

Single-payer summit draws 400; many union members

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

On Jan. 29, State Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) met his counterpart in Congress — U.S. Rep. John Conyers of Detroit — at a daylong conference on building a movement for

“single-payer” health care. Dembrow is a leader of American Federation of Teachers-Oregon; Conyers is the son of a United Auto Workers union representative. Both are sponsors of legislation that would take private insurance companies out of the center of the health care

system — by setting up a public insurance system to pay for basic health services.

Conyers’ “Medicare for All” proposal in Congress, HR 676, was kept out of the official debate on health care reform in 2009. But the bill that did become law, the Affordable Care Act, allows states to set up their own single payer systems. Dembrow’s bill, which he expected to introduce early this month, would do that.

The Oregon Single Payer Conference, held at a church in downtown Portland, drew 400 attendees from around the state — twice as many as organizers expected. And 50 of those attended a workshop about the special role organized labor could play in bringing about a single payer system.

Union health and welfare trusts are a working model of what a single payer system would look like, said workshop co-chair Tom Leedham, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 206. Because union trusts are mostly self-insured, they provide a high-quality benefit at a price that employers can’t match.

“All the money goes into one pot, out of which we pay claims,” Leedham said. That’s how a single payer system would work. While union health trusts may rent a provider network from Blue Cross, Leedham said, and may pay a private company to administer claims, no union trustee collects a salary or makes a profit off the trust. The trust is run to benefit all members and their families, and no questions are asked about pre-existing conditions or any other insurance company loophole.



State Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), left, talks with Congressman John Conyers (D-Michigan) about his bill in the Oregon Legislature to create a public system of health insurance. Conyers’ bill in Congress would do the same on a national level by extending Medicare to all Americans.

Hundreds of locals, central labor councils, and national unions have endorsed the single payer idea, said fellow workshop co-chair Mark Dudzic, national coordinator of the group Labor Campaign for Single Payer Health Care. They’ve done so for pragmatic as well as principled reasons.

Health benefits are the most contentious item in bargaining union con-

tracts. And paying the ever-rising cost of health care burns up money that could otherwise go to wage increases or other benefits. A single payer system would take health care off the bargaining table. It would make health care a birthright for every American, Dudzic said, and deliver the universal health care that every other rich industrial country has achieved.

Busted!

A sampler of recent charges of employer labor law violations filed with the local office of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Willamette Glass must reinstate workers it fired

Willamette Glass, a nonunion glass contractor in Clackamas, agreed to reinstate four workers and pay \$43,411 in back pay. That — and a workers’ rights notice mailed to all employees — will settle a charge filed by **Painters District Council 5** after the Jan. 22, 2010, firing of four members of Painters Local 740. The NLRB concluded that company president Scott Fritcher fired the four glazing and fabrication employees because of their union sympathies. Two workers agreed to accept reinstatement, but two others declined, reportedly concerned they’d be returning to a hostile environment. The NLRB took seriously a threat by one anti-union co-worker — that he would be going “hunting” for any union guy that tried to steal his job. Painters organizer Mike James says District Council 5 has not given up trying to organize the company.

Georgia-Pacific strips worker of union rights

Georgia-Pacific is accused of issuing discipline that went outside the bounds of the union contract, to retaliate against a worker for supporting his union, the **Inland Boatmen’s Union**. At a paper product warehouse, Dave Franzen was made to enter into a “last chance agreement” under threat of termination. The agreement strips him of his union right not to be terminated without just cause. The company refused to bargain over any aspect of the discipline and refused to provide information to the union when it tried to represent him.

Corporate-owned hospital doubles CNA workload

The NLRB has determined that unionized **McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center** in Springfield broke federal labor law. The agency issued a complaint in three separate charges filed by **SEIU Local 49** and set a Feb. 15 trial date for the case to be heard. The for-profit hospital is part of Tennessee-headquartered Community Health Systems, the nation’s largest publicly-traded hospital company. Local 49 staff director Ron Ruggiero said the chain is making record profits in Springfield and elsewhere, yet refuses to bargain seriously with its 340 union techs and support staff workers, and is asking them to pay more for their health insurance. The hospital also doubled the patient load of some certified nurse assistants — from 11 to 22 — without bargaining with the union.

Hilton manager seems to be on rampage

Hilton Portland food and beverage manager Florian Kunkel is on a rampage, judging by recent unfair labor practice complaints. Last month, we reported the charge that he grabbed a union contract right out of the hands of union steward Melissa Goff. Since then, Kunkel called one worker an idiot and made a group of workers work on Christmas who had supported Goff in her grievance and unfair labor practice charge. **UNITE HERE Local 9** filed two more charges and is alleging across-the-board retaliation against seven of Goff’s co-workers for supporting her in the grievance procedure and in her unfair labor practice charge.



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