

Conyers to speak at single payer forum in Portland

Supporters of a "single payer" public health insurance system are gearing up for a daylong Jan. 29 conference in Portland at which they'll hear from the leading single payer advocate in Congress — and strategize how to support a single payer bill that will be introduced in the Oregon Legislature.

The United States has a government-provided single-payer health insurance system for those 65 and older, known as Medicare, and it's extremely popular among seniors. But private insurance companies and their political allies have fiercely opposed proposals to extend Medicare to all Americans, such as HR 676, a bill introduced by U.S. Rep. John Conyers (D-Ill.). Conyers will talk at the conference about his bill, which President Barack Obama and Democratic leaders in the House and Senate refused to consider during the 2009-2010 deliberations over health insurance reform.

Also headlining the event will be Dr. Margaret Flowers of Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP). Flowers, a Maryland pediatrician, was arrested during a 2009 hearing of the Senate Finance Committee for demanding that the committee hear testimony on Conyers' bill. Committee Chair Max Baucus refused during weeks of hearings on health care reform to allow testimony from any supporter of a single payer system, even though Conyers' bill had 87 Congressional co-sponsors and a companion bill in the Senate sponsored by Independent

IBEW's Malbin to co-chair prevailing wage advisory panel

Norman Malbin, in-house counsel for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48, has been named labor co-chair of the Prevailing Wage Advisory Committee (PWAC) by Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian.

Shawn Miller, counsel for Associated Builders and Contractors and the Independent Electrical Contractors of Oregon, was named management co-chair.

PWAC was created by legislative action in 2003, directing the commissioner of the Bureau of Labor and Industries to appoint an equal number of representatives from management and labor in the building and construction industry who perform work on public works contracts. The committee is charged with advising the labor commissioner on matters regarding the prevailing wage rate laws that apply to public construction projects.

Previous co-chairs Don Kool of the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters, Local 290 (retired), and Jim McKune, chief operating officer of Emerick Construction Co., completed their terms at PWAC's Jan. 20 meeting.

Malbin and Miller will take charge Feb. 1.

Bernie Sanders of Vermont. Such universal government-provided health insurance is common throughout the world.

The Portland conference, paid for by the Presbyterian Church USA, has the endorsement of the Oregon AFL-CIO and 10 other labor organizations. It will take place Jan. 29, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at the First Unitarian Church, 1211 SW Main St., Portland.

Activists, including Portland Jobs with Justice, hope to use the conference as a springboard to build support for a bill to be introduced in the Oregon Legislature the following week by State Rep. Michael Dembrow and State Sen. Chip Shields.

Though single payer wasn't considered as a nationwide option during the Congressional health care debate, Sanders and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) were able to win a provision in the final version of the health reform legislation that gives states some latitude to experiment with single payer. Section 1332 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act allows states to implement alternatives to the private insurance market exchanges, with a federal waiver, as long as they provide coverage at least as comprehensive and affordable for a comparable number of residents. That opens the door to states that want to try a single payer system.

Besides Oregon, campaigns are under way to propose single payer this year in Vermont, Minnesota, Pennsylvania and California.

To register for the conference, visit www.SinglePayerOregon.org or call 503-262-4970.

Who's On Our Side?

By Tom Chamberlain



Oregon's unemployment rate has hovered at 10.5 percent since 2008, and while there are some signs that our economy is beginning to rebound and that the spring unemployment numbers may show some improvement, it will not be enough to give relief to the 200,000 Oregonians who are unemployed.

Those 200,000 Oregonians are either trying to make ends meet on their meager unemployment benefits or have exhausted those benefits and rely on odd jobs, help from family and friends, or our social safety net, such as food stamps, welfare and — if they are lucky — Medicaid.

And while they face the daily struggle of trying to stay in their house, keep their car, and feed their family, they also face full days feeling unproductive and alone without the satisfaction of putting in a fair day's work for a fair day's pay.

There are a number of organizations that have established unemployed support groups: Machinists, Jobs with Justice, Labor's Community Service Agency, Working America, and others have had some success in reaching and providing needed support for the jobless.

But these programs still aren't reaching enough people.

That's why the AFL-CIO has selected five pilot cities, including Portland, to expand support and resources to the unemployed. In Port-

land, we will be working with the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, Labor's Community Service Agency, and Working America, among other community partners. We will combine several established unemployment programs so that we can access more resources and develop more opportunities for the unemployed — both union and non-union.

