



Making spirits bright in Salem

Marion, Polk, Yamhill Counties Central Labor Council held its 69th annual Holiday Party last month at the Elsinore Theatre in Salem. A packed house of kids, their parents, and grandparents had a chance to meet Santa and Mrs. Claus, played by Jack Rusen of Albany Steelworkers Local 6163 and his wife, (pictured above) after seeing the movie "Ice Age III: Dawn of the Dinosaurs." The Patrick Lamb Band, members of Musicians Local 99, sang Christmas carols and, afterward, everyone received a goodie bag. The labor council funds the annual event through donations from more than 14 union affiliates and unionized businesses. Serving as master of ceremonies again this year was Jeff Anderson (standing with Santa hat), secretary-treasurer of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555.

Unions ponder health reform bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The health care reform bill passed by the U.S. Senate on Christmas Eve is inadequate and too tilted toward the insurance industry, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said.

Senators approved the 2,700-page legislation, which would affect everyone in the U.S., by a 60-39 party-line vote at 7 a.m., after marathon debate forced by the chamber's 40 Republicans. A small number of Democratic senators also held the bill hostage by threatening to block a vote.

The AFL-CIO said the bill that finally passed puts the interests of insurance companies — and senators who would rather look out for the insurance companies — ahead of real reform.

"The labor movement has been fighting for health care for nearly 100 years and we are not about to stop fighting now, when it really matters," Trumka said. "But for this health care bill to be worthy of the support of working men and women, substantial changes must be made. Genuine health care reform must bring down health costs, hold insurance companies accountable, assure that Americans can get the health care they need, and be financed fairly."

Labor acknowledged that the Senate's bill makes a lot of important and necessary changes to the health care system, but says it falls short in three key areas:

- It lacks a public health insurance option, to offer real competition to insurance companies to bring down costs.

- It fails to make sure employers take responsibility and pay their fair share.

- It's funded through a new tax on working families' health care benefits.

"It doesn't have to be this way," Trumka said.

The AFL-CIO supports the health care reform bill passed by the U.S. House. The House bill finances health care through a small tax on the very wealthiest of earners — those who reaped vast benefits from the Bush tax cuts — and it includes a public health insurance plan and real responsibility for employers.

Change To Win issued no statement, but posted on its Web site an open letter from Service Employees President Andy Stern, the coalition's largest union.

"At the very moment that we saw real and meaningful changes within our

grasp, one senator came forward to say 'No, we can't,' Stern wrote, referring to Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman, though not by name. "He can't let the Senate have an up-or-down vote on health insurance reform. And the result of this senator saying 'we can't?' The public option is declared impossible. Americans cannot purchase Medicare at an earlier age. The health insurance reform effort we have needed for a century is at risk."

There is still much work to be done to attain a final bill. Representatives of the House and Senate now must meet in conference committee to merge their two bills before a final vote is taken.

The AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions are asking union members to contact their congressional representatives and encourage them to support the House version of health care insurance reform.

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