

Labor must ramp up efforts to combat global warming

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Barbara Byrd may soon be attending your union meeting to deliver an urgent message.

Byrd, secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO, is the Portland coordinator for the Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) of the University of Oregon's. She spent Dec. 3-14 in Bali, Indonesia, as an official observer at a United Nations climate change summit.

Byrd returned to Oregon evangelized: Global warming is real, and the union movement needs to step up and show leadership by helping to craft the world's response to it.

"The need to really ramp up labor's engagement is so clear to me now in a way it never was before," Byrd told the NW Labor Press. "We need to be there to talk about protections for workers who might lose their jobs, and about creating new jobs that are good jobs. We [in labor] bring a moral dimension to this discussion, having to do with equity — who loses and who benefits in dealing with climate change."

There's no time to waste, Byrd said. The scientific case, by now, is overwhelming. Even the Bush Administration has acknowledged that global warming is happening. At the Bali summit, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) presented its most recent conclusions after reviewing hundreds of studies. Global evidence of a warming trend is unequivocal, the IPCC reported, from increases in average air and ocean temperatures to widespread melting of snow and ice to rising average sea levels. And human activity, the IPCC concluded, is the driving force contributing to the warming.

In Bali, Byrd met foreign trade unionists who told her that global warming's impacts are already here.



Pictured above is most of the U.S. contingent to the United Nations Dec. 3-14 summit on climate change in Bali, Indonesia. Oregon AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Barbara Byrd is in the middle row at the far right. In front of her is Bob Baugh, executive director of the Industrial Union Council of the national AFL-CIO. Others pictured include union leaders from the United Mine Workers, Boilermakers, Service Employees, Communications Workers, and Steel Workers, plus Sean Sweeney of the Cornell University Global Labor Institute.

Agricultural land is turning into desert. Floods are uprooting communities. Massive forest fires are destroying people's livelihoods. And disappearing Arctic ice is disrupting fishing industries.

"The folks I met from Malaysia and South Africa and Argentina and Brazil, they're not sheltered from the impact," Byrd said. "They're experiencing it big time. We haven't felt it because we're a rich country and can adapt. But we will."

Fortunately, according to the IPCC report, humanity already has tech-

nologies to combat global warming. The Bali meeting was the kickoff of a new round of negotiations over the international response to global warming. The negotiations are supposed to produce a successor agreement to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. Under the Kyoto Protocol, 36 of the world's rich countries committed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while 137 poor countries committed to monitor and report emissions. The United States and Kazakhstan are the only countries not to have ratified the Kyoto agreement.

The negotiations begun at Bali are expected to be concluded next year at a meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark. According to the road map agreed to in Bali, poor nations would also commit to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the new agreement, and rich nations would help them do so with aid, investment, and transfer of new technologies.

The Bali meeting was the first time the world's trade union movement has had a role in climate talks: The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) was given status as an offi-

cial observer, and brought 90 trade unionists from 25 countries.

Byrd was part of the 20-member U.S. contingent, which was led by Bob Baugh, a former Oregon AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer. Baugh now is executive director of the national AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Council, and chair of the labor federation's one-year-old Energy Task Force.

As observers, Byrd and other trade unionists met with official government delegates to lobby for workers to be protected when actions are taken to halt global warming, a principle ITUC outlined in a "Green Jobs" white paper.

Back from Bali, Byrd is working on a presentation to take around to local unions. Byrd said she wants to make sure organized labor is part of state and regional discussions on how to respond to global warming. At its 2007 convention, the Oregon AFL-CIO passed a resolution to create a blue ribbon committee to study how the state labor federation can best contribute to the fight against climate change. Byrd wants labor to be at the table this year when state lawmakers discuss global warming legislation to be introduced at the 2009 Oregon Legislature. Oregon is one of six western states (and two Canadian provinces) taking part in the Western Climate Initiative, an effort to develop a regional response to global warming. If there are state and local government subsidies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, Byrd wants to make sure they favor employment of local workers, and require payment a living wage.

"There are [green] jobs being created as we speak," Byrd said. "They are not necessarily good jobs. We need to make sure they are good jobs. And then we need to go out and organize them."

More than 3 million seniors will fall into donut hole in 2008

By JAMES PARKS
NATIONAL AFL-CIO

This will not be a happy New Year for millions of seniors. More seniors than ever are expected to fall into the Medicare Part D donut hole in 2008, the coverage gap that requires seniors to pay the full cost of their prescription drugs, according to the Alliance for Retired Americans.

Under the Medicare Part D rules pushed by the Bush Administration and passed by Congress in 2003, seniors are on the hook for prescription expenses between the annual amounts of \$2,510 and \$5,726 in 2008. This gap of more than \$3,200 has been dubbed the "donut hole." The total costs for seniors in the donut hole, when you add in deductibles and co-pays, will hit \$4,050, about \$200 more than in 2007,

the Alliance says.

More than 3 million of the 24 million Part D enrollees will have to pay the \$4,050 in out-of-pocket expenses before Medicare kicks back in and provides catastrophic-care coverage, paying 95 percent of those prescription costs. But, even if they don't fall into the donut hole, seniors are paying nearly 25 percent more in premiums for their 2008 Medicare Part D prescription coverage than they did in 2007, according to a report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR).

Edward Coyle, executive director of the Alliance, sums up the situation facing seniors: "Between rising premiums, fewer prescriptions being covered and the growing donut hole, seniors will pay more for their drugs on every front next year."

The CEPR study, "Changes in the Cost of Medicare Prescription Drug Plans, 2007-2008" suggests the increased premium costs may be the result of insurers offering low introductory premiums when the program began in January 2006 to attract seniors and later springing the higher costs on participants.

The average Part D premium increase will drive costs up for the average single participant by \$57.70 a year to \$293; for the average couple, the annual premium jumps from \$470.60 a year to \$586.

The study warns: "If this rate of increase is sustained for any substantial period of time, then it will have a noticeable impact on living standards."

In August, the AFL-CIO noted that seniors in the Part D program are more likely to pay at

least \$300 a month for medicines than those in other plans, according to a study published by the journal, Health Affairs.

Medicare Part D is a voluntary prescription drug program, and its benefits are provided only through private plans, either stand-alone prescription drug plans or Medicare Advantage plans. Congress passed the Medicare drug legislation by a slim margin — and several lawmakers likely would not have voted for the bill had they been told the true cost, the AFL-CIO said.

While the Bush Administration claimed the legislation would cost \$400 million over 10 years, Congress learned that Medicare's chief actuary had estimated the true cost of the program at \$534 billion.