

Top Dems debate, seeking Oregon AFL-CIO backing

EUGENE — All three top Democratic candidates for Congress in Oregon's First District debated Sept. 27 at the invitation of the Oregon AFL-CIO, the state's premier federation of labor unions. The debate — on issues important to working people — took place in Eugene on day two of the Oregon AFL-CIO's biennial convention. Afterward, union delegates had their own debate over whether and whom to endorse.

A Nov. 8 primary will determine which of the three will go on to the Jan. 31, 2012 special election to succeed U.S. Representative David Wu, who resigned in August. The district includes Northwest Oregon as far east as the West side of Portland. Republican candidates were also invited to address the convention, but declined to take part.

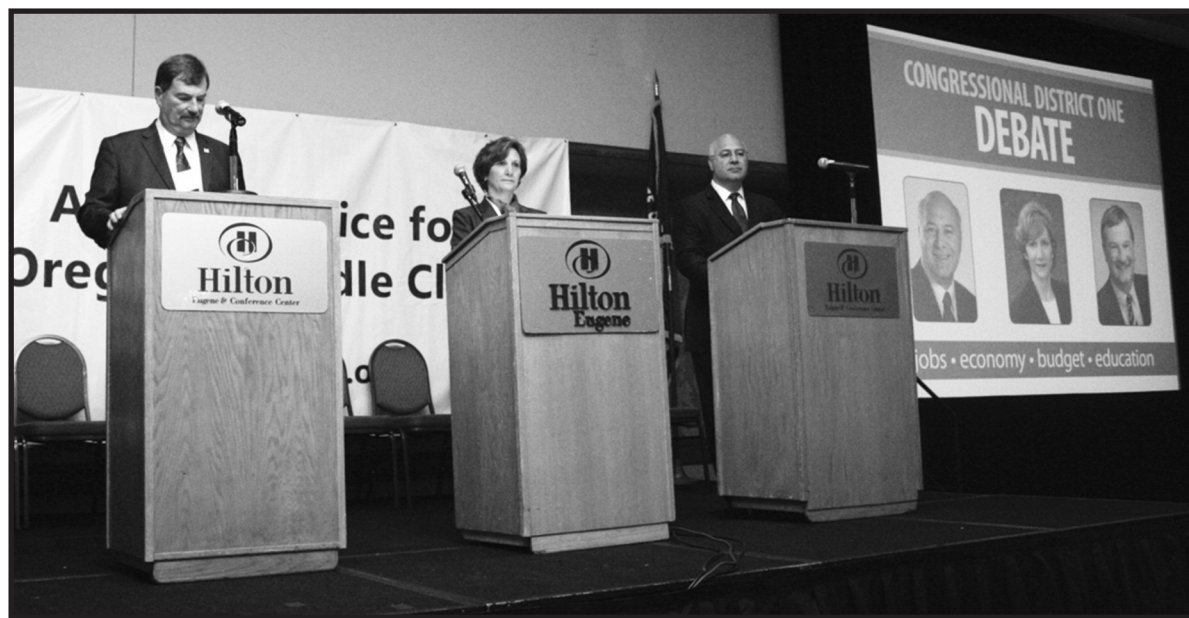
State Representative Brad Witt of Clatskanie — who was the Oregon AFL-CIO's number two officer for 14 years — appeared to have the strongest support among delegates, but Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian and State Senator Suzanne Bonamici also have close relationships with organized labor. All three presented themselves as pro-union candidates in the debate.

On trade, Witt had the strongest position, pledging to seek renegotiation of all trade agreements going back to

NAFTA. Witt and Avakian said they would vote against pending NAFTA-style trade agreements with Korea, Colombia and Panama, but Bonamici was non-committal, saying only that she'd look at each agreement to see if it would create jobs, and that she supports funding benefits for workers who lose jobs due to foreign competition.

To shore up Social Security's finances for the long term, all three candidates said they support eliminating the income cap on the Social Security payroll tax. Right now, only the first \$106,800 of annual income is subject to the Social Security taxes; those with higher incomes pay nothing on income above that.

The three candidates also seemed to agree that federal education policies like the No Child Left Behind Act and President Obama's Race To The Top are the wrong approach. No Child Left Behind punishes public schools if students perform below average on standardized tests, while Race To The Top gives money to states if they encourage charter schools. Avakian said one of his first acts would be to introduce a bill to repeal the No Child Left Behind Act. Bonamici said she wants to repeal the bad parts of the act. Witt said the federal government needs to stop pushing



From left to right: Brad Witt, Suzanne Bonamici, and Brad Avakian debate at the Oregon AFL-CIO's 2011 convention in Eugene. The three Democrats are running for Congress in Oregon's First Congressional District. The state labor federation made no endorsement.

states to promote charter schools.

Oregon State Building Trades executive secretary-treasurer John Mohlis asked candidates if they support creation of a federal infrastructure bank. All three agreed.

Avakian derided President Obama's recent call for \$50 billion in new infrastructure spending proposal as "very very small," saying it would create just 5,500 jobs in Oregon at a time when 190,000 Oregonians are out of work.

"When is the president going to get serious about putting people back to work?" Avakian asked. Avakian said he wants "a 21st century WPA program" which would use infrastructure investment to put millions back to work.

Witt similarly proposed to fund infrastructure by dedicating funds from a repeal of the Bush tax cuts.

Asked what steps they'd take to pass to pass the Employee Free Choice Act, Witt said he'd go further, pressing for legislation to end so-called "right to

work" laws, ban permanent replacement of striking workers, and grant unemployment benefits to strikers. Avakian said he sponsored the Employee Free Choice Act when he was in the Oregon Legislature. [Presumably he was referring to a law that allows public sector employees to unionize via signed authorization cards.] Bonamici noted her support of an Oregon law banning employers from holding mandatory-attendance anti-union meetings.

In closing remarks, Avakian reminded delegates of his background defending union members as an attorney, and pledged to make, "Wall Street corporations that are bankrupting your pension plans pay their fair share."

Bonamici touted her work as a Legal Aid lawyer defending the poor, and said she learned the value of hard work from her grandfather, a union stone mason who worked in a coal mine.

Witt closed the debate with an appeal to labor to elect one of its own to Congress. "As a 30-year union worker, union member and union representative, I know better than any other candidate in this race what our members face each and every day. From layoffs to union busting, from unfair labor practices to Bill Sizemore, I have fought them all and I have won my fair share."

The debate lasted an hour and was streamed live on the federations web site, oraficio.org.

Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain thanked all three candi-

dates for speaking to the issues and not about each other, an observation which drew a standing ovation.

"All three of you are strong advocates for workers," Chamberlain said.

After the debate, convention delegates took up the question of whether and whom to endorse. A proposal to endorse whichever candidate prevails in the primary — in effect to make no endorsement in the primary — failed to win the required two-thirds supermajority in a standing vote of delegates. Delegates next debated a proposal to endorse Witt. Arguments from the floor ran strongly in favor of backing him, as one of labor's own, but that motion also failed to win two-thirds in a vote based on affiliates' numerical representation. A third motion, to endorse Avakian, was tabled in a voice vote.

Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio: 'A Message to Labor'

Oregon 4th District Congressman