Anti-union forces continue to try to portray unions as being concerned only with our own members. But in doing that, they take away the voice of so many American workers — because when it comes down to it, we, along with Working America, are the only groups giving voice to all working people. It's time, though, that we reach out beyond our role in supporting working people in Oregon and help those who used to work find their voice as well.

In Oregon alone, our community affiliate, Working America, has a membership of over 135,000 members who do not belong to a union. Many of them are unemployed. Within our own ranks there are hundreds of union members on the books who are not working. And thousands more Oregonians were union members before they lost their job and their union. These Oregonians are our brothers and sisters, even if they are not union members.

It's high time that union membership does not stop with a paycheck.

Moving forward, we will treat participants in our unemployed program just like members of any other constituency group — Young Emerging Labor Leaders, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Pride at Work, or Labor Council of Latina American Advancement.

In mid-February we will hold the first meeting for unemployed Oregonians and work with them to create an Oregon Jobs Jump Start Express, as the program is being called nationally. At that meeting we look forward to finding out what unemployed Oregonians need, and how the participants think they can join together to raise their common voice. If you or someone you know is interested in participating in this group, call the Oregon AFL-CIO office at 503-585-6320 and we'll get you more information as it gets closer to the event.

Meantime, spread the word to former co-workers and your fellow union members who are out of work.

Because, moving forward, Oregon's union movement is on your side — even after the paycheck stops, whether or not you're a union member.

Tom Chamberlain is president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Representing workers at OHSU

Raahahn retires after 34 years with AFSCME

Longtime union field rep Dave Raahahn, 61, retires today, Jan. 21, after 34 years in American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

When he settled in Portland in 1970, Raahahn was an anti-war long-hair who'd grown up outside Rochester, New York.

On Oct. 1, 1976, he started working at the Hooper Detox Center, a Multnomah County agency that treated the severely intoxicated. Raahahn did laundry, then food service, then drove the van that picked up alcoholics in need of medical detoxification. The job paid the minimum wage, but Raahahn began going to AFSCME Local 88 union meetings. His testimony at a late 1970s union contract bargaining session helped the union double the wage.

In 1980, county workers went on strike. Raahahn remembers it as the first public workers strike after Oregon's passage of the Public Employee Collective Bargaining Act. For six weeks, county offices were closed. Raahahn was the strike captain for his building — the detox center. He ran a union soup kitchen and served on the strikers assistance committee, which helped members in special financial hardship.

After the strike, Raahahn's union involvement continued to deepen. He served on his local's bargaining



DAVE RAAHAHN

team. He took leaves from his job to do political work for the local, state, and national AFSCME — including a six-month stint as driver for then-gubernatorial candidate Ted Kulongoski during his 1982 primary campaign. Kulongoski won the primary but lost the November general election to Vic Atiyeh.

In the early 1980s, Raahahn's county department was privatized. [Today, Hooper Detox and its Chiers vans are run by the non-profit Central City Concern under a county contract.] Raahahn took a job in 1984 as a parking enforcement officer in the Transportation Department of the City of Portland. He wrote tickets for parking violations, making the rounds on foot or by scooter. And he got involved in his new union local, becoming Transportation Department chapter chair (kind of like a chief steward) for AFSCME Local 189.

He took classes through the Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) of the University of Oregon and graduated from its U-LEAD leadership training program. And he served as an AFSCME delegate to the Northwest Oregon Labor Council.

When a union rep position became vacant in Ontario, Oregon, in 1999, Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Ken Allen asked Raahahn to fill in for a few weeks. The few weeks became a few months. In 2000, a position opened up as rep for his former local at Multnomah County, and Raahahn applied and was hired.

Later, he was assigned to represent members at Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) Local 328, Oregon AFSCME's largest.

Union political efforts are Raahahn's passion. He's proud of his record at OHSU recruiting members to contribute to PEOPLE, AFSCME's political program. Support for PEOPLE tripled at OHSU, from 6 percent to 19 percent.

"We as public employees have the unique ability to elect our own bosses," Raahahn explains, "and once they're elected, to influence the way that public employees are treated, and in a larger sense, how all workers are treated."

Raahahn would continue on, he says, but a chronic pain disorder has begun to make the long hours of a union rep difficult to maintain. Look for him instead behind the wheel of his restored Milano Maroon 1965 Corvette roadster, on the golf course while his back holds up, or fly-fishing one of the Northwest's great rivers.