

Electrical Workers Minority Caucus meets — and volunteers — in Portland

Oregon U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley told delegates to the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus Jan. 18 that he is pushing for energy retrofits to be a primary piece of any jobs bill that comes out of Congress in the next few months.

"We can put a lot of people to work re-building the buildings we have, saving a lot of energy, and saving a lot of money," Merkley said.

To achieve this, the bill must include financing assistance for residential and commercial building owners who cannot afford the upfront cost of a home renovation, but who could pay for it out of the savings they will see on their energy bill.

Merkley said financing assistance can allow federal dollars to be leveraged substantially farther than a rebate program. For example, appropriating \$2 billion for loan guarantees could allow \$20-\$40 billion in financing.

Electricians applauded the announcement. Electrical contractors have been hit hard by the Great Recession, with unemployment in the industry as high as 40 percent in some areas.

More than 350 delegates from throughout the country attended the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus convention Jan. 14-18 at the Benson Hotel in downtown Portland. This year's host was IBEW Local 48. The caucus serves as a support and networking system for minorities within the union, providing education and training.

On Jan 14, more than 125 volun-



Electricians Felicia Wiseman of IBEW Local 58 in Detroit and Jeff Thomas of IBEW Local 11 in Los Angeles troubleshoot electrical outlets at the Salvation Army in North Portland. Union electricians attending the National Conference of Electrical Workers Minority Caucus in Portland Jan. 14-18 fanned out across the city on Jan. 14 for a "day of service," in observance of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. The Salvation Army received new electrical receptacles in the kitchen and gymnasium, old and non-functioning receptacles were replaced, new circuits were added to the main circuit panel, and all circuits in the main panel were matched to their proper receptacles and locations in the building.

teers fanned out across the city for a "day of service" in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Volunteers ran electrical wiring, added electrical receptacles, updated and repaired electrical panels, painted, and more, said IBEW Local 48 President Eric Hayes, who helped coordinate the event.

The projects ranged from work at a food pantry to doing a service

on a 1940s church.

"I've been involved with this since 1996," said Marjorie Ramirez, a member of IBEW Local 48. "I think the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus has been doing volunteer work for a minimum of 20 years."

Caucus delegates also collected working cell phones, wall chargers, and batteries to donate to the Portland Women's Crisis Line.

Building Trades, Fire Fighters councils endorse Kitzhaber

The Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council and the Oregon State Firefighters Council have endorsed John Kitzhaber for governor of Oregon.

The OSBCTC represents 32 union locals in 21 crafts, including: asbestos workers, boilermakers, bricklayers, electricians, glaziers, ironworkers, laborers, floorcoverers, painters, plasterers, roofers, sheet metal workers, plumbers and pipefitters, cement masons, glassworkers, elevator constructors and teamsters.

"John Kitzhaber is the hands-down choice for anyone who cares about creating jobs and a better economic future for Oregon," said OSBCTC Executive Secretary Bob Shiprack. "Oregon's next governor will inherit a tough economic climate. John Kitzhaber is the only candidate for governor with a real track record of creating quality jobs and standing up for Oregon's middle class."

Oregon State Fire Fighters Council President Kelly Bach said as firefighters, "our job is to step into a crisis to rescue and protect the people in danger. Right now, Oregon needs the same thing from its next governor. John Kitzhaber has the on-the-job experience and character we need to create jobs, protect public safety, and stand up for front-line firefighters and all Oregon families."

The Oregon State Firefighters Council represents 3,000 members in 44 different locals.

Kitzhaber has already received endorsements from United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48.

Kitzhaber is a former two-term gov-

ernor. An emergency room physician from Roseburg by trade, he has also served in the Oregon House of Representatives and as the Oregon Senate president. In his career he enacted many progressive reforms, including the Oregon Health Plan, the Oregon Education Act for the 21st Century, the Oregon Children's Plan, and the Oregon Salmon Plan, and he helped establish Oregon's Statewide Trauma System.

Since leaving office in 2002, he has continued to work on health care reform, natural resource issues and energy policy, leading several nonprofit foundations and boards.

