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Plight of the 'Millennials':

Today's young workers face economic squeeze

By CAITLIN DONOHUE

Life wasn't turning out the way Josh Heiney had imagined. A stellar high school sportsman, he bounced around the country's colleges on partial athletic scholarships. But at age 23, Josh wound up back in Portland, burned out on school, with massive debt.

"In college you're supposed to find what you're looking for, but there wasn't anything laid out," Heiney recalls.

He wound up as a cell phone salesman, a far cry from economic success. Heiney received no benefits and was never paid the commission money he was promised to support his minimum wage paychecks. "Talk about your dead end job."

As a group, the "Millennials (a sociological term coined to describe the generation born between the years 1979 and 1990) are less economically stable than their Baby Boomer parents were at their age. While earnings for almost every demographic have fallen, leaving 17.8 percent of 18 to 24 year olds living in poverty, the cost of college — often seen as the only path to the middle class — has risen dramatically.

Stagnant government financial aid programs are leaving the average Oregonian college grad with $19,667 in debt upon graduation, according to a study produced by Demos, a non-partisan policy research organization, which supplied most of the statistics in this article. Housing costs are rising, and the prevalence of consumer debt among youth is gaining ground rapidly.

Heiney's story of occupational woe rings familiar for many fellow Millennials. Since the 1970s, America has been losing the solid manufacturing jobs that supported the Boomers to globalization — outsourcing to cheap labor overseas. In return, Americans have seen the rise of the service sector — low-paying positions with no benefits.

These changes have dire repercussions. Median annual earnings of men of Heiney's educational status have fallen (in 2004 dollars) from $44,958 in 1975 to $35,500 in 2005. Employer-based health care, once a given for 63.3 percent of recent high school graduates, is now supplied to a mere one-third.

And no relief is in sight. Four of the top five fastest-growing occupations are low-wage nonunion service industry jobs, positioning them to make up three-quarters of all jobs in 2016.

This injustice is not lost on the Millennials. According to a study done by the Center for American Progress, young people are more likely than their parents were to support universal health care coverage and to want the government to increase services and educational spending, even if that means an increase in taxes. They are more likely to be concerned about jobs and the economy and are more supportive of labor unions than nearly any other group over the past 40-years.

Finding ways to channel this new wellspring of interest is leading to innovative programs in organized labor.

"Young people are bringing unique issues and concerns to the table," says Lydia Hallay, an organizer for AFSCME Oregon Council 75's Next Wave. The group is meant to be a friendly point of access to union involvement and a forum for younger members. Hallay notes the creation of an environmental caucus at AFSCME's recent national convention as one of the local chapter of Next Wave's greatest achievements — the idea having been raised by its youthful participants.

Still in its early planning stages, the Oregon AFL-CIO's Youth Caucus is another program aimed at developing tomorrow's leaders inside the labor movement.

"So far we've started some important discussion about what younger union members can do to get involved in their locals and what locals can do to reach out to their members," says Elana Guiney, Oregon AFL-CIO staff member.

"The restaurant industry has this habit of making people believe their jobs are disposable," said UNITE HERE Local 9 organizer Karly Edwards.

She cites implementation of tip credit — legislation which allows employers to pay tip-earning employees below the minimum wage — as one of the pitfalls that hotel and restaurant workers who organize with UNITE HERE hope to avoid.

"It's about creating jobs with dignity," she said.

Local 9 workers had a recent success winning their first contract at the Vancouver, Washington Hilton — a feat Edwards says was aided and abetted by the passion and drive of young workers.

"The way the service industry works, there's a high chance your rights might be violated," says Misty Cumbie, a Portland restaurant server. Tired of low wages, nonexistent benefits and labor law violations they saw going on every day in their workplaces and without any formal organizing experience to date, Cumbie and fellow restaurant employee Ryan Wisnor decided to do something about the Millennials' economic plight. They started the Portland Restaurant Workers' Association (PRWA), a group focusing on education, support and solidarity for service industry employees.

"Only recently has the PRWA felt that it has reached a stage where it can approach community groups and unions with a clear picture of its guiding principles, structure, and goals," says Wisnor, adding that the association looks forward to working with these organizations in the future.

To date, PRWA has helped workers bring lawsuits against tip-stealing employers. They have plans for Spanish language classes to help bridge the gap between workers, and anticipate growing their network of worker-ac-

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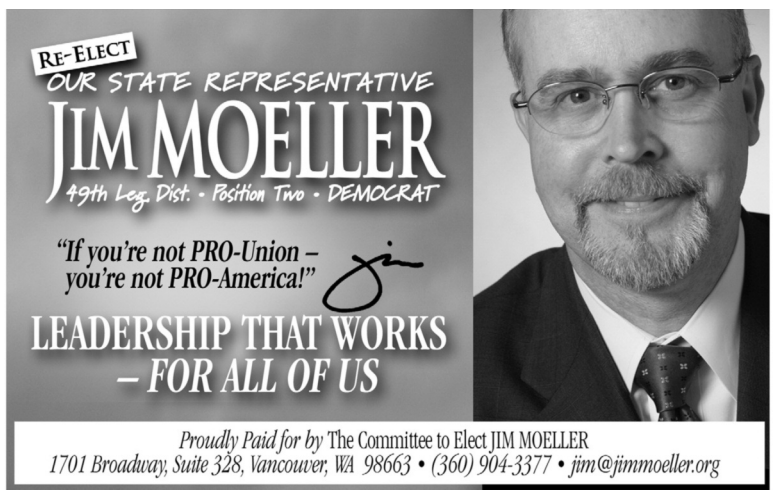

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