

Working Family Party gets bill to start 'fusion' voting

SALEM — The Oregon Working Families Party is ready to get more active in electoral politics next year, thanks to an election reform that took three years to pass.

Oregonlive.com reported July 9 that Gov. Ted Kulongoski intends to sign Senate Bill 326, which will restore a kind of "fusion" voting to Oregon. Under fusion voting, candidates can be nominated by more than one political party. It's a practice that opens up the two-party-dominated political system and makes minor parties like the union-backed Oregon Working Families Party more competitive.

Oregon Working Families Party co-chair Barbara Dudley told the Labor Press SB 326 isn't all they'd hoped for, but it's enough that the party can get active nominating candidates for the November 2010 elections.

Full fusion, which the Oregon Working Families Party lobbied hard for in the 2007 session of the Legislature, would give minor parties the option of using their own ballot line to cross-nominate a candidate. In a hypothetical example, voters completing a ballot might fill in the circle for candidate Rick Metsger where his name appeared as a nominee of the Democratic Party, or where it appeared a second time as nominee of the Oregon Working Families Party. When ballots were counted, Metsger would know how many voters

backed him because of the Oregon Working Families Party nomination. This kind of fusion existed in Oregon and other states in the 1800s, and contributed to the election of populist politicians. In 2007, advocates of fusion had commitments from bipartisan majorities in each legislative chamber, but couldn't get Democratic leaders to allow a vote.

That leadership opposition continued this year, so fusion backers pushed a compromise proposal instead, which they called "aggregated fusion" or "fusion lite." As spelled out in SB 326, ballots will list, after candidates' names, all parties that have nominated them. So voters will see that a candidate has more than one party's backing.

"It gives voters information about candidates," Dudley said, "but doesn't give candidates information about voters."

The Oregon AFL-CIO stayed neutral on the proposal, but the bill had the support of the groups that back the Oregon Working Families Party: United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555, Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters, Operating Engineers Local 701, Teamsters Local 206, Communications Workers of America, Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, and International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

In the end, it passed 42 to 17 in the

House and 25 to 5 in the Senate.

There was some doubt about whether the governor would sign it. Leaders of the Democratic Party of Oregon were calling for a veto. But fusion backers took their case to the editorial boards of the Oregonian and the Eugene Register-Guard, both of which penned strong calls for the governor to sign the bill. And Dudley got a statewide radio audience for her arguments July 8, with a guest appearance on Oregon Public Broadcasting's Think Out Loud.

Once the bill is signed, Oregon Working Families Party will turn its energy to putting theory into practice. The idea of the party is that working people's interests aren't well enough represented by the Democratic or Republican parties, and need a party that will focus on bread-and-butter issues. The Oregon Working Families Party doesn't take positions on social issues that sometimes divide working people politically, like abortion or gun rights. Instead, its platform calls for:

- Health care for all Oregonians without private profit;
- Debt-free higher education and technical training;
- Creation of green family-wage jobs;
- Affordable housing and an end to predatory lending; and

CORRECTION

In the July 3 issue of the Northwest Labor Press, an article about the just-concluded Oregon legislative session incorrectly reported that the state's new top tax rate on personal income will be 9 percent. In fact, 9 percent is the existing top tax bracket, on income over \$125,000. The new rate will be 10.8 percent on income over \$125,000 and 11 percent on income above \$250,000, for tax years 2009, 2010, and 2011, and after that, it will be 9.9 percent on all income over \$125,000. The Oregon AFL-CIO applauded the change as a move toward greater tax fairness, since it means the well-off will pay an increased share of the taxes that fund things like schools and public safety.

- Strengthening workers' right to organize and negotiate with employers.

The party collected enough signatures to earn statewide ballot status in 2006, but it has been reluctant to run "spoiler" candidates — candidates who are unlikely to win themselves, but might take enough votes away from the more favorable major party candidate to result in a win for the less favorable major party candidate.

However, to maintain its ballot status, the party did run one statewide candidate in the 2008 election, and the results proved quite interesting. J. Ashlee Albies, a Portland civil rights lawyer and Working Families Party supporter, was the party's candidate for Oregon attorney general. Fellow candidate John Kroger was virtually assured of victory, because he was running with the nomination of both the Democratic and Republican parties, plus the support of or-

ganized labor. That meant Albies could test the waters for the Working Families Party without jeopardizing the election of a labor-endorsed candidate from another party. To keep its ballot status, the Working Families Party needed 1 percent of the statewide vote; it got almost 11 percent, 161,655 votes — more than twice that of the Green Party candidate and very near the turnout for the conservative Constitution Party. And the level of support for the Working Families Party was higher — above 16 percent — in counties that tend to vote Republican: Crook, Grant, Harney, Klamath, Lake, Malheur, Morrow, Umatilla, Union and Wheeler.

Dudley said those results seemed to validate the premise of the party — that working people alienated by the two major parties might be willing to vote for a party that sticks to core issues of economic justice.

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