

# Union and political leaders propose labor-business alliance to rebuild nation's crumbling infrastructure

Citing crumbling bridges, roads, waterways, rails and ports, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney proposed labor and business form a joint alliance to push a comprehensive long-term plan to rebuild the nation's infrastructure.

Closing a national infrastructure conference at his alma mater, Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., on Feb. 19, Sweeney said he would be willing to set up such a joint alliance with the Chamber of Commerce, the National Associations of Manufacturers, and others.

If such a long-term rebuilding plan, with government-backed financing for projects, passed Congress and was signed by the next president, "managers of the \$5 trillion now in our union benefit funds (would) seriously consider infrastructure capital investments, and I know it would have the same effect on

private capital," Sweeney said.

"We all have a stake in this — every one of us — and we all have different motives for wanting action," Sweeney continued. "For the AFL-CIO, it's good jobs. For others, it is something different. We all depend on our infrastructure to keep our families and our communities healthy, comfortable and safe, and to keep our country moving. We should be able to put some of our parochial concerns aside and come together behind a comprehensive long-range infrastructure plan."

A day later in Portland, Oregon Congressman Earl Blumenauer, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, met with a dozen construction union leaders to get their ideas on what a national plan to rebuild infrastructure might look like.

He told them he has been working with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, (D-Calif.), and has talked to more than 240 stakeholders (a diverse group ranging from contractors and environmentalists to truckers and transit workers) to raise the profile for a national infrastructure plan.

"This is going to part of the Democratic program this year and next," he emphasized. "China is spending 9 percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure. India is spending 4 percent of its GDP. The United States spent less than 1 percent. We are falling further and further behind our global competitors."

The Iona College conference was diverse, too, bringing together unions, business, government and academic leaders to explore the hows and whys of revitalizing the economy by rebuilding

its infrastructure.

"We know that investing in our own infrastructure will produce prosperity. It will put people to work . . . But there has to be a will to do this. It is hard work to build consensus," said Ron DeFeo, CEO of heavy equipment manufacturer Terex, Corp., which sponsored the conference.

The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that every \$1 billion invested in transportation infrastructure generates \$2 billion in economic activity. Most estimates also say that every billion dollars spent on infrastructure creates between 40,000 and 50,000 jobs.

"In simplistic terms, what we lack is any sort of long-range comprehensive plan — any sort of overall strategy" that would cover years of projects and billions of dollars in construction, Sweeney said.

But Sweeney insists it will take a new administration in Washington, D.C., before any significant action is taken, because for seven years the Bush Administration has refused to consider using infrastructure spending as a job-creation vehicle.

During last January's debate on a short-term economic stimulus package, the AFL-CIO urged Congress to include a job-creating infrastructure component, one aimed at bridge repair and school renovation. Bush and his allies in the Senate nixed it.

Sweeney did not offer a comprehensive plan himself, but said a good start would be bipartisan legislation pending in Congress — now marooned in the House Banking Committee — to "establish a National Infrastructure Bank to finance substantial infrastructure projects with public and private capital, above

and beyond existing grants and earmarks."

"The central idea behind such an approach is the financing would be guaranteed by our government," Sweeney said. "We'd be asking government, business, labor and individuals to invest in America, and in this time of economic uncertainty and national division, that would be a percentage play for all of us."

At both the Portland and New York gatherings, similar information was shared with participants. For example:

- The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates it will take \$1.6 trillion over five years to bring roads, rails, bridges, waterways, transit systems and other infrastructure components in to "good condition."

- A National Surface Transportation

Policy and Revenue Study calculates that it will take \$225 billion annually just to maintain the existing transportation system over the next 50 years.

- The Congressional Budget Office predicts a \$5 billion shortfall in the Highway Trust Fund by 2009, disrupting projects in all 50 states.

- By 2020, every major U.S. container port is projected to double its designed capacity. Some West Coast ports will quadruple.

There are 72,000 miles of sewer and water pipes that are over 80 years old.

