

# Washington legislative session a mixed bag for labor

OLYMPIA — A projected \$2.8 billion state budget shortfall meant tough choices this year for the Washington State Legislature. Last year, state lawmakers responded to a recession-caused shortfall by passing what the Washington State Labor Council (WSLC), AFL-CIO called an “all-cuts” state budget. This year, the Legislature split the difference, raising nearly \$800 million in new tax revenue, cutting as much from the budget, and filling the remainder of the hole with federal aid and by drawing down reserve accounts.

WSLC went to Olympia with a jobs-focused agenda: Spare public-sector jobs (and services) from budget cuts, and stimulate private-sector jobs through public investment.

The Legislature’s record, says WSLC spokesperson Kathy Cummings, was mixed. In a two-month regular session and four-week special session, lawmakers approved two measures that will put building trades members back to work. But they also bucked labor’s call to end tax loopholes, and cut too many services. And they eliminated funding for Initiative 728, a voter-approved 2000 ballot measure that mandates extra money to reduce class sizes.

Democrats occupy the governor’s office and have supermajorities in the State House and Senate. But increasing state government revenue still took extraordinary measures. The Legislature found it necessary to suspend — through mid-2011—a voter-passed statute that requires a two-thirds’ legislative supermajority to increase taxes. They then voted to increase state sales taxes by 28 cents per six-pack on mass-market beer; 2 cents per can on soda, and \$1 per pack on cigarettes. They also added candy, gum, and bottled water to the list of items covered by the state’s 6.5 percent sales tax. And they raised the gross receipts tax on service businesses from 1.5 percent to 1.8 percent. Most of tax increases are temporary, expiring mid-2013. The increases prevented some layoffs and service cuts, but even with the tax increases, up to 1,500 state employees are targeted for

layoff, 12,500 state workers will take 10 days of unpaid furlough, and the state is closing a women’s prison near Spokane.

Meanwhile, the Legislature passed two significant back-to-work proposals for the private sector. One is a referral to voters of a \$505 million bond measure to create an estimated 30,000 jobs over five years doing energy-efficiency retrofits at public universities and K-12 schools; the bonds would be repaid over 25 years by a sales tax on bottled water.

Also approved was an expansion of the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle; that project could account for 3,000 jobs.

One jobs proposal that did not pass would have increased a tax on oil exported by Washington refineries to \$1.50 per barrel, using the proceeds to pay for storm water pollution cleanup in every county.

The November 2010 general election is shaping up to be a battle royale over taxes. Ballot measure activist Tim Eyman is gathering signatures on eight separate initiative petitions to undo different pieces of the tax package, and an initiative to reinstate the two-thirds’ vote requirement for legislative tax increases. [On the other side, a ballot initiative backed by Bill Gates Sr., father of the Microsoft founder, would impose an income tax on the richest 3 percent of Washingtonians — and also reduce state property taxes by 20 percent and exempt 375,000 small businesses from

the state’s business and occupation taxes. Washington is one of seven states that don’t collect personal income tax. To get it on the ballot, backers have until July 2 to collect 241,153 valid signatures.]

Also passing, with labor’s backing, were bills to:

- Give Washington State Department of Labor & Industries subpoena power for investigations into the underground economy;

- Require the appointment of non-voting labor members on public transportation governing bodies; and


- Give collective bargaining rights to symphony musicians and medical interpreters by placing them under the jurisdiction of the Public Employment Relations Commission.

Cummings said labor’s agenda was sometimes stymied by a group of “corporate Democrats” including the newly formed informal “roadkill caucus.”

One of WSLC’s biggest affiliates, the Washington Federation of State Employees (AFSCME), delivered a rebuke to Democratic lawmakers at its April 17 endorsements conference. The union endorsed only one Democratic incumbent in the State Senate, and 18 in the House. [Dist. 49 (Pos. 2) Representative Jim Moeller was the only lawmaker from Southwest Washington to get the group’s endorsement.]

WSLC will release its ratings of legislators at its May 15 political convention, where delegates will also deter-

mine which candidates to endorse. The state labor federation resolved last year to change the way it does politics, no longer giving money to state Democratic committees, but instead deciding on their own which candidates to support with the newly-formed “DIME PAC.” DIME PAC is expected to have close to \$500,000 by May 15.



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