

Oregonian newspaper attacks state senator for (gasp!) standing up for workers

OPEN FORUM

By **SCOTT MOORE**

On June 18, the Oregonian editorial board blasted State Sen. Richard Devlin (D-Tualatin) for daring to stand up for the rights of workers to organize. What “crime” did Sen. Devlin commit to cause such a tongue-lashing? He sent out a letter reminding agencies and service providers to not spend public funds to discuss the pros or cons of a unionizing effort by Service Employees International Union Local 503.

“[T]he good senator has no business throwing his weight around in the middle of a union organizing drive,” the editorial clucked.

The opinion piece followed a front page article on the same issue, which was dressed up as a damning exposé.

Here’s the news article headline, which was printed in large bold font on Page One above the fold: “Lawmaker accused of helping out union drive.”

Every day, politicians go to work trying to figure out how to give more money to the banks, insurance companies, and big oil. They hand out tax breaks to move jobs overseas. And they try to weaken protections for the middle class. So when lawmakers like Devlin stand up to balance the scales in favor of workers, we should applaud them and hope others will follow.

But there’s a blatant double standard at the state’s largest newspaper that should be alarming to every Oregonian. While the Oregonian reserved its front page for this hit piece on Devlin, here

are the stories from this legislative session that the paper buried or ignored entirely:

- Republican Co-Speaker Bruce Hanna killing the ban on BPA — a dangerous chemical I— in children’s products. Why is Hanna on the side of poisoning children? He’s the president of the Roseburg Coca-Cola Bottling Company, and Coca-Cola is one of the nation’s largest proponents for the use of BPA.

- Rep. Matt Wingard, the Republican Co-Chair of the House Education Committee, cashing personal checks from Connections Academy, a for-profit corporation that runs online charter schools. Wingard spent most of his time on the committee pushing for bills

that would expand online charter schools, diverting more taxpayer dollars to his employer in what most sane people would agree is a stunning conflict of interest.

- Republican State Sen. Chris Telfer pushing a bill that would specifically benefit a cigar shop owned by her business partner by exempting it from indoor smoking laws.

Unfortunately, this has become par for the course for the Oregonian since it was taken over by N. Christian Anderson III, the libertarian former publisher of the Orange County Register.

Anderson’s anti-union animosity is well-documented. When the pressroom at the OC Register attempted to unionize, Anderson brought in one of the nation’s most notorious union-busting

firms to run an intimidation campaign against the workers.

Among the tactics allegedly employed in the union-busting effort: physical assault, vandalized cars, mandatory anti-union meetings, and threats of termination and pay cuts. A few months later, Anderson fired 41 pressroom workers, ensuring that they couldn’t vote to unionize.

Talk about “throwing his weight around in the middle of a union organizing drive.”

(Editor’s Note: Scott Moore is communications director for Our Oregon, a non-profit, progressive coalition working for social and economic justice.)

Corporate profits soar 81 percent, but few jobs created

By **TULA CONNELL**

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Profits of the 500 largest U.S. corporations soared 81 percent (\$318 billion), the third largest percentage gain in list history, Fortune magazine reported.

Walmart holds the number one spot for the second year in a row. Exxon Mobil leads profits with \$30 billion, for the eighth year in row.

The stunning leap in profits is so excessive even Fortune writers are writhing in their leather chairs:

“We’ve rarely seen such a stark gulf between the fortunes of the 500 and those of ordinary Americans. The profits derived partly from productivity gains, including workforce reductions. And many 500 companies are growing faster overseas than in the U.S.”

So what are Wall Street CEOs doing? Screaming for more tax breaks. Listen to them holler about how the United States has one of the highest corporate tax rates in the world. And then read on to see why these corporations actually pay less — if anything — in corporate taxes than their counterparts in other nations.

“By taking advantage of myriad breaks and loopholes that other countries generally do not offer, United States corporations pay only slightly more on average than their counterparts in other industrial countries. And some American corporations use aggressive strategies to pay less — often far less — than their competitors abroad and at home,” the New York Times reported.

A Government Accountability Of-

fice study released in 2008 found that 55 percent of United States companies paid no federal income taxes during at least one year in a seven-year period it studied, the Times noted.

As the AFL-CIO Executive Pay-Watch site points out, U.S. corporations held a record \$1.93 trillion in cash on their balance sheets in 2010.

But they are not investing to expand their companies, grow the real economy or create good middle-class jobs. Corporate CEOs are literally hoarding their company’s cash — except when it comes to their own paychecks.