"The infrastructure we built for the previous century is obsolete," Blumenauer said in Portland. "Today, we have a unique opportunity to rebuild our communities in ways that meet our environmental and energy challenges while revitalizing the economy."

## Annual Faith-Labor Breakfast set for Wednesday, March 12

The sixth annual Faith-Labor Breakfast will be held Wednesday, March 12, starting at 7:45 a.m. at Highland Christian Center, 7600 N.E. Glisan St., Portland.

The annual event is co-sponsored by the Portland Chapter of Jobs with Justice, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, the Northwest Oregon Labor Council and Oregon Farmworkers Ministries.

All clergy, lay leaders and trade unionists are invited to attend.

Cost for breakfast is \$7.

For more information, call 503-236-5573.

## Grocery-meat workers wrap up more contracts

Members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 ratified several more contracts last month on the heels of a ratification vote in Eugene-Springfield after more than a year of bargaining.

In February, Salem, Corvallis, Albany, Sweet Home, Lebanon, and Newport all settled contracts. Support has averaged around 92 percent.

Local 555 represents more than 1,100 workers at Safeway, Albertsons and Fred Meyer stores in these areas.

Key provisions in the contracts are identical to those in Eugene-Springfield, with union workers winning hard-money wage increases (not bonuses in lieu of wages, as employ-

ers initially tried to get). Wages will increase \$1.30 an hour over the life of the agreement, retroactive to February 2007. There will be no health reimbursement accounts (which would have resulted in large increases in deductibles), and employees may volunteer to work Christmas Day, but can't be scheduled to work.

Ratification votes are scheduled this month in Vancouver, Wash., Medford, Roseburg, Coos Bay and Brookings.

Contracts in The Dalles and Hood River expire May 31. Contracts expire in Portland, Bend, and Newport July 26.

## Labor groups to participate in anti-war rally March 15

The war in Iraq will be five years old this month, and anti-war groups, with the support of labor organizations, are planning protest rallies around the country. In Portland, a march and rally is planned for March 15, starting at 2 p.m. at the South Park Blocks.

Oregon AFL-CIO president Tom Chamberlain will speak at the Portland rally, along with Barbara Dudley, co-chair of the labor-backed Oregon Working Families Party; Andrea Cano, director of the Oregon Farm Labor Ministry; plus an Iraqi national, an Iraqi war veteran, and the father of Ehren Watada, a U.S. Army lieutenant who refused deployment to Iraq.

The event has the endorsement of AFSCME Local 88, ILWU Local 5, Portland Jobs with Justice, and the Oregon AFL-CIO.

## Portland Public School bus drivers ratify contract

Union school bus drivers at Portland Public Schools ratified a new union contract Feb. 29, after more than two years of working without a contract. The group of 85 workers drive buses for special education students, and are represented by Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757.

The new contract runs through June 30, 2010 and is retroactive to Jan. 1, 2006. Drivers will get annual raises of 2.5 percent, including retroactive pay back to last July, and a flat \$625 for the 18 months before that. Under the previous contract, driver pay started at \$12.69 and rose to \$16.51 after 10 years.

The new contract also raises the district's capped contribution to health coverage by 6 percent a year starting Oct. 1. That's also when the new statewide school district employee health insurance pool comes into being, so there may be some reduction in the cost of coverage.

Under the new deal, the union agreed to give up employer-paid retiree health coverage after 2014. Currently the district pays for it for to five years or until the retiree is eligible for Medicare.

"[The new contract] was quite a bit better than the one we turned down," said Randy Shaw, a PPS driver and member of the union's Executive Board. "But a lot of the drivers still wanted to turn it down," Shaw said.

In the end, Shaw said, members voted to approve it by a two-to-one margin, and almost every member in the unit voted.

**NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS**

**503-288-3311**

**Subscribe Today!**

Receive 24 issues of the latest labor news and views from Oregon and Southwest Washington

**Special group rate of \$7.92 on orders of 50 or more**

Mail To: Northwest Labor Press  
P.O. Box 13150  
Portland, OR 97213

Name/Union Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_