

Oregon Legislature passes halfway mark: April 17 is a critical date for bills

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

The Oregon Legislature is more than halfway through its 2009 lawmaking session, and leaders and lobbyists from Oregon labor unions are on the scene in Salem — supporting, opposing and monitoring a bewildering number of bills that affect union members and working people.

The biggest-stakes topic this year is the budget. All interested parties are waiting for the May 15 revenue forecast, the last one legislators will receive before they adjourn for the year on June 30. Every budget forecast since last fall has predicted deeper shortfalls. The unemployed and money-losing businesses don't pay income taxes, and that's cutting into the state's ability to pay for education, public safety, and social services. All agencies have been ordered to prepare 2009-11 biennium budgets that include 30 percent cuts.

Unions, particularly public employee unions, have allied with human services advocates like AARP and the PTA to advocate targeted revenue increases in order to avoid severe budget cuts.

"There's a real opportunity to make a case with the public this year," said Rob Wagner, director of political and legislative affairs for American Federation of Teachers (AFT)-Oregon. Wagner predicts public support for "Obama-style" tax increases on the wealthy and on corporations.

The union-backed group Our Oregon, which helped defeat a phalanx of ballot measures last fall, has stepped in to help the coalition, which is planning a community forum on the human impact of the budget crisis. That's at 11 a.m., April 11, at Gordon Russell Middle School in Gresham. "This doesn't have to be doom and gloom," said Our Oregon spokesperson Scott Moore. "If we come together and find a balanced solu-

tion that protects the vulnerable and doesn't shift the burden to the middle class, we'll get through this."

The co-chairs of the Joint Ways and Means Committee, State Sen. Margaret Carter (D-Portland) and State Rep. Peter Buckley (D-Ashland), are mulling a late April "road show" in which they'd hold town hall meetings throughout Oregon to give citizens a chance to comment on the budget and the potential cuts.

Budget crisis aside, union leaders are still counting on the expanded Democratic majority — 36-24 in the House and 18-12 in the Senate — to deliver on a pro-labor agenda.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is keeping track of over 300 bills.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

The Oregon AFL-CIO's top priority is the Worker Freedom Act, SB 519, which would make it illegal for an employer to discipline an employee for refusing to attend a workplace anti-union meeting. Such meetings are a standard tactic by employers trying to prevent a union from getting majority support.

Another priority for the AFL-CIO, and for public employee unions, is HB 2831, a bill making numerous changes to Oregon's Public Employee Collective Bargaining Law. In 1995, a Republican-led Legislature delivered a blow to public employee unionization by passing Senate Bill 750. HB 2831 reverses some of those changes, and in general makes it easier for public employees to unionize if they want to.

HB 2931 would establish foster parents in Oregon as "public employees" for the purposes of allowing them to join a labor organization.

SB 463 would allow laid-off part-time workers to get unemployment insurance benefits even if they're not available to work full-time.

HB 3160 would create up to six

weeks of paid family leave at \$300 per week, paid for by a new payroll tax of two cents per hour for all employees in Oregon. The program, which would start in 2012, would make it easier for workers to take family leave for the birth or adoption of a child, or to care for a family member with a serious health condition.

STOPPING BALLOT INITIATIVE ABUSES

Every two years, longtime union foe Bill Sizemore plagues organized labor with objectionable ballot measures, all while skirting election laws intended to shed light on campaign contributions and rein in paid petitioner abuses. But Secretary of State Kate Brown is working with labor to push a bill that would force him and other ballot initiative activists to run cleaner campaigns.

HB 2005 makes a number of changes: Signatures from petitioners convicted of forgery or fraud wouldn't be counted; elections officials would be able to access police databases to see if paid petitioners have a criminal history; chief petitioners would bear increased responsibility for lawbreaking by signature gatherers; and campaigns would have to turn in their signatures monthly instead of all at once (to prevent elections officials from having to verify 2 million signatures in a matter of weeks.)

HEALTH CARE REFORM

The high cost of health insurance has become a drain on wages and a source of serious conflict in contract bargaining. If elected leaders could find a way to rein in health care costs and cover the uninsured, they'd be doing an enormous service to working people. But hospitals, insurers, and pharmaceutical companies tend to oppose health care reform proposals and have had more sway in Salem than the rest. Can they be overcome? Here are some of this year's ideas:

HB 2009 would tax hospitals and insurance companies and use the proceeds to expand the number of children and low-income Oregonians who can get into the Oregon Health Plan — the public health insurance program which uses state money and federal matching funds. The tax is part of a package of health system reform proposals generated last year by the citizen-run Oregon Health Fund Board. (Labor's representative on that board was Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain.) The bill would tax hospitals 4 percent and insurers 1.5 percent, which would generate \$600 million that would then be matched by \$1 billion in federal funds.

"Oregon can't afford to leave that money on the table," said Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Ken Allen at a Feb. 20 hearing on HB 2009.

HB 2117 would increase the cigarette tax 60 cents per pack to pay for ex-

panded health coverage for children. HB 3145 would tighten rate review for health insurance providers. Currently, insurers have to get approval from a review board before they can raise rates, but the way it's set up, the board never says "no." This bill would set more criteria for the board to consider before they could approve new rates.

SETTING LIMITS ON PRIVATIZATION

Right now, one in six Oregon school districts contracts out food service, and more than one in 75 school kids attends a "charter" school that gets public money but isn't run by a public body. Lots of public business is done by private contractors; is the public getting its money's worth? When the public does save money, is it only because contracted-out workers get lower wages and benefits?

A pair of bills backed by a union-supported group, the Coalition on Government Transparency and Accountability, would answer those questions. Those concepts are also expressed in initiatives the Obama Administration is undertaking at the federal level. As President Barack Obama put it last month: "The days of giving government contractors a blank check are over."

HB 2037 would ensure that all government contracts be made available online in databases accessible by the public.

HB 2867 would require state or local governments (including school districts) to do a cost-benefit analysis before contracting out things like janitorial or cafeteria services. And they wouldn't be allowed to contract out for reasons of cost savings if those savings are only achievable because of lower wages and bene-

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