

Group presses Oregon to enact 'sweat-free' policy

Anti-sweatshop activists are hoping to persuade Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski to enact a "sweat-free" policy by executive order.

Since April, representatives of the group Sweatfree Northwest have been meeting monthly with the governor's labor liaison and the state's chief procurement officer to discuss such a policy. Sweatfree Northwest coordinator Elizabeth Swager said her group wants Oregon to require uniform vendors to disclose which factories are making the uniforms, and to declare that to the best of their knowledge, no local labor laws are being violated in those factories.

The campaign has been endorsed by about a dozen labor organizations, including Oregon AFSCME and Oregon State Fire Fighters Council.

The State of Oregon buys uniforms for all sorts of workers, from snow plow operators to state police officers. Activists have yet to demonstrate that any of the clothing purchased by the state was made in sweatshops, but industry trends make that increasingly likely. Sweatshops — factories that violate international labor standards and local labor laws — are the norm in the garment industry, in which companies shifted production abroad in the last 40 years to take advantage

of lower wages. While there are some garment sweatshops in the United States, by far the worst abuses are in the poorer countries.

Uniforms have been one of the last bastions of U.S. apparel manufacturers, owing to the small, quick turn-around nature of the market — and to the Berry Amendment, which requires the U.S. military to buy products manufactured domestically whenever possible. But Roger Heldman, co-owner of Seattle-based Blumenthal Uniforms, thinks a majority of the uniforms sold in the United States may now be supplied by foreign factories. Heldman said the police and fire uniforms his company sells to Portland and the state of Oregon are still made by union workers in several U.S. states.

Sweatfree Northwest is part of the national group Sweatfree Communities. A July 1 report by Sweatfree Communities faults Cintas, one of the vendors that sells uniforms to Oregon, for abuses at a Honduras factory it does business with. The abuses include unpaid overtime, illegally low wages, and lack of safety equipment.

If Oregon adopts the sweatfree purchasing rules, it would become the eighth state to do so, joining California, Illinois, Maine, New Jersey, New



A delegation from Oregon attended the National SweatFree Summit in Philadelphia July 11-13. The summit coincided with a meeting of the National Governors Association. Participants at the SweatFree Summit rallied across the street from the governors' gathering to urge the elected officials to join the sweatfree consortium. Pictured from left to right are Wes Brain of SEIU Local 503, Les Jones of Elevator Constructors Local 23, Deborah Schwartz of SEIU Local 503, Arthur Stamoulis of the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign, and Al Bradbury of SEIU Local 49.

York, Pennsylvania, and Vermont. So far, the state commitments are largely symbolic, said Liana Foxvog, Sweatfree Communities national organizer.

The next step would be to launch the Sweatfree Consortium, which would hire independent monitors to visit factories where uniforms are made. The consortium will be launched when the group gets financial commitments from participating governments that have \$100 million a

year in combined purchasing power. So far, just three local jurisdictions have made the financial commitment, pledging a small percentage of the purchasing budget.

One of them is the City of Portland, which passed a "sweatfree" resolution last year. A Portland city council resolution created a committee that's crafting an ordinance to go back for the council's approval this fall.

Steelworkers team with Britain's Unite to establish global union

The United Steelworkers signed a pact July 1 with Britain's largest union, Unite, creating a global union that will have 3.2 million members in four countries.

The new global union is called Workers Uniting. It will engage in joint bargaining and organizing across the Atlantic Ocean with such multinational employers as ArcelorMittal — the world's largest steel firm, Shell, British Petroleum and Alcoa.

Unite General Secretary Derek Simpson and Steelworkers President Leo Gerard made it clear the new union would be aggressive against multi-national firms that try to cut workers' wages and conditions. "Globalization is a man-made disaster," Simpson said.

"This union is crucial for challenging the growing power of global capital," Gerard said. "Globalization has given financiers license to exploit workers in developing countries at the expense of our members in the developed world. Only global solidarity among workers can overcome this sort of global exploitation wherever it occurs."

Under terms of the agreement, the Steelworkers and Unite will keep their headquarters in Pittsburgh and in London, respectively.

Much of the new union's business will be carried out by teleconferencing. And the merger itself will not be fully consummated until union attorneys on both sides of the Atlantic pore over the agreement and adjust provisions to conform to the labor laws of the four nations involved.

'Unity Team' goal is to aid in organizing

The Oregon AFL-CIO is trying to find ways to help affiliated unions organize nonunion workplaces.

In April, the state labor federation brought Graham Trainor on staff to coordinate the effort, which was mandated by a September 2007 convention resolution. Prior to that, Trainor headed up the Oregon chapter of the AFL-CIO's community affiliate, Working America. His new position is funded by a grant from the national AFL-CIO.

The effort — dubbed the Unity Team — brings together unions that are interested in organizing, so that they can share resources.

In June, about two dozen union decision-makers met to talk about ways to collaborate. The group voted to undertake six projects of varying sizes. Those include helping recruit a 'salt' for one campaign, lending organizers to help visit workers in their homes on several campaigns, and turning out members for a rally to highlight unfair labor practices of a large corporation that is being targeted by an affiliate.

Other ideas were floated. If a union tries to organize in a remote part of the state where it has no office, other unions could make meeting or office space available. The Working America member list — citizens signed up by paid canvassers as supporters of labor movement goals — could be lent out as needed. And the AFL-CIO would help smaller affiliates train their organizers.

The decision-makers will continue to meet quarterly.

Trainor is also helping to resurrect the Oregon AFL-CIO Organizing Committee, a kind of roundtable for professional organizers to share ideas and strategy. They'll meet six times a year, the second Tuesday of every other month. Sept. 9 is the next meeting. And the third Wednesday of each month, union organizers will meet for a happy hour event. "We want to build a federation-wide culture of organizing," Trainor said.



'Bush Legacy' bus tour stops in Oregon

Ariel Brantley-Dalgish checks out the Bush Legacy bus July 23 at Portland's Waterfront Park. The union-backed Bush Legacy Tour kicked off June 24 in Washington, D.C., and is traveling to 150 cities this summer. Portland was the 29th stop on the tour. The State Capitol in Salem was stop number 30 the following day. Using video and guide-by-cell-technology, the bus is an interactive museum on wheels that encapsulates how Bush Administration policies and conservative ideology have harmed workers and the economy. "We mustn't forget that Bush didn't do this alone," said Julie Blust of Americans United for Change. "He had the help of Congress — members like (Oregon U.S. Senator) Gordon Smith, who rubber-stamped his most disastrous policies." Blust and the tour bus pointed to "reckless tax cuts" for millionaires and big corporations, and an energy bill written by and for big oil companies who are now raking in record profits while gas and food prices skyrocket. "Gordon Smith voted with Bush 81 percent of the time," Blust said. Americans United for Change was founded in 2005 to help stop Bush's plan to privatize Social Security. Oregon Action and several community leaders hosted the tour bus stop in Portland.



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