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Portland, OregonConstruction workers
rally for jobs legislation

SALEM — A boisterous crowd of nearly 400 workers — many of them long-term unemployed in the construction industry — rallied for jobs legislation Feb. 10 on the front steps of the State Capitol.

They came from every corner of Oregon to deliver a forceful message to lawmakers that they and their unions will no longer support politicians who don't support them. A sea of signs in the crowd read: "Vote Your Job," "I Want to Work," and "Don't Vote for Job Killing Politicians."

This is a major election year, with the governor's chair, all congressional seats, a U.S. Senate seat, and State House and Senate seats up for grabs.

The rally was organized by the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council and Oregon AFL-CIO.

According to the Oregon Employment Department, 12,900 construction trades jobs vanished last year. Since 2007, the number of construction jobs lost stands at 27,300. The official unemployment rate in Oregon is 11 percent, with some counties topping 20 percent.

"Wall Street may think the recession is over," said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain, "but here in Oregon it's not. Legislators need to make sure that the job creation legislation before them this session makes it to the governor's desk. For the hundreds of thousands of unemployed Oregonians there is no other option."

A half-dozen bills have been introduced in the February special session of

the Legislature that would spur job creation. However, several of them are bottled up in committee — primarily on the Senate side.

"They're calling this a 'jobs session,' but they seem to want to kill every jobs bill out there. They're trying to placate us with a few extra weeks of unemployment insurance," said Bob Shiprack, executive secretary of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council. "It was the same story last session. Some of these folks in the Capitol don't get it."

Democrats control the Senate 18-12 and the House 36-24.

State Sen. Rick Metsger, D-Welches, who is not seeking re-election this year, told the crowd that "it's time to take away the rhetoric and get down to the brass tacks and find out what your legislator is going to do."

The bills construction workers are lobbying include Senate Bills 1050, 1045 1020, and 909; and House Bills 3604, 3651, 3681, and 3655.

"If we don't put you folks back to work, we're going to cut our budgets again," said State Rep. Mike Schaufler, D-Happy Valley. "Anything but a 'yes' (on SB 1020) and the other bills creating jobs and working in America is a 'no' to you, a 'no' to unions, a 'no' to your family, and a 'no' to the future of this state."

Apparently SB 1020 is already dead. The bill was referred to the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee, but did not receive a hearing before

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Above, unidentified members of Glaziers Local 740 and (photo left) Adam Stoecklin, Dave Osborn, and John Ray, all members of Iron Workers Local 29, brought their voices to Salem to call on lawmakers to pass bills that will help create jobs.

Union-backed legislation hobbled by Senate's abuse of filibuster

By DON MCINTOSH
Associate Editor

It was a moment of heartbreak for the American labor movement. After working hard to elect a Democratic super-majority in the U.S. Senate, the AFL-CIO fought for a bill that would make it easier for workers to unionize, and harder for employers to fire pro-union workers. But the bill failed to overcome the Senate's "filibuster" rule, by just one vote. That was the Labor Law Reform Act, in 1978.

Senate Democrats appear headed for a cruel repeat of that in 2010, as time runs out on the Employee Free Choice Act, a labor law reform that could reverse organized labor's downward slide. In 2007 it passed the House 241-185 but failed to overcome a filibuster threat in the Senate.

History is littered with the memory of bills that passed the U.S. House only to die in the Senate because of the filibuster rule — in

which opponents speak at great length, or threaten to, in order to delay or prevent a bill's passage. During the early 20th century, racist mobs lynched more than 4,000 Americans, mostly black. Three times, the House passed federal anti-lynching legislation which then died in Senate filibusters.

The U.S. Constitution makes no mention of the filibuster, saying only that "each house may determine the rules of its proceedings." Instead, the filibuster is an artifact of the Senate tradition of unlimited debate. In the 19th century, opponents of a bill would use that tradition to try to talk a bill to death, speechifying for hours and days, like Jimmy Stewart in the movie *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*.

Exasperated by the filibuster of a war-readiness bill, President Woodrow Wilson declared in 1917 that "a little group of willful men ... have rendered the great government of the United States helpless and contemptible."

Led by Wilson, the filibuster was reformed: Two-thirds of the Senate could vote to cut off debate and vote on a bill. That was changed to three-fifths in 1975, a decade after the filibuster had delayed passage of civil rights legislation for seven years.

Lowering the cutoff to 60 votes was a turning point for the filibuster, says University of Miami political scientist Greg Koger, author of the forthcoming book "Going to the Mattresses: The History of Filibustering in Congress."

"That's when the Senate stopped waging old-school filibuster fights," Koger said, "and instead started saying, 'If we've got the votes to cut off debate, we win; if we don't, we lose.'"

The problem is, that practice makes it much easier to filibuster. A filibuster used to be a feat of endurance: Opponents had to speak at great length on the Senate floor. Now, filibustering means voting not

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