

Lifelong union activist Michael Dembrow campaigning hard for Dist. 45 House seat

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Michael Dembrow, 56, is the kind of trade union true believer who keeps inspiration alive in the labor movement. In the early 1980s he helped lead fellow part-time instructors at Portland Community College to unionize with American Federation of Teachers (AFT). And over the next two decades, he rose to positions of leadership within the state-wide AFT organization and built a reputation for solidarity across labor unions.

Now he's making a serious run for a seat in the Oregon House of Representatives. In a three-way race with two well-funded opponents, Dembrow has the backing of organized labor.

House District 45 in Northeast Portland, Parkrose and Maywood Park is solidly Democratic, so if Dembrow wins the May 20 primary, he would likely serve in the Legislature for years to come.

Dembrow grew up in Connecticut and was the first in his family to attend college, earning a bachelor's from University of Connecticut and a master's from University of Indiana. He moved to Oregon with his wife Kiki in 1981 and found part-time work teaching writing at Portland Community College. Dembrow led the campaign by part-time instructors to join AFT Local 2277, which already represented full-time instructors, and he helped get their first union contract in 1985. He became a publicist, grievance officer, and negotiator for the local, and was elected local president in 1992. He became a member of the statewide AFT Executive Council, and later, secretary-treasurer, where he signed off on an expensive but important commitment — joining Oregon Education Association

in a major lawsuit against Bill Sizemore's ballot initiative machine.

AFT is a politically active union, and Dembrow started making regular trips to Salem to lobby the Legislature on the union's issues. And within the wider labor movement, he made common cause with other unions as a member of Portland Jobs With Justice and as a delegate to the Northwest Oregon Labor Council and to conventions of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Last year, State Rep. Jackie Dingfelder announced a run for State Senate, and House District 45 came open. Dembrow lives in that district, and AFT political director Rob Wagner leaned on him to run. A run for public office puts to use the skills Dembrow developed as an rank-and-file union leader: motivating people to get involved, knowing when to compromise and when to stand firm, leveraging power to win results.

Colleagues describe him as responsible, persistent, and smart, a hard worker with a patient, thoughtful demeanor and a gift for bringing people together.

Dembrow has two opponents: Cyreena Boston, a health policy analyst for Multnomah County; and Jon Coney, a publicist for Metro. Each of them has an impressive list of endorsements from state and local politicians. But Dembrow has some real advantages too, not the least of which is support from the labor movement. Dembrow is backed by unions in both the AFL-CIO and Change to Win federations, as well as the Oregon Education Association. Former United Food and Commercial Workers steward Logan Gillis is his campaign manager.

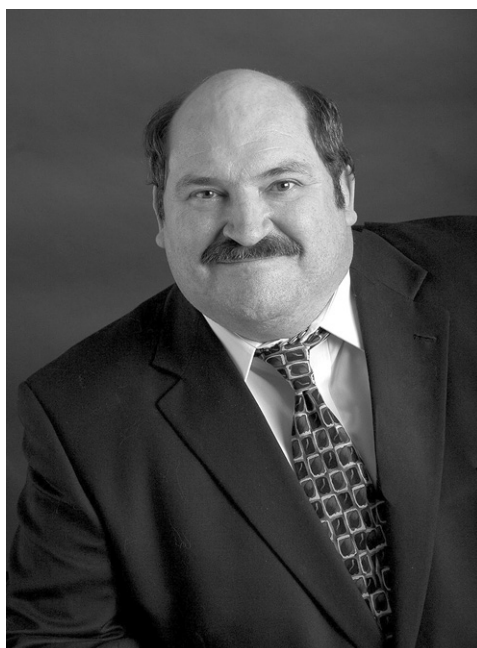
Good organization, targeted mailings, and shoe leather
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Good organization, targeted mailings, and shoe leather are key to winning state house races, says AFT member Michael Dembrow, seen knocking on door of a potential voter in Northeast Portland.

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