

Labor bills in the mix as lawmakers return to Salem

SALEM — The Oregon Legislature began its special session Feb. 1, and representatives of organized labor will be in and out of the Capitol over the next three weeks with a wish list they want the Democratic leadership to support.

Lawmakers dodged a budget bullet last month when Oregon voters approved a package of temporary and permanent tax increases on corporations and the wealthy. Because of that, legislators will get to focus this session on policy changes. Under the special rules, each state representative was allowed to introduce one bill, and each state senator two bills. A limited number of “committee bills” will also be introduced. Several bills will be of particular interest to organized labor.

A bill by State Sen. Diane Rosen-

baum (D-Portland) would curb employers from considering the credit rating of job applicants.

A bill by State Rep. Brad Witt (D-Clatskanie) (who is also a union rep at United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555) calls for study of a “pay or play” system of employer-based health insurance coverage: Employers would either provide health insurance to their employees or pay into a state insurance fund.

Rep. Jules Bailey (D-Portland) — continuing his focus on bills that marry jobs and environment — has a bill to require the Columbia River Crossing interstate bridge project to give preference to goods manufactured close by — and goods whose production will help the state meet greenhouse gas reduction targets.

A bill by Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) would require workers’ compensation protection for home care workers. Dembrow is an officer in American Federation of Teachers-Oregon.

AFT-Oregon will also push to change the law that gives college faculty a confusing “double ballot” when they try to unionize. Unlike other public employees, faculty must first vote if they want a union, and then vote to join a particular union.

Rep. Mitch Greenlick (D-Portland) is back with a proposed referral to voters of a constitutional amendment establishing the obligation of the state to ensure every legal resident has access to affordable health care. Greenlick has pushed the idea since 2006, and at one point led an initiative campaign to do it, but failed to collect enough signatures to make the ballot.

One bill, introduced by State Sen. Rick Metsger (D-Mt. Hood), might restrict labor’s ability to participate in politics. The bill would set campaign contribution limits for state office, and prohibit corporate and labor organizations from making contributions directly from their treasuries.

State Sen. Ginny Burdick (D-Portland) is sponsoring a bill, sure to be closely watched, that would reform

Oregon’s unique “kicker” tax refund. The kicker rule requires the state to send a refund check to individual and corporate taxpayers if state revenues exceed official projections by more than 2 percent — whereas the state must cut budgets if revenues come in under those projections. The practice, enshrined in the state constitution, puts a lot of pressure on state economists to correctly guess the future, and leaves state government very little wiggle room if the predictions are off.

Burdick’s proposal would move the threshold to 4 percent, and dedicate any surplus below that to the state’s rainy day fund.

The state’s Business Energy Tax Credit (BETC) is also up for reform. Since 2007, BETC has reimbursed up to half the cost when businesses install or manufacture wind turbines and solar panels, but the tax credit has been criticized as too generous and too indiscriminate: tens of millions of dollars in tax credits have been given away to companies that were arguably going to make investments in renewable energy technologies anyway — with no requirement that they create jobs, sell the power in Oregon, or even stay in the state.

Last year the Oregon AFL-CIO testified in favor of changes to BETC,

some of which were passed by legislators. But Gov. Ted Kulongoski vetoed the bill. Months later, a front-page exposé in *The Oregonian* revealed that lawmakers were intentionally misled about BETC’s projected cost. Kulongoski did an about face and called for changes to the program.

This month, lawmakers will consider a bill to transform BETC from a business-initiated entitlement to more of an instrument used sparingly to leverage renewable energy investment. It gives the Oregon Department of Energy tremendous discretion in whether to pre-approve the credit. The department would consider the number of jobs created and whether and how much of the credit is needed for a facility to be built, and it could lower or eliminate the BETC if it looked like the state is headed for a budget shortfall.

Most state legislatures meet annually, but Oregon’s has historically met every two years, except for emergency special sessions. This special session is the second in an attempt to start a regular non-emergency short session in the off-years. During the session the Legislature will take up a proposal to refer to voters this November a constitutional amendment requiring annual sessions.

Union households boost Brown in Massachusetts

Republican Scott Brown’s victory last month in the Massachusetts Senate race was lifted by strong support from union households, the *Wall Street Journal* reported.

A poll conducted on behalf of the AFL-CIO found that 49 percent of Massachusetts union households supported Brown, while 46 percent supported labor-endorsed Democrat Martha Coakley.

The poll conducted by Hart Research Associates surveyed 810 voters.

Karen Ackerman, the AFL-CIO’s political action director, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the poll results indicate “what we call a working-class revolt” in which voters were responding to the fact that no one was addressing their needs or interests.

“Union voters are like any other voters, and they respond to the environ-

ment around them” and who they think will be on their side and fight for them, Ackerman said. “What happened in Massachusetts is that working families did not see the Democratic candidate as being on their side.”

Guy Molyneux, a pollster with Hart Research Associates, said the poll showed “pretty strong evidence” of voters who worried the health care overhaul moving through Congress would tax their employer-provided benefits, even though President Obama had agreed to a deal that exempted union workers until 2018.

By 61 percent to 33 percent, the voters polled said they were picking the best candidate for Massachusetts rather than sending a message to Washington. Nearly two-thirds of the voters who elected Brown said they wanted him to work with Democrats in Washington.

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