

Washington AFL-CIO convention

Politics on the minds of union activists in Washington

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

VANCOUVER, Wash. — Judging by last week's convention of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, the ballot box has eclipsed the bargaining table as the focus of union attention.

"I never thought I'd be talking to senators and congressmen, but we live and die by what happens in the election," National Association of Letter Carriers regional representative Paul Price told delegates. Price was backed on stage by 10 blue-shirted NALC members who had pledged to volunteer at least 10 hours this year to the union political effort. That's something his union is appealing to all members to do. The T-shirt and the chance to help save the middle class are the reward.

Through their volunteers and member contributions, unions have become the workhorse of many a political campaign, and politicians know it. Perhaps that's why so many made their way to the Vancouver Hilton Hotel and Convention Center Aug. 4-7 to speak to roughly 350 delegates of the state labor federation. The governor, both U.S.

senators, and half a dozen others spoke, aiming their remarks at the breadbasket and social justice concerns of working people.

For Washington workers, two races are of the highest importance this year, said WSLC President Rick Bender: re-electing Gov. Chris Gregoire to a second term, and sending Barack Obama to the White House.

Delegates heard about Gregoire's labor-related first-term accomplishments from Bender and from Gregoire herself: 225,000 new jobs; \$1 billion in new school construction; a \$900 per year per student increase in public school funding; and a law requiring apprentices on all public works projects, so that a new generation of skilled building trades workers gets trained. During her term, Washington has also become the third best state in the country for business, according to Forbes, and a large, skilled workforce was a big part of that calculation. Meanwhile, the Pew Center on the States ranks Washington as one of the top three best-managed state governments in the nation.

So why do polls show Gregoire as neck and neck with Republican chal-

lenger Dino Rossi, a real estate broker and former legislator she beat four years ago by just 133 votes?

WSLC spokesperson David Groves thinks part of the problem is that Gregoire is seen as a career government administrator — not the most exciting political résumé.

"Do you want to hire a governor with some experience running government agencies," Groves asked, "or do you want to hire someone who's an outsider with some simplistic ideas about running government like a business?"

"We could pick up seats in the Legislature," said Bender, "but if we lose that governor's race, everything we do in the next four years is going to be vetoed."

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray touted her work on Medicare, veterans' benefits, transportation and infrastructure funding and workforce training. But the topic that drew delegates to their feet was the U.S. Air Force decision to award Northrup Grumman and a European air consortium a \$35 billion contract to build the next generation of re-fueling planes.

"That contract should have gone to

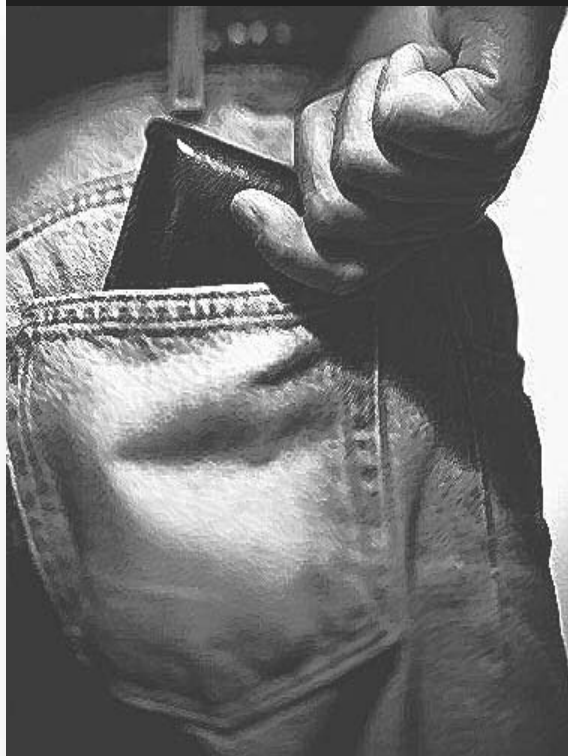
our workers," Murray said. "This country has no business outsourcing jobs to Europe as we slip into recession."

Murray was echoed by U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell, who said she too intends to keep fighting to ensure that the tanker contract goes to Boeing Corp.. The Pentagon has decided to reopen the bidding for the contract after government auditors found errors in the Air Force's handling of the process. Cantwell said she intends to hold up the confirmation of the new secretary of the Air Force until she is assured that the new bidding process maintains the original criteria, as opposed to changing them to favor any bidder.

Delegates debated and passed a number of resolutions, including a first-time call, sponsored by AFSCME, for a national holiday in honor of the late Chicano farm workers union leader Cesar Chavez. Several resolutions also set WSLC's priorities for the next legislative session, including a call for funding for the paid family and medical leave benefit, which the Legislature passed last year but has yet to fund. And delegates debated whether to call for a nationwide general strike against the war, high oil prices, mortgage foreclosures and evictions, and the lack of affordable health care; in

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