

Two central labor councils east of Cascade Range merge

PENDLETON — The Pendleton-based Umatilla-Morrow Central Labor Council and the Eastern Oregon Central Labor Council based in La Grande merged March 6 to form a new entity now known as the Eastern Oregon Labor Council (EOLC).

A labor council is an umbrella organization of union locals in a specific area of the state. Each labor council is affiliated with the state body of the AFL-CIO and labor council charters are issued by the national AFL-CIO.

In 2005, seven national unions withdrew from the AFL-CIO to form a new Change to Win labor federation. That departure left a huge financial void in state and local organizations. National leaders later created Solidarity Charters as a way to keep state and local labor movements together.

Still, the withdrawal of several affiliates was a factor in the decision to merge the two councils.

EOLC represents just over 1,000 members from a dozen affiliated locals, including two locals from Change to Win — United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 and the Laborers Union.

Becky Marks, who was president of

the Umatilla-Morrow Central Labor Council, was chosen as president of the new group. Marks is a retired Umatilla County mental health case worker and member of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Oregon Council 75 Retirees Chapter. Like its predecessor organizations, EOLC has no paid staff.

Marks said in her part of the state, unions stick together. She said the local affiliate of the independent Oregon Education Association often attends labor council meetings.

The new organization will be responsible for fostering labor unity and coordinated action in a politically conservative and sparsely populated geographic jurisdiction that comprises almost half the state. The council's jurisdiction includes Umatilla, Morrow, Baker, Grant, Malheur, Union and Wallowa counties. Pendleton, population 16,354, is the region's largest city.

Eastern Oregon is in Oregon's Second Congressional District, which elects the state's only Republican congressman, Greg Walden. Marks said labor worked with Walden once to keep a Pendleton Post Office from moving to the Tri-Cities area of Washington. But other than that, she said, their relationship has been non-existent. As tallied by the national AFL-CIO, Walden has a 19 percent favorable voting record. On March 1, he voted against the Employee Free Choice Act, the labor law reform that is the union movement's top priority in Congress.

Labor does have cordial relations with plenty of local officials, however, Marks said. In a region that elects Republicans, labor gets behind the most labor-friendly. EOLC hopes to get pro-labor members elected to the board of Blue Mountain Community College, and will be supporting plans to bring new living wage jobs to the area.

In the small towns that make up Eastern Oregon, Marks said, being able to belong to a labor community means a lot. And support from union members from the Western half of the

state can make a big impression. When a bus-full of union members came to support a picket by Pendleton fire-

fighters in April 2006, it was one of the biggest events in town, Marks said. EOLC will meet 6:30 p.m. the first

Tuesday of each month at the AF-SCME office, 308 SW Dorion Ave., Pendleton.

Labor groups back anti-war rally in Portland March 18

Several labor organizations have endorsed a major anti-war march to be held on the eve of the fourth anniversary of the Iraq War.

The event, which will take place Sunday, March 18 from noon to 5 p.m., will include a march, rally and a tent for children to make art for peace.

At the request of city officials concerned about the size of the crowd, organizers have moved the event from Pioneer Courthouse Square to the South Park Blocks at Southwest Madison and Park.

Organizers expect between 10,000 and 20,000 people to attend.

The march portion of the event will begin at 1:30. The event has the backing of the Oregon AFL-CIO, Portland State and Portland Community College locals of the American Federation of Teachers, Service Employees Local 49 and Portland Jobs with Justice. For more information, visit www.pdx-peace.org or call 503-230-9427.

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