

## Lots at stake for workers

# Labor has full plate before Washington Legislature

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Associate Editor

OLYMPIA — State lawmakers assembled here Jan. 12 for what will surely be a crisis session of the Washington Legislature. Washington state government's share of the global recession is a projected \$5.7 billion revenue shortfall in the next two-year budget. Unlike the federal government, states have to balance their budgets. So unless there's a full-scale federal bailout of state governments, Washington lawmakers and Gov. Christine Gregoire will be weighing spending cuts and revenue increases.

Workers have a big stake in those decisions, and representatives of the state's labor movement will lobby and testify in the weeks and months leading up to the April 26 close of the legislative session.

Grappling with the budget won't be the only topic, though. Organized labor also expects the Democratic majority to deliver on reforms — such as extending the right to unionize, setting up a fund to provide paid family leave for workers, and requiring payment of the prevailing wage on mixed public-private construction projects.

Most of labor's political efforts are coordinated through the Washington State Labor Council (WSLC) — the statewide body chartered by the national AFL-CIO. In the fourth most unionized state in the nation, WSLC represents most major unions except the Washington Education Association, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. About 500 local unions are affiliated, with a combined membership of about 400,000. And WSLC sees itself as the advocate for working people in general, not just of union members, said spokesperson David Groves.

WSLC is calling on lawmakers to put more money in the hands of unemployed workers, which could help stimulate the economy. Washington's unemployment insurance trust fund has \$4 billion in reserves, a much higher level than most states. Gov. Gregoire is proposing to tap the fund to add \$45 a week to unemployment insurance benefits. Business groups have vowed to fight the proposal.

WSLC supports it, and also wants to see a rule change so that individuals can get unemployment if they quit because they're relocating to where a spouse has found a new job.

Last fall, responding to the budget shortfall, Gov. Gregoire announced a state government hiring freeze. Since then, the budget picture has worsened to the point where state worker layoffs are on the table. But her December budget proposal to the Legislature crossed the line for several unions. The governor didn't ask lawmakers to fund the modest raises that had just been agreed to in contract bargaining with

several state worker unions. Three public employee unions filed suit for breach of contract — the Washington Federation of State Employees (an affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents most state employees); SEIU Local 775, which represents home health care workers; and

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SEIU Local 925, which represents childcare workers. The legal dispute had not been resolved as of press time.

Basically, the governor's office is arguing economic necessity, whereas the unions counter that the governor has to ask to renegotiate the raises, and can't just unilaterally dump the contract. And they say the governor's budget failed to suggest alternatives — like ending corporate tax breaks.

Washington has no personal income tax, so public services rely on the property tax, sales tax, and a business gross receipts tax; receipts from the last two have fallen significantly with the drop-off in sales and business activity. Cutting back on corporate tax breaks would be one way to increase revenue without raising taxes. A tax break for producers of bull semen has been the most singled out for ridicule, but all told there are about 600 business tax exemptions, totaling tens of billions of dollars. WSLC isn't proposing that they be eliminated wholesale, just that they be looked at to see whether they accomplish their purposes, and whether those purposes are worth the cost to the treasury at a time when public agency budgets are facing severe cuts.

Aside from the economy and the state budget, WSLC's top reform priority this year is the Worker Privacy Act. Under the bill, workers could not be disciplined for refusing to attend workplace meetings at which issues of individual conscience are to be discussed — including whether to support unionization, but also matters of religion, politics, or charitable giving.

WSLC also wants to extend state-administered collective bargaining rights to community college faculty (possibly the last major group of public workers without that right) and to performing artists at small symphonies and opera companies not covered by the National Labor Relations Act.

And WSLC, which is a member of the Healthy Washington Coalition, wants to see more progress toward making sure all Washingtonians have

health insurance. That means no cuts to the state's program of health insurance for children from low-income families. And it means a decision on how to move forward on a program of comprehensive health care reform.

Under Senate Bill 6333, passed last year, a citizen task force hired a consultant to account for five major proposals to overhaul health care; that gives lawmakers a menu of options to choose from.

"We think health care reform is part of economic recovery," Groves said. "To take the burden off business and working families ... frees up money to create jobs and spend money in other areas that help the economy."

The labor council also wants lawmakers to stop stalling and make a decision on how to fund a paid family leave benefit they approved in 2007. The program would replace up to \$250 a week of lost wages for workers who take family leave after the birth or adoption of a child. The benefit would apply only at workplaces with 50 or more employees, the same workers who now have a federal guarantee of unpaid family leave. The problem with unpaid family leave is that workers can't afford to use it. So the modest benefit would make a difference. Except Olympia never decided how to fund it: Would it come from a 2 cents per hour payroll tax on workers, or a penny each from workers and employers, or even from unemployment insurance fund? Whichever, it's time to get it off the ground, WSLC will argue.

Meanwhile, the Washington State Building and Construction Trades Council (WSBCTC), which pools the political agendas of the state's building trades unions, will focus on proposals to expand apprenticeship opportunities; bring unemployment insurance

rules into compliance with federal standards; and give the state better tools to make employers comply with workers' compensation coverage requirements.

Thanks to previous rounds of legislation, most public works projects in Washington require at least some work be done by apprentices — opening up chances for new workers to gain skills. State-certified apprentice numbers have doubled since 1999, and now stand at close to 16,000. This year, WSBCTC hopes to extend the apprentice utilization requirement to construction projects on higher ed campuses.

"It's a policy statement," said WSBCTC Executive Secretary David Johnson. "If you're going to bid on public work, you need to make some commitment to training the future workforce."

WSBCTC also will push a bill targeting "bid shopping," in which general contractors, after getting a contract, play subcontractors against each other to see which will do the work most cheaply. The bill would require contractors to name their subcontractors when they get a contract.

And WSBCTC will bring back a bill to expand the requirement that workers employed on public construction projects be paid the prevailing wage. One idea would be to require private sector projects to pay prevailing wage if they're given public money in the form of tax incentives or lower-than-market-value public land. Another would have the state begin to collect data on wages paid to out-of-state workers making pre-fabricated parts used in public construction, such as pre-cast concrete forms.

For information and regular updates, union members can visit the Washington State Labor Council Web page at [www.wslc.org](http://www.wslc.org).

Members who want to get involved in WSLC's legislative efforts should plan to attend a half-day legislative conference Thursday, Feb. 26 at the Olympia Red Lion Inn.

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