

# Labor lobbyists scramble to push through priority bills

SALEM — With just four weeks left in the 2007 session of the Oregon Legislature, unions are scrambling to push priority bills through. Some union-backed bills have already made it to the finish line and have been signed into law by the governor. Others are for all intents and purposes dead.

The topmost priority of the Oregon AFL-CIO is a package of bills to make it easier for workers to unionize. Two of the bills may be headed for passage — a bill prohibiting use of tax dollars to oppose union drives, and a bill allowing public employees to unionize by signing cards. Both passed the House in April and are now before the Senate. Two other “right to organize” bills ran into trouble, however. A non-binding resolution urging Congress to pass the union-backed Employee Free Choice Act appears to have stalled. And a bill aimed at banning mandatory-attendance anti-union meetings in the workplace passed the House in April but un-

raveled in the Senate over provisions that extended the ban to religious proselytizing in the workplace.

Meanwhile, a package of reforms of the initiative process is on track to become law. The bill is aimed at modernizing and improving the citizen initiative, and ending the kinds of abuses committed by the ballot measure operation of union foe Bill Sizemore. It passed the House and was scheduled to have its first hearing May 30 in the Senate Rules Committee.

Building trades unions have been pushing a bill to settle a dispute over whether construction projects that mix public and private money have to pay workers the prevailing wage. The bill, which would mandate prevailing wage on any project that has over \$750,000 of public money, passed the House and is pending in the Senate.

Several bills on health care reform have made progress. The governor’s proposal to insure all Oregon children failed to attain the needed three-fifths majority in an April 26 House vote, but a Senate version of the proposal now looks like it may end up being referred to voters as an amendment to the state Constitution.

And a bill called the “Responsible Employer Act” passed the House May 16 and is now pending in the Senate. It would reveal to the public how many of a company’s employees are receiving state-subsidized health benefits. The law is aimed at companies like Wal-Mart that don’t provide adequate health insurance.

Lawmakers failed to reach consen-

sus on a comprehensive universal health care proposal, but several versions of a bill may yet pass that would continue to develop such a proposal for the Legislature to consider as early as its scheduled special session in January 2008.

A bill to give workers paid family leave in case of birth, death or serious illness cleared a House committee May 3 and is now in the Joint Ways and Means Committee. Basically, employees who are eligible for unpaid leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act would be eligible for a weekly stipend of \$250 for up to six weeks, funded by a 1-cent-per-hour insurance contribution paid by all workers. The governor has said he will sign it

if it reaches his desk.

Another bill would make workers who are locked out in a multi-employer labor dispute eligible to collect unemployment insurance. Currently, when a single employer locks out workers (the employer-side equivalent of a strike), the workers can collect unemployment, but multi-employer bargaining units are excluded. That’s of particular concern to grocery workers and longshore workers. The bill passed the House May 16 and is pending in the Senate.

Public employee unions remain hopeful about the chances of a bill undoing the “break in service” provisions of the 2003 PERS reforms. Because of the provision, more than 3,000 workers

who returned to public sector jobs after an absence of six months or more have been placed in PERS “Tier 2” with reduced pension and later retirement age. The bill passed a House Committee April 30 and as of press time, was before the Joint Ways and Means Committee.

One bill, hailed by labor as a job-creator, will require major utilities to get 25 percent of their electricity from new renewable energy sources by 2025. It passed the House April 10 and the Senate May 23. The governor has said he will sign it.

The 2007 legislative session will end June 29.

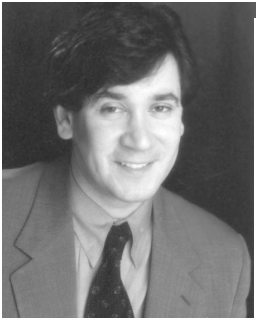
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