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and voted for a populist package that raised taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

"It gave the electorate a really clear choice about being able to protect the things they care about but not put the burden on middle class families," Looper said.

"Oregonians looked beyond the lies and half-truths that were thrown at them," House Majority Leader Dave Hunt (D-Clackamas County) said at an election night celebration in Portland.

But without question, it was the involvement of unions — particularly public employee unions — that made the "yes" campaign competitive. Oregon Education Association contributed over \$2 million, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) nearly \$1.9 million; and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) \$1 million — half from Oregon AFSCME and half from the AFSCME international.

Oregon AFSCME also worked to counter the opposition ads. The union bought \$150,000 worth of radio spots to debunk the claim that state employees had received \$259 million in raises. Nine days before the mail ballot deadline, the "no" campaign surprised supporters with a wrap-around ad in the Sunday Oregonian; the ad made it seem like the paper itself was going out of its way to urge a "no" vote. Oregon AFSCME stepped up with \$20,000 to put its own wrap-around ad in the paper six days later. Both of the independent ad campaigns were paid primarily from a media grant the national union gave Oregon AFSCME last April.

After the vote, Looper said he got calls from people around the country wanting to talk about how the campaign was run and what it means for their states.

The Oregon vote result could embolden further moves in Oregon and elsewhere toward a tax system that asks more of business and the wealthy.

PGE proposes change or closure at Boardman coal plant

Portland General Electric, Oregon's largest investor-owned electric utility, announced Jan. 14 a proposal to close — or alter — its Boardman, Oregon, coal-burning electricity generating plant in 2020. PGE owns 65 percent of the 585-megawatt plant, which directly employs 110 workers, including about 80 members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 125. The plant is the biggest source of power for PGE customers (24 percent), but is also the state's largest source of air pollution, including mercury and nitrogen oxide that contributes to haze in the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area. To comply with clean air regulations, PGE currently has to either close the plant in 2014 or install \$520 million to \$560 million worth of equipment to scrub the plant's emissions, in which case it could operate the plant until 2040.

The 2020 closure proposal is a kind of compromise proposal — PGE is ask-

ing to be allowed to install less expensive equipment that would reduce emissions less. The proposal will require buy-in from ratepayer groups and the approval of environmental regulators.

The Oregon Public Utility Commission (PUC) would have to approve closing the plant in 2020, because the shorter time frame for amortizing the emissions control investment could lead to increased rates for purchasers of electricity. And the Environmental Quality Commission would have to approve the proposal for less stringent emissions controls.

The Boardman plant has also been targeted by environmental groups as a big emitter of carbon dioxide, which contributes to global warming. PGE spokesperson Steve Corson acknowledged that the company faces a certain amount of financial risk if carbon comes to have price under future greenhouse gas controls.

Corson said PUC could sign off on

the 2020 proposal first half of this year, while the EQC, which is the rule-making body for the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) would have its say toward the end of the year. If agreement on an alternative plan can't be reached, PGE will continue to seek approval for installation of all required emissions controls and continued operation of the plant through 2040.

PGE also outlined an alternative to outright closure in 2020: The plant could be adapted to burning a still-in-development coal-like fuel made from wood or plant material. That could help PGE comply with a state law passed in 2007 that requires investor-owned utilities to generate 25 percent of their electricity from new renewable sources by 2025. Known as "renewable portfolio standard," it is spurring big growth in wind, as well as research and development of wave, geothermal, and biomass sources.

Though any change is years away,

Local 125 Political Affairs representative Marcy Putnam said the union is seeking to meet with PGE to discuss impacts. PGE is a major employer in sparsely-populated Morrow County, with not only Boardman but also the Coyote Springs natural gas electricity generating plant.

With 10 years notice, members will have a lots of options, Corson said.

For one, PGE is proposing construction of a new 300 to 500 megawatt natural gas plant at Carty Reservoir, adjacent to the Boardman plant. That is driven by increased demand — and the need for "wind-chaser" generation to compensate for the intermittent nature of wind generation. The plant would be similar to the 400-megawatt plant at Port Westward in Clatskanie.

Also, a new transmission line is being constructed to bring more power down the Gorge into Willamette Valley, from wind and the new natural gas plants in the works.