

# LERC to celebrate 30th anniversary March 7

EUGENE — The Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) at the University of Oregon will celebrate its 30th anniversary Friday, March 7, with a dinner at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland.

Over the last three decades, LERC has opened the university's door to rank-and-file workers, union officials and community leaders, providing them access to the resources and expertise of the higher education system.

As was noted in UO's "Oregon Quarterly, Autumn 2007" newsletter: "Each year, thousands of union members attend LERC classes to address an array of issues from how to handle workplace bullying to public speaking. Its collective bargaining institutes have achieved statewide renown. Summer schools bring together groups such as organizers and labor relations professionals to catch up on current developments, learn new strategies, and network."

The vision for LERC was an obscure one that began in 1971 in the form of a resolution adopted at the annual convention of the Oregon AFL-CIO. "Creation of a labor education center at the University of Oregon" was one of among 63 resolutions passed that year — a time when the focus of the country was on the Nixon Administration's wage-price freeze. Labor wanted President Nixon out of office and the Oregon convention revolved around ways to rally the troops to elect a new president.

Still, with that resolution in hand, union officials began lobbying lawmakers and administrators on the importance of a labor center for Oregon's workforce.

In 1975, then-State Rep. Ted Kulongoski of Eugene (now governor, and a keynote speaker March 7) introduced a bill to create a center at UO. It failed. Two years later another measure was introduced. This time lawmakers were convinced. They passed the bill along with nearly \$250,000 in funding.

The bill was signed by Gov. Bob Straub on July 15, 1977, at a dinner in Springfield celebrating the 20th anniversary of the merger in Lane County of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

"This is one of the major pieces of legislation labor has gotten passed in years. It will have a long-lasting effect," Pat Randall, then secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO, said at the time.

Randall and retired Oregon AFL-CIO President Irv Fletcher were lauded for their efforts lobbying for LERC. At the time, Fletcher was secretary-treasurer of the Lane County Labor Council.

The labor center was the first of its kind in the Pacific Northwest, but was modeled after similar education programs at public universities, including Cornell, Rutgers, Indiana, UC Berkeley and Wisconsin (which was the first to be established in 1924).

LERC caught on quickly. Recognition and demand were so great that the Legislature nearly doubled its budget in 1979. By 1986, a Portland Center had been established and a full-time faculty position was created for it.

"The visions of decades ago were on the mark," Steven Deutsch, professor emeritus of LERC, wrote last April in a retrospective. Deutsch, a sociology pro-

fessor at the university, was LERC's interim director in 1977 as a labor advisory committee searched for a director. He wasted no time establishing courses on stewards' training, contract negotiations and contract administration.

In 1978, Emory Via was hired as the first permanent director. It was his ties to national labor leadership that raised LERC's profile nationally. Within a year of Via's hiring the George Meany Center for Labor Studies selected the labor center to lead the development of a national program in grievance handling for transit industry unions.

Via retired in 1988 and Margaret Hallock, a state economist and former director of research of the Oregon Public Employees Union, was hired. Under her leadership, LERC broadened its research and programming and began to emphasize strategic approaches to workplace change, labor-management relations and union operations. The new focus included an aggressive outreach to workers, unionists and scholars worldwide.

Hallock left in 2001 to take over as founding director of the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics at UO. She was succeeded by Bob Bussel, a former union rep for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (now UNITE-HERE) and Service Employ-

ees International Union. Bussel taught in the labor education program at Penn State University for seven years before coming to Eugene.

Under Bussel's leadership, LERC has continued in its tradition of providing direct, hands-on education, training and consultation to workers and unions. Faculty also provide technical assistance to legislators, community activists and government agencies, and frequently furnish background information on labor and employment issues to the news media.

Bussel said LERC is continually developing its course content to reflect changes in the workplace and job markets. The decline in manufacturing and growth in service sector, governmental and alternative energy jobs — plus the influx of immigrants and women into the workforce — requires it.

"I'd say there's more emphasis on research in support of organizing and the right to organize, immigrant workers and sustainable business development," Bussel said.

Today, LERC reaches more than 3,000 workers each year on a biennial budget of about \$1.2 million. It has five full-time and three part-time faculty, plus a staff of five. Faculty includes associate professors Gordon Lafer and Marcus Widenor; instructors Barbara

Byrd, Lynn Feeekin and Helen Moss; and research associates Jennifer Hess, Laurel Kincl and Marc Weinstein.

Lafer has taken his research on union election procedures before Congress, testifying last year on the right of workers to organize. Byrd coordinates the Portland Center. Her research has included apprenticeship training in the building trades and women in non-traditional jobs. She also serves as secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO, a part-time post. Moss coordinates the U-LEAD (Union-Leadership Education and Development), a non-credit certificate program.

The March 7 celebration starts with a reception at 6 p.m. at the Oregon Convention Center. Keynote speakers at the dinner will be Gov. Kulongoski, UO President Dave Frohnmayer and Ruth Milkman, director of the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

From 2 to 5 p.m. LERC will hold a symposium entitled, "Creating Labor-Community Alliances That Work."

At the dinner LERC also will launch a new Strategic Training and Action Research (STAR) Fund. Net proceeds from the celebration will benefit the fund, which will be used in part to provide more training programs and to bring visiting union leaders to Oregon.

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