

Union-sponsored Oregon Working Families Party has spot on ballot

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

For the first and maybe the last time, Oregon voters will get a chance this November to vote for a candidate from a union-sponsored political party — the Oregon Working Families Party.

Portland labor lawyer J. Ashlee Albies will appear — on the Working Families ballot line — as a candidate for Oregon attorney general.

The Oregon Working Families Party, modeled on a New York minor party, formed in 2006 with the support of seven local unions in order to push a worker-friendly political agenda and reintroduce “fusion” voting to Oregon. Under a fusion voting system, candidates can appear on the ballot line of more than one endorsing party.

So the Working Families Party, for example, could use its ballot line to endorse Democratic or Republican candidates who support its jobs, justice, and worker rights platform.

Voting for a candidate on the Working Families ballot line instead of the Democratic ballot line shows politicians that economic justice is important to those voters. The same dynamic would apply to candidates cross-endorsed by the Libertarian or Constitution parties.

The two major parties outlawed fusion voting in the early 20th century. The Oregon Working Families Party gathered 28,000 signatures to gain minor-party status, and then tried in the 2007 legislative session and the 2008 special session to get lawmakers to restore fusion. That didn't happen.

Now Working Families' status as a minor party will expire unless it again gathers the signatures, or gets more than 1 percent in a statewide race. That's why the party asked Albies to run.

Albies is an employee-side employment law and civil rights law attorney with the Portland firm Steenson, Schumann, Tewksbury, Creighton and Rose. She co-chairs the Portland Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild.

Working Families has no problem with John Kroger, who won the Democratic — and Republican primary

(no Republican entered the race) — in May with heavy backing from organized labor. Kroger is practically assured victory in November. Therefore, a Working Families candidate wouldn't end up being a “spoiler,” throwing the race to a less-appealing candidate.

But Measure 65 on the Nov. 4 ballot would completely rework the role of major and minor political parties in primary and general elections. If it passes, all candidates would appear together on the primary ballot, and all voters, regardless of party registration, would choose from among the candidates. The top two vote-getters would go on to the general election.

The Oregon AFL-CIO opposes the measure.

No political party would be assured of a spot in the general election, and primaries would no longer be how the major parties choose their nominees. Instead, each candidate would be identified by their party registration, and next to their names would appear the names of any parties that endorsed them.

For minor parties like Working Families, Measure 65's passage would mean they would no longer have a “ballot line” on which to place candidates they'd nominated. But the party name would appear next to any candidates who accepted their endorsement.

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