Something to think about, with more than 25 million still be unemployed or underemployed.

(Editor’s Note: Tula Connell writes for the AFL-CIO NOW news blog.)

Buy union-made Franz Bread, but not at Walmart

To The Editor:

Bakers Local 114 was astounded by the sudden advertising blitz in which Franz Family Bakeries is endorsing Walmart. We all know the devastation Walmart has wreaked upon the lives of workers and communities around the nation, and the destruction Walmart has brought to manufacturing jobs throughout the United States.

Our Bakers Local 114 does not support Walmart and opposes all efforts of the Walmart expansion into the northwest. Our union bakers do produce the highest quality breads at Franz and our

other union bakeries (Oroweat, Kroger Clackamas Bakery, Safeway Clackamas Bakery), but we have no control over where our good products are sold.

We do appreciate that we, the workers, can successfully negotiate with Franz Family Bakeries to provide good family wage and benefit jobs, and we recognize Franz Family Bakeries as a good union employer. But we also say: NO to Walmart!

Terry W. Lansing
Secretary Treasurer
Bakers Local 114
Portland

‘Labor law still matters,’ NLRB chairwoman says

By **BARB KUCERA**

While collective bargaining is under attack in many parts of the country, it remains one of the few effective ways to preserve the American middle class, the chairwoman of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) said.

The NLRB administers federal law safeguarding the rights of private sector workers to organize unions and bargain contracts. Wilma Liebman, with nearly 14 years on the Board, is one of its longest serving members. President Obama named her chairwoman in 2009.

Liebman spoke earlier this year at the University of Minnesota Law School, where she discussed the history and role of the NLRB. Noting the turmoil that has erupted from Wisconsin to New Hampshire over the question of worker rights, she wished the debate “were less rancorous,” but added, “It has brought [collective bargaining] back into the public eye, the public discourse.”

While hundreds of thousands have

mobilized for rallies and other events sparked by the current debate, the conflict over worker rights is nothing new, Liebman said.

The NLRB is no stranger to controversy. The law is the product of fierce battles, some of them quite bloody.

In 1935, when Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act and created the NLRB, most workers had no legal right to a voice on the job. During the worst economic depression in U.S. history, millions marched in the streets, occupied factories and some died in the struggle to win collective bargaining rights.

It’s worth remembering why Congress did what it did at that time. The Act was seen as a means of restoring the country to economic prosperity by restoring the purchasing power of wage-earners.

The law really worked for the first few decades. Millions of people achieved a middle-class way of life

through collective bargaining in major industries.

Workers’ ability to achieve gains began to unravel, however, first through Congressional action and later through economic change. In 1947, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, weakening some of the labor protections contained in the NLRA.

And in recent decades, the growth of a global economy, overseas competition, new technology and deregulation have created new pressures on both management and labor, leading to major drops in union membership and ramping up employer opposition to unions.

Today, many types of workers, such as independent contractors, now fall outside the protections offered under federal labor law.

It’s fair to say the law did not keep up with all these changes.

Despite efforts “to reinvigorate the law” in the 1970s and more recently through the Employee Free Choice Act,

it has not been amended since Taft-Hartley. Each attempt gets bogged down in partisan and ideological division.

At times, the five-member NLRB has been nearly immobilized as appointments were held up in Congress or left unfilled. For 27 months during the Bush Administration, Liebman and one other board member issued rulings and tried to carry on normal business, despite three vacancies. The U.S. Supreme Court later decided they did not have the authority to act, and the board — now with four members — has to revisit many of those decisions.

Even though the National Labor Relations Act states it is national policy to encourage the practice of collective bargaining, “I don’t think there is really a consensus of what the statute is all about,” Liebman said. “There are still people in the business and legal community who never accepted the legitimacy of this law in the first place.”

In recent decades, many NLRB and

related court decisions have focused on individual — as opposed to collective — rights, she said.

Despite being told that labor law is “dead, dying, ossified, neutered,” Liebman holds out hope.

“My answer to it all is, ‘I’m not dead yet.’”

She said the board is making modest gains in keeping the law “relevant and dynamic” by issuing a new rule requiring all employers to post worker rights notices in the workplace — something never mandated before — and by making use of tools such as injunctions to prevent the most serious abuses.

“I think that labor law still matters very much in this country. The rights contained in this statute are enduring values. They are now recognized around the world . . . [and are] critical to a fair economy,” Liebman said.

(Editor’s Note: Barb Kucera is editor of www.WorkdayMinnesota.org.)