

Labor bills fight for attention as Oregon Legislature winds down

SALEM — With much of labor's agenda still waiting approval in the final weeks of the 2007 Oregon Legislature, union lobbyists in the state Capitol were in something like a 24-hour-a-day vigil.

"We've hit our political stride," said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain. "We've made real progress this session, and it's not over yet. We're going to move the ball as far for working Oregonians as we can."

The state labor federation's number one goal looked like a done deal as of press time — a bill requiring union recognition when a majority of public employees sign authorization cards. The bill passed the Oregon House April 18 and the Senate June 11. Because the House bill was altered by some friendly amendments in the Senate, it must go back to the House for a second vote.

On the other hand, as of press time, a companion "right to unionize" bill, which would ban the use of tax dollars to fight union drives, had stalled in the Senate Rules Committee, headed by Portland Democrat Kate Brown. But Chamberlain said he was hopeful the bill would make it out of committee.

Also awaiting action in the Senate Rules Committee were a House-

passed bill reforming Bill Sizemore-style abuses in the ballot initiative system, and a bill requiring payment of the prevailing wage on all construction projects that spend more than \$750,000 of public money.

Dozens of other union-supported bills were also fighting for attention in one legislative body or another. Most of them were bills that passed the House months ago and have taken their time in the Senate.

One bill that did make it through recently was a top priority for the AFL-CIO's largest affiliate, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) — a bill strengthening and making permanent a governor's executive order that made AFSCME and the Service Employees International Union Local 503 the exclusive bargaining agents for two groups of state-licensed child care providers. The bill passed the Senate May 11 by a vote of 19-8 and the House June 11 by a margin of 52-7.

Workers who are locked-out by management in multi-employer labor disputes got help from the 2007 Oregon Legislature. On June 7, by a 21-8 vote, the Senate passed a bill allowing the locked-out workers to collect unemployment insurance benefits. Cur-

rently, employees locked out by employers in a single-employer bargaining unit are allowed to receive unemployment benefits during a lockout.

In 2002, Longshore workers along the entire West Coast were locked out when the multi-employer group representing approximately 70 employer groups locked out 25,000 Longshore workers in Oregon, Washington and California. Locked out workers in Washington and California received unemployment benefits, but Oregon workers did not. At least 30 states do not preclude locked out workers from receiving unemployment benefits.

The lockout bill, which passed the House May 16, was a personal achievement for State Rep. Brad Witt (D-Clatskanie), former secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO and a business representative of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555. Witt was the bill's chief sponsor, and shepherded it through the two legislative chambers.

Witt said he expects Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski will sign it.

Several labor-backed bills have been signed into law by in recent weeks. On May 31, the governor signed legislation requiring all farm labor contractors to provide workers' compensation insurance in order to re-

ceive a farm labor contractor's license. And on June 6 he signed a bill into law that requires the state's largest utilities to meet 25 percent of their electric load with new renewable energy sources by 2025.

As the session races to a close June 30, the big mystery is what the ground rules will be for the 2008 special session that will begin next January. Responding to a task force suggestion for improving the Legislature, House and Senate leaders of Oregon's biennial

Legislature are experimenting with the idea of an annual session by holding a special session in what is normally the biennial Legislature's off-year.

Will it be a policy-only session or will lawmakers remake the budget? Will they accept new legislation or only bills that were introduced this year? Will bills that passed one chamber this year have to pass again, or can they be taken up in the other?

"We haven't heard a clear answer," Chamberlain said.

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