

Portland Jobs with Justice celebrates 20th anniversary

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Portland Jobs with Justice — tireless protest dynamo, exemplar of solidarity, incubator of labor activism — turns 20 this year.

On May 14, supporters filled a Portland Hilton ballroom to celebrate and remember.

“We started it because of the attacks we were under,” declared Larry Cohen, Communications Workers of America (CWA) president. “We’re still under attack.”

Cohen was national CWA’s organizing director when he conceived of Jobs with Justice (JwJ) in the late 1980s. Convinced that organized labor couldn’t win all by itself, he wanted union activists to form local coalitions to bring together labor and the wider community in a common fight for economic and social justice. The organization — JwJ — would be based on a simple pledge for people to sign, which states: “During the next year, ‘I’ll be there’ at least five times for someone else’s fight, as well as my own.”

At a June 1988 Oregon AFL-CIO-sponsored rally in downtown Portland, 300 people signed the first Portland JwJ pledge cards. In 1991, a small group of activists, with Cohen’s encouragement, took the next step and formed a local chapter. Representatives of 15 organizations attended an April 1991 founding meeting. For the group’s first action — June 1991 — demonstrators wrapped Blue Cross’ downtown Portland office building with red tape.

The group met monthly after that, says Portland JwJ co-founder Margaret Butler — a tele-

phone operator who became the organizing co-chair at CWA Local 7901. Representatives from participating unions would discuss their fights with employers, and JwJ would plan noisy and creative protests, calling up pledge signers to make good on their commitments.

“We in the labor movement had been getting our butts kicked for a long time,” Butler recalls. “We needed to rebuild basic solidarity at the grass roots.”

“Jobs With Justice would take on certain aspects of a campaign that union leaders wouldn’t or for legal reasons couldn’t,” says co-founder Jamie Partridge, an activist with National Association of Letter Carriers Branch 82.

Sometimes, activists would be arrested in civil disobedience, sitting in, for example, at the National Labor Relations Board — to highlight the need for labor law reform. More often, JwJ would surprise malefactors with a sudden occupation, leaving when police asked them to. After the owner of Tony Roma’s opposed an increase in the minimum wage, demonstrators briefly took over his restaurant, chanted, and handed out cake and leaflets to customers.

“The idea is to take actions that will be outside the comfort zone of the decision-makers, but within the comfort zone of demonstrators,” Partridge explains, “disrupting business as usual and sending the message that if they don’t do what’s right, they would face continued disruptions.”

Over the years, JwJ demonstrators would occupy Niketown, Powell’s Books, WalMart, Providence hospital, Wells Fargo bank, and the

offices of senators and congressmen who voted for job-killing trade treaties.

More often, they would show up in great number, often repeatedly, to give courage and moral support to workers in the middle of a labor dispute — at Oregon Steel Mills, Williams Controls, Fred Meyer, Safeway, OHSU, Cummins Northwest, Parry Center, Oak Harbor Freight Lines, Legacy Emanuel Hospital, the Portland Hilton ... the full list would go on for pages. JwJ pledgers promise to come out five times a year. Within a few years, Portland JwJ was so active it could at times have five actions in a single month.

Five years in, the group hired Butler part-time as its first paid staffer, and set up an office in space provided by Oregon AFSCME. Today, Portland JwJ has four paid staff. It also has 4,300 pledgers, a 2,000-person e-mail list, a 1,000-strong phone tree, and a 200-person hot-list of the most active members. That network allows the group to scale up or down mobilizations as needed. Unions seeking a large turnout can request a “full mobilization” and have volunteers call through the list.

But it would be a mistake to think of Portland JwJ only as a rapid-response picketer battalion, because the group also works proactively through long-term projects and committees.

Its annual faith-labor breakfast helps build relationships between labor union leaders and local clergy. Its global justice committee seeks to hold politicians accountable for the effects of trade policy. Its immigrant rights committee protests raids and deportations. Its health care

committee pushes for a single-payer health care system. A recently formed economic crisis committee hopes to use the current downturn as a catalyst for reform.

JwJ’s Workers Rights Board, begun in 1999, is a roster of community leaders — politicians, church leaders, academics and others who are willing to take a public stand in favor of workers rights. Depending on the needs of a campaign, the Workers Rights Board may convene a panel, hold a public hearing, and issue recommendations. The hearings give workers a chance to tell their stories to community leaders.

Though Portland JwJ doesn’t get involved in candidate electoral campaigns, time and again it has mobilized turnout and testimony at local elected bodies. It was Portland JwJ that led the passage of living wage ordinances at the city and county, which set minimum wage and benefit levels for contracted workers.

JwJ exists to support others’ struggles, so its victories are those of the workers it helps. But it’s clearly a part of those workers’ wins, boosting spirits with chants, pickets, and inflatable rats, and strategic advice and good will.

“Out on the picket line or at the rallies,” Butler says, “it makes a big difference for workers to see that they aren’t by themselves.”

“We want jobs,” concluded Cohen, the CWA president, at the celebration. “But it’s not just jobs that we want. Slaves had jobs. We want jobs with justice.”

To sign the pledge, and join Portland Jobs With Justice, call 503-236-5573 or visit jwjpgdx.org.

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