

In Oregon Legislature

Many labor-backed bills advancing

SALEM — The Oregon House of Representatives passed three of the Oregon AFL-CIO's "top priority" bills last month. The bills are designed to protect the rights of working Oregonians to organize and collectively bargain without interference by employers.

The Democratic-controlled House passed House Bill 2893, dubbed the Worker Freedom Act, by 31-27; HB 2891, the Majority Sign-Up for Public Employees bill, on a vote of 34-24; and HB 2892, the State Financial Accountability Act, by a party-line vote of 31-29.

HB 2893 gives employees the freedom to walk away from anti-union, political and religious indoctrination meetings without fear of being fired. Employers can still hold meetings, express their beliefs and exercise free speech; they simply can't make the meetings mandatory or take retaliatory measures if an employee doesn't want to attend. Faith-based and political organizations are exempted under the bill.

HB 2891 allows public-sector workers to decide for themselves whether to use the already legal process of majority sign-up, which allows workers to form a union by demonstrating a clear majority of worker support through signa-

tures on cards or petitions. Currently, the decision about whether to use such a process is the choice of the employer.

Three Republicans joined all 31 Democrats in supporting HB 2891. They were Representatives Bill Garrard of Klamath Falls, Fred Girod of Stayton, and Greg Smith of Heppner.

HB 2892 ensures that taxpayer dollars are used to pay for programs, instead of paying high-dollar consultants to deter union organizing campaigns.

The bills now go to the State Senate. Still coming up in the House is House Joint Memorial 7, a bill to support the national Employee Free Choice Act. The Oregon AFL-CIO has made its four-bill "Restoring the Freedom to Organize" package a top priority for the 2007 legislative session.

Another bill supported by labor would stop fraud and abuse of Oregon's initiative process.

HB 2082, which passed the House last month, will require campaigns that hire paid signature gatherers to keep accurate and up-to-date payroll records, and gives the secretary of state audit authority to spot-check campaigns.

The measure also increases the number of signatures required to file a ballot title from 25 to 1,000, which would stop

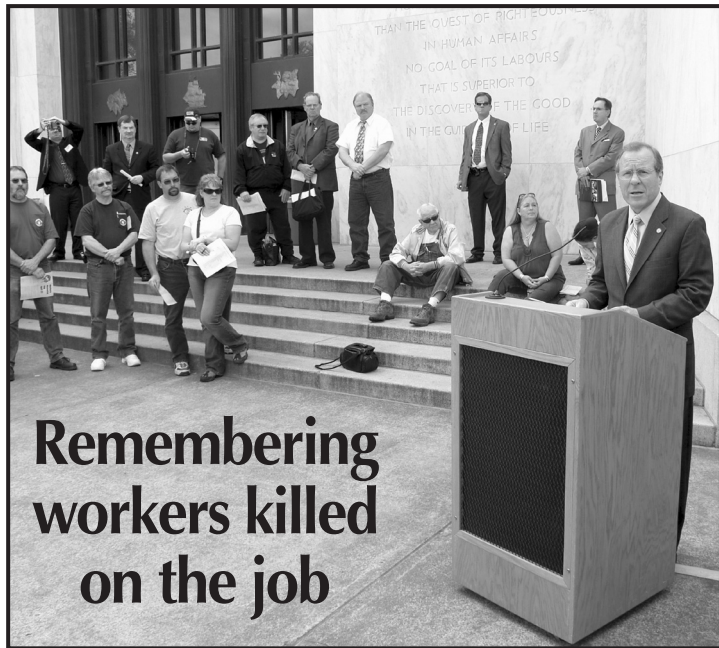
the current practice of campaigns marketing their ideas on the taxpayer's dime. If the campaign goes forward with the measure, the 1,000 signatures would count for the final total.

Another labor-backed bill became law last month when Gov. Ted Kulongoski signed **SB 362** to expand the Oregon Prescription Drug Program to include the private sector, labor unions and all underinsured Oregonians who lack full prescription drug coverage.

The program was created in 2003 to help low-income uninsured Oregonians over the age of 54 afford the high cost of prescription drugs. Through the power of bulk purchasing for prescriptions and by pooling resources together, the state is able to negotiate lower prices for prescriptions than what individuals and businesses normally can.

In November 2006 the program was expanded under Ballot Measure 44 to allow all Oregonians without prescription drug coverage to access the program. Since then, the number of Oregonians enrolled in the program has more than tripled to nearly 16,000 members.

Kulongoski said Oregonians enrolled in the program save on average \$28 per prescription, and savings can be as high as 60 percent over retail prices.



Remembering workers killed on the job

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski (pictured above at podium) urged citizens to contact federal lawmakers and insist that they strengthen — not weaken — workplace safety rules in the United States.

Kulongoski spoke to about 100 people gathered at the front steps of the State Capitol April 27 to observe Workers Memorial Day. The actual Workers Memorial Day — April 28 — was established 18 years ago by the national AFL-CIO to recognize the thousands of workers who die on the job each.

Last year, 69 workers died on the job in Oregon.

Kulongoski expressed outrage at the Bush Administration and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for "lowering its priorities" for protecting workers.

According to a New York Times report, OSHA under the Bush Administration has issued the fewest significant standards in its history — and the only significant health

standard it issued was ordered by a federal court.

President Bush's political appointees come from big business, and since he took office OSHA has eased regulations or weakened enforcement that it considers cumbersome or too costly for businesses and consumers.

"It's absolutely outrageous," Kulongoski said. "You need to tell them (the White House, OSHA and federal lawmakers) you won't tolerate it."

Kulongoski said Congress passed the OSHA Act in 1970 with the intent of protecting workers. He said in Oregon, workplace fatalities have declined 75 percent since enactment of the Oregon Safe Employment Act in 1973.

At the Salem memorial ceremony, Oregon-OSHA Administrator Michael Wood read the names of all 69 workers killed in Oregon last year, as well as the names of the 19 Oregon soldiers killed in the Iraq war. As the names were read, a bell tolled in the background.

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