Council 75.

Zadow's terms expires in September.

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