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Portland bus brigade travels to rallies at 8 worksites

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

On Thursday, June 30, 133 unionists packed into three buses, and protested at eight Portland-area demonstrations.

The idea was conceived months earlier, when labor activists with Portland Jobs with Justice noticed an extraordinary pile-up of union contracts set to expire June 30, and thought, "Why not get all the unions together?" They dubbed the project "Portland Rising," borrowing from the "Hotel Workers Rising" campaign, in which UNITE HERE has fought to synchronize contract expirations for West Coast hotels.

The June 30 day of protest began in the parking lot outside a collection of union offices at Southeast 12th and Madison. Participants boarded two charter buses and a First Student school bus driven by Amalgamated Transit Union officer Anna Tompte. What followed were a series of tightly choreographed, short, noisy but polite protests, in some cases coordinated with local

management.

The first stop was Georgia-Pacific's North Portland tissue paper warehouse at the Kelley Point industrial area. With their old contract on the verge of expiration, members of Inland Boatmen's Union (IBU) were without a new one. Protesters sang and chanted in the parking lot outside, and a delegation of IBU members marched into the warehouse manager's office and appeared to catch him off guard. As they handed him a petition calling for a fair contract, the phone rang. "Actually, they're already here," he said into the phone.

Next stop: the Hilton Vancouver Hotel and Convention Center. The City of Vancouver owns it. Hilton Hotels manages it. Neither wants to give workers a raise.

Demonstrators gathered in a park across the street, and heard from workers that they haven't had a raise in four years. Their expiring union contract didn't include raises, though it did limit housekeeper workload and contain

other improvements. Earlier this year, a group of workers tried to dump UNITE HERE, but the unit voted 77 to 33 to

stick with the union.

With a courteous assistant general manager holding open the door for

them, protesters carrying pompoms and clappers filed quietly through the Hilton lobby. Managers directed protesters into an empty conference room, where they held a short rally. Hotel workers were ushered in amid cheers.

Banquet captain (and union steward) Wanda Buck told the Labor Press her base wage of \$8.55 rises to \$19 to \$22 an hour after the hotel distributes half the 20 percent gratuity it charges customers. But the dishwashers and housekeepers and phone operators who make \$8.55 to \$9.25 are long overdue for a raise, she said.

The bus next headed to a State of Oregon office building near Lloyd Center in Northeast Portland, where a rally by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 503 was already under way. The biggest item of contention for state workers — no surprise — is paying for health insurance. Gov. John Kitzhaber is demanding that state workers have 5 percent of the cost de-

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Three buses crisscrossed the Portland area June 30, delivering 133 union members and supporters to eight protest demonstrations on a day when multiple union contracts expired.

UFCW's Brad Witt runs for Congress

State Rep. Brad Witt, a union representative of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555 and former secretary-treasurer of the Ore-

gon AFL-CIO, has entered the Democratic primary for Congress in Oregon's 1st District.

Witt, 59, was introduced to a small

group of Sauvie Island residents July 7 by Scott Beckstead, an animal welfare activist from Oakland, Oregon, and Rachael Barry-Dame, director of the Columbia County Women's Resource Center. It was the last of five stops he made in each of the five counties that make up the 1st Congressional District.

Witt said he will be a strong advocate for the middle class and will work tirelessly to bring back family-wage jobs. "My top priority is to put Americans back to work," he said. "We need to repair our roads, rebuild our bridges, weatherize our schools and public buildings, and upgrade our water and sewer systems."

Additionally, Witt promised to fight for a "financially solid Social Security and Medicare system so that today's working families can retire with dignity," and to stand up to big spending, Wall Street, global banks, and special interest groups.

Witt will have his work cut out for him, as he challenges seven-term incumbent David Wu. Also running in the Democratic primary is Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian.

Wu, the first Chinese-American to serve in the House of Representatives,

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State Rep. Brad Witt meets with residents of Sauvie Island July 7 after announcing his candidacy for Congress in Oregon's 1st District. Witt is a union rep for UFCW Local 555 and a former secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO.

Oregon Legislative session 2011 a mixed bag for labor

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers wrapped up the 2011 Legislative session June 30. If there was anything memorable in it for working people, it was that lawmakers finally cut corporate tax breaks down to size ... except when they were giving out new ones. It was also the year that the Oregon Legislature gave state agencies a new aspirational goal: Lay off managers, not just front-line state employees. In a state with 9.6 percent unemployment, the closest lawmakers got to passing a jobs bill was a pilot project that will employ some workers on energy efficiency retrofits of public schools, or maybe the new law removing procedural roadblocks to pipelines and other "linear" construction projects.

The Oregon House was split 30-30 between Democrats and Republicans this year. Though Democrats controlled the Oregon Senate 16-14 and the governor's office, they were reluctant to back any major initiatives. It was a session of tight budgets, diminished expectations, and defensive battles for organized labor. As usual, many bills that organized labor deemed worthy of support were bottled up or watered down. In a few cases where labor allied with business, the logjam let up.

Here are some highlights among new laws of interest to the labor movement:

1) School retrofits. "Cool Schools" was a centerpiece of Gov. John Kitzhaber's 2010 election campaign, as his chief proposal to put Oregonians back to work. The idea is to give public schools more energy-efficient boilers, HVAC systems, doors, windows, roofs, insulation, and lighting — creating employment in the short run and lowering schools' utility bills in the long run. But the Legislature appropriated no new money for such work. Instead, HB 2960, which passed unanimously in both chambers, will redirect and make creative use of existing pots of money. As bill au-

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