

Inside

MEETING NOTICES

See
Page 4

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PortlandWorker Privacy Act

Washington's top Democrats kill priority labor bill

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OLYMPIA — Union activists in Washington felt a slap from three of the state's top Democrats on March 11. House Speaker Frank Chopp, Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, and Gov. Christine Gregoire announced they were killing a bill that the Washington State Labor Council (WSLC) had called its top priority — because of a WSLC e-mail that warned “not another dime” for Democrats until the bill passed. And that wasn't all: The three Democratic leaders asked the Washington State Patrol to investigate whether the e-mailed threat to withhold future campaign contributions violated state law.

Citing the pending police investigation, WSLC spokesperson Kathy Cummings told the Labor Press she could not discuss what happened. But official statements from the Democrats and the WSLC — and reporting by the Seattle Times — tell the story.

The bill in question, the Worker Privacy Act, was a legal trial balloon that took aim at an employer tactic used to defeat union campaigns. Dur-

ing union drives, standard employer practice is to require workers to attend a series of workplace meetings at which company representatives make every kind of anti-union argument. It can be hard to explain to those who haven't experienced one of these meetings just how demoralizing and intimidating they can be to union supporters. Because no union reps are allowed to attend to counter what's said, pro-union workers either risk their jobs speaking up in rebuttal, or sit there feeling like cowards for failing to speak up for their beliefs. Managers know this, and it's one of the reasons these so-called “captive audience” anti-union meetings are so frequently utilized.

The Worker Privacy Act would prohibit employers from firing or otherwise retaliating against workers who refuse to attend these meetings — or meetings where employer views on religion or politics, if those are unrelated to work, are to be presented. Employers wouldn't be stopped from holding those meetings, or from barring alternative views, but workers who refused to attend could no longer be penalized.

WSLC, a state-level body of the AFL-CIO la-

bor federation, thought it had commitments from Democratic leaders to pass the Worker Privacy Act. Last year, the WSLC and its affiliated unions spent enormous time and money helping re-elect Gregoire and elect more Democrats to the state House and Senate.

But employers — led by Boeing and the Washington Roundtable, a club of the state's top CEOs — came out aggressively against the bill. They argued that the bill would restrict employer freedom of speech, and predicted it would be struck down in federal court. Strong business opposition meant Republicans would have no qualms voting to oppose the bill, while Democrats would be forced to choose between Boeing and organized labor. The Legislature had a self-imposed deadline: Any bill not passed out of at least one chamber by March 12 would be considered dead for this year's legislative session. As the deadline neared, Chopp and Brown had not scheduled a vote on the Worker Privacy Act. WSLC political organizers started to get nervous, and ramped up a campaign calling for a vote.

Win or lose, WSLC wanted a vote, to be able to

see which side lawmakers would be on.

On Monday, March 10, someone at WSLC sent an e-mail to affiliated union leaders.

The e-mail — which was later obtained and published by the Seattle Times — contained notes from a WSLC strategy session about the campaign to pass the Worker Privacy Act, including this passage: “Union leaders would send a message to the State Democratic Party and to the Truman and Roosevelt funds from the House and Senate that ‘not another dime from labor’ until the governor signs the Worker Privacy Act.”

[The Truman and Roosevelt funds are the Democratic Party's vehicles for electing candidates to the state House and Senate.]

Somehow, the e-mail made its way to Senate Majority Leader Brown, who showed it to House Speaker Chopp. Chopp showed it to attorneys for the Washington House of Representatives, and canceled a meeting he had previously scheduled with labor leaders to talk about the bill.

That evening, Chopp and Brown met with Gov. Gregoire, and the three decided to kill the bill, an-

(Turn to Page 2)



Roger Bullock, a member of Operating Engineers Local 701, shows money that construction workers have taped to the wall of the elevator he operates at a job site in downtown Portland.

Construction crew turns 'tip' into cash for kids

What started as a lark at a downtown Portland construction site has emerged into something special to help kids at Doernbecher Children's Hospital.

Roger Bullock, a 12-year member of Operating Engineers Local 701, found a penny on the floor of the elevator he operates five days a week at the Courtyard by Marriott redevelopment project at Southwest 5th and Oak in downtown Portland. “That's my tip for the day,” he quipped to co-workers as he taped the penny to the wall of the elevator.

By the end of the day, a nickel and dime were taped to the wall next to the penny. “It went from nickels and dimes to quarters and dollar bills,” Bullock said. Pretty soon, Bullock had more than \$10 on the wall.

“I didn't want to keep the money,” he told the NW Labor Press. So he posted a sign saying: “Children's Cancer Society.”

Word spread that Bullock was giving the money to the cancer center at Doernbecher Children's Hospital. In less than a week more than \$200 was tacked to the elevator walls.

Project superintendent Kelly Rowland said donations will continue for the duration of the job — which is expected to be the end of March, at which time the money will be counted and matched by Hoffman Construction, the general contractor on the project.

At this juncture, the job employs anywhere from 80 to 100 workers from all the construction trades. Those workers have now issued a challenge to construction crews at other projects downtown to meet or beat the donation, which will easily top \$500 before it's all said and done.

“These are tough times for a lot of people, and charities, too,” Bullock said. “We're all fortunate to be working. It's the least we can do.”