

## Who's On Our Side?

By Tom Chamberlain



Have you ever noticed that precisely when we should be talking about the big issues — when hard economic times hit, or during election season — America doesn't focus on the things that have a direct impact on real people? Jobs, economic equality and education are thrown by the wayside and, instead, our attention is diverted to issues that are designed to divide us. Abortion versus choice, same-sex marriage, immigration — these issues divide because they create fear: the fear of the unknown.

Using immigration to divert the focus of Americans away from important issues is as old as our nation. With the exception of an 1875 law that restricted immigration from China, America had open borders until the 1920s, when a wave of immigrants washed onto American shores. These immigrants came to America with dreams of a richer life; those dreams were lost on the floors of sweatshops, in plants, mines and logging camps across America. Shackled by low-paying jobs and companies that paid in scrip, redeemable only at a company-owned store, those immigrants viewed union membership as strength, a road to a better life, the future for their children.

Unions adapted and began to organize based on language and ethnic background: Jewish, German, Italian unions. Over time, U.S.-born mem-

bers became friends with these members, neighbors met, their kids played and went to school together. The wedge slowly disappeared, but only with those who we didn't fear — only with those we knew.

As the 2012 election kicks into high gear we will see the vilification of certain groups of immigrants — those who speak a different language, whose skin tones are darker. We stereotype these Americans as criminals, consumers of public services they don't pay for, the ones who take our American jobs.

The targets now are Latin Americans — and they don't have a higher crime rate than native born Americans; they do pay taxes; and they actually use fewer public services than their American-born counterparts. While occasionally these immigrants find good middle-class jobs, by and large they work in low-paying jobs in sweatshops and in agriculture.

Recently, I spent time at the Portland Day Laborer Center and saw the records of the types of jobs day laborers work. Mostly, they were low-paying menial jobs: gardening, trash hauling, and cleaning up. These folks are not taking our jobs.

Frankly, these workers aren't the problem. They are taking whatever work is available, just like our out-of-work neighbors would. The real problem is unscrupulous employers who

hire undocumented workers because they are out to undercut union employers. Employers who exploit workers must be held accountable. Yesterday, it was the factory owners at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory who locked the exits to increase productivity and reduce theft. Today it is employers who find ways to avoid paying our legal minimum wage, avoid employer taxes that fund public services and education, and often only sporadically pay their workers at all.

We are a movement founded and built by workers — native and foreign born. We will never grow in strength by ignoring either. When we learn to understand their issues and they understand ours, when we coordinate our efforts, we can identify and hold accountable exploitive employers — and our movement will grow in strength and power.

When we exclude any worker, everyone loses. Our history teaches us this over and over again.

Because a movement that is on the side of all peoples, of all ages, ideas and language, will succeed, will grow, will become more.

*Tom Chamberlain is president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.*

## NOLC recognition dinner is June 4

The Northwest Oregon Labor Council's annual Labor Appreciation and Recognition Night is Saturday, June 4.

This year's dinner and awards ceremony, which serves as a fundraiser for Labor's Community Service Agency, will be held at Milwaukie Elks Lodge, 13121 SE McLoughlin

Blvd, starting with a n-host cocktail hour at 5 p.m. Dinner tickets (a Mexican buffet) are \$15 per person. Raffle tickets also will be sold for \$1 each or seven for \$5.

The labor council also is accepting cash and door prize donations.

For more information or to order tickets, call 503-235-9444.

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## Fire Fighters freeze political contributions

The International Association of Fire Fighters, one of the most sought after endorsements in politics, said it

is turning off the spigot of millions of dollars in campaign contributions to federal candidates and federal politi-

cal parties because politicians aren't doing enough to stand up for them in the face of intense attacks.

"These state battles are devastating to our members' future," said International Fire Fighters President Harold Shaitberger. "You would think that we would have our friends in Congress stepping up and stepping out and leading and be willing to fight for us. But right now, we don't feel they have our back."

Shaitberger said for the past two years politicians from both parties have failed to address firefighter issues in Washington, D.C., and with no pro-firefighter legislation likely to be advanced in the 112th Congress — "it's time to take a stand," he said.

Shaitberger said the union will start redirecting federal political contributions to defend anti-union attacks on the state level.

"I expect this strategic decision to focus our resources on state and local efforts, and the freezing of federal contributions, to last as long as the fights in the states remain at such a high level and until we see some real results and leadership from those in Washington, D.C., on our members' behalf," Shaitberger said.

## Mt. Hood college, faculty reach last-minute contract

A late-breaking contract settlement averted a planned strike at Mt. Hood Community College. For weeks the school had been advertising for workers to replace instructors in the event of a strike, which was set to begin May 12. Mt. Hood Community College Board Chair Brian Freeman threatened the college would hire permanent replacements, and at one point said part-timers might be asked to teach the classes of striking full time faculty. About 33,000 students attend the college in Gresham.

But members of Mt. Hood Community College Faculty Association, an affiliate of Oregon Education Association (OEA), voted May 10 to ratify a new three-year agreement, and the college board approved it May 11. The union represents 157 full-time faculty at the school. The previous contract expired Aug. 31, 2010. The new one is retroactive to Sept. 1, 2010, and ex-

pires Aug. 31, 2013.

Mostly the new contract is concessionary, with members agreeing to board demands on salary schedule and medical contributions. It contains a pay freeze in year one, a 1 percent increase in year two, and 2 percent in year three. Faculty will contribute 13 percent of their medical and dental premiums. Those terms are the same as agreements ratified in November and December with 500-member Part-Time Faculty and Tutor Association and the Classified Employee Association.

But it also contained gains for members, including a requirement that the college negotiate before contracting out bargaining unit work.

Also, faculty retiring after Oct. 1, 2011, will receive one-party medical coverage until they become eligible for Medicare, or a stipend equal to reduced two-party medical coverage for a maximum of four years.