

Oregon AFL-CIO's top bill, the Worker Freedom Act, gets shelved in committee

SALEM — Last week, officials at the Oregon AFL-CIO thought they had enough support in the Oregon Senate to pass one of its top priority bills.

SB 519 — The Worker Freedom Act — would have made “captive audience” meetings by employers voluntary for certain topics — including union organizing. In other words, employers could not require employees to come to meetings and listen to their propaganda against unions.

The bill was scheduled for a vote in the Senate May 7.

Democrats control that chamber 18 to 12.

But when the time came to vote, Sherwood Republican Sen. Larry George rose and got a unanimous voice vote to refer the bill to the Rules Committee. That committee is chaired by Democrat Ginny Burdick of Southwest Portland, an open opponent of the bill who has refused even to meet and discuss it with the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Generally, a bill that is sent to Rules at this point in the session is not going to get a vote, the labor federation said.

Union officials were scratching

their heads wondering how it got a unanimous vote.

The Oregon AFL-CIO learned from allies in the Senate that the Democratic and Republican leadership supported the referral. Apparently one of the 16 Democrats who'd committed to vote for the bill changed their mind, so the bill didn't have enough support to pass.

The Oregon AFL-CIO political staff knew Burdick was against it, and that Betsy Johnson, a Democrat from Scappoose, had never committed to vote for it. So they are looking to find which of the other 16 Democrats broke a promise to organized labor.

“We are disappointed in the Democratic leadership for not bringing it to a vote,” said Oregon AFL-CIO spokesperson Elana Guiney. “The working people of Oregon deserve to have a public on-the-record vote so we know who stands with working people and who doesn't.”

Senate Majority leader Richard Devlin (D-Tualatin) is also on the Rules Committee, and it's possible that influence could be brought to bear on Burdick to release the bill to the floor for an up-or-down vote.

The Rules Committee stays open

until late in the 2009 legislative session, which is headed for wrap-up in late June.

(Editor's Note: Sen. Burdick helped block a similar bill in the 2007 Legislature. Because of that, she received one of the lowest Oregon AFL-CIO rankings of any Democrat in the Senate, and she was not endorsed for re-election by the state labor federation.)

...Washington Legislature

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was a push to eliminate the pro-worker House amendments. Sen. Karen Keiser (D-Kent) demanded a roll call vote on each of the amendments. It takes nine senators to require a roll-call vote. Only three other senators joined Keiser. So the amendments were eliminated by a “standing vote,” with no record of who voted to eliminate them. The bill went back to House. There it got the roll-call vote at least, but the amendments were eliminated.

In the battle between the business and labor sides of the Democratic caucus, labor was routed, said WSLC spokesperson Kathy Cummings. If there was any “up” side to the debacle, Cummings said, it was that the rebuff has brought labor together more in a shared sense of outrage. Cummings said WSLC heard anger from elected leaders and rank-and-file members in nearly every affiliate, and that's prompting the labor federation to look for a whole new way to evaluate the Legislature.

While it's too soon to say how the state labor movement will change its approach to politics, it's hard to envision Gregoire's already-announced campaign for a third term getting labor support.

Delegates will meet Aug. 6-8 in Wenatchee for WSLC's next convention.

Oregon Bricklayers Union to host regional apprenticeship contest

Bricklayers and Allied Craft Workers Local 1 of Oregon is hosting the Western States Brick, Tile and Marble Regional Apprenticeship Contest in Portland, Saturday, May 30. The day-long event will take place in the parking lot of the Jantzen Beach Red Lion Hotel. Forty-five apprentices representing 10 union locals from California, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Washington and Oregon will compete for the chance to move on to the national finals later this year in Bowie, Md.

Winners in the respective categories will receive cash and tools, plus an all-expenses paid trip to the finals.



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Obama nominates pair to the National Labor Relations Board

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — President Barack Obama has nominated two people, including a veteran union attorney, to vacant seats on the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), leaving just one slot to be filled on the five-member panel that oversees most of the nation's labor-management relations.

Nominated last month were Craig Becker, associate general counsel for both the American Federation of Government Employees and the Service Employees International Union, and Mark Pearce, a labor-side lawyer from Buffalo, N.Y.

Becker, like Obama, taught at the University of Chicago law school, and has practiced and taught labor law for 27 years.

Pearce practiced union-side labor law before many New York state and federal agencies, and recently served

on a New York state board that judges state labor department rulings.

Obama called both men “impressive and distinguished individuals” who will “serve with the highest ideals of our nation in mind.”

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said both are “extremely qualified” for the posts.

“Becker and Pearce also understand the importance of workers' rights, collective bargaining, and the need to restore balance to the National Labor Relations Board,” Sweeney said.

If confirmed by the Senate, Becker and Pearce would join holdover NLRB members Wilma Liebman, a Democrat whom Obama nominated to chair the Board, and Peter Schaumber, a Republican.

With only two board members, the NLRB has recently found itself in legal limbo following two contradicting court decisions issued May 1.

To prevent a major backlog of cases, Liebman and Schaumber for the past 16 months have jointly issued 400 decisions on uncontested cases where both agreed on the outcome.

However, on May 1, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C. held that it was invalid for them to issue two-member decisions, while at the same time a federal appellate court in Chicago upheld the validity of their decisions.

It will likely take a Supreme Court decision to clear up the legal matter.

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