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Transit Union pickets TriMet board meeting

Members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757 employed and retired from TriMet held an informational picket at Portland State University Nov. 10, site of a TriMet board of directors meeting. ATU is trying to raise public awareness of a contract dispute it has with the transit agency, as well as TriMet's failure to include the union in dealing with safety concerns raised by employees, and why a shortage of drivers has caused huge amounts of overtime in order to keep service on the streets. "While the contract dispute is currently main stage, there are other serious issues that TriMet is failing to adequately address," said ATU President Jon Hunt (pictured above right). TriMet created a task force to investigate public concerns over safety issues plaguing the transit agency, but ATU claims it was left out of that process. "We believe that the recent report on safety by the task force is a whitewash and fails to disclose major safety problems at TriMet," Hunt said.

AFL-CIO Poll: Voters punished Dems, but no mandate for GOP

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Though Republican victories in the 2010 elections will put the union Congressional agenda in jeopardy, labor leaders took some consolation from a pair of election night polls commissioned by the national AFL-CIO.

According to the poll, voters punished Democrats for failing to rescue the economy, but that didn't mean that voters were endorsing Republican economic proposals.

Hart Research Associates, a public opinion research firm, conducted phone interviews with a random sample of 801 voters in the 100 most competitive U.S. House districts as identified by the Cook Political Report.

For respondents, the number one issue was "jobs and the economy." And fully 84 percent said they were dissatisfied with economic conditions, including 56 percent of those polled who said they were "very dissatisfied" — the most negative answer the poll offered as an option. Nearly 3 in 10 voters (28 percent) had lost a job, or had someone in their family lose a job, in the last two years. Even more — 40 percent — had

pay or hours reduced for someone in their household. Of those who said they were "very dissatisfied" with the economy, 70 percent voted for the Republican candidate for U.S. House.

Alongside AFL-CIO president Rich Trumka, Hart Research partner Guy Molyneux explained the poll results in a Nov. 3 conference call for reporters.

"The real problem for Democrats trying to hold onto these seats," Molyneux said, "is that there's massive economic dissatisfaction, and yet only 30 percent said they believe the Democrats had a clear plan for strengthening the economy and creating jobs."

But worth noting, Molyneux said: Only 35 percent felt Republicans had a clear plan.

"The American people are angry," said the AFL-CIO's Trumka, "and for good reason. They've felt the pain of economic collapse and paid for it with their jobs, their homes and often their hope."

"This election was about the economy and jobs, plain and simple," Trumka said. "It was a mandate to fix

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Sen. Merkley will push for rule change to end filibuster abuse

Oregon's freshman Democratic U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley favors reforming a parliamentary procedure known as the filibuster, in hopes that doing so will allow the Senate to get some work done.

"The Senate likes to use the term 'the greatest deliberative body in the world,'" he told some 70 union members at a breakfast meeting Nov. 4 sponsored by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council. "Well, I'm here to tell you, at least from my freshman two years experience, that it is absolutely one of the least deliberative bodies I can imagine. And we must change the rules of the Senate so that it can actually process legislation."

Changing the rules of the Senate is no easy task. During the session it requires the support of 67 senators. However, in January 2011 — after the new Congress is sworn in — senators will have a small window of time to change procedural rules

with a simple majority vote. Democrats hung on to control of the Senate during the midterm elections and will enter the new year with a 53-seat majority (two senators are independent, but caucus with the Democrats).

But will they do it?

A survey conducted by Public Policy Polling found that 64 percent of the public supports filibuster reform. President Obama, prior to the midterm elections, said that he'd support overhauling the filibuster. Republicans, on the other hand, have generally resisted filibuster reform. An exception is Indiana's Senator-elect Dan Coats, who endorses it. The AFL-CIO also supports reform.

A filibuster is a form of obstruction, whereby a lone member can elect to delay or entirely prevent a vote on a proposal. Filibusters in the U.S. Senate

require a 60-senator cloture vote to end debate and bring a bill to a final majority-rules vote. As it currently works, an obstructing senator doesn't actually have to talk out his or her objections on the floor. Once an objection is made, though, the issue goes to a "special order," which requires a supermajority vote and a one week delay for additional debate time. Meanwhile, the Senate can proceed with its normal business.

Three Republican senators — Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, Jim DeMint of South Carolina, and John McCain of Arizona — have standing objections to every motion, Merkley said.

Merkley would like to see the rules changed to require filibustering senators to speak on the floor for as long as they are willing to block the bill.

"So then, you — the American people — can see that they are on the floor blocking legislation

and you can say 'fine, I like what you're doing, thank you for blocking it,' or 'we hate what you're doing, let the vote take place,'" he explained. "Right now, it's just a cheap shot."

The use of the filibuster has increased dramatically in recent years. Only eight percent of major bills in the 1960s faced filibusters or threats of a filibuster; 70 percent did in the last decade. Last session, Merkley said there were 200 objections to the regular order of business.

"You no longer have real debate and motive," Merkley said. "It damages the Executive Branch because you can't get nominations confirmed. It damages the judiciary because you can't get judges confirmed. It absolutely prevents government from making decisions. In the long term, this creates a bias against working people because the big pow-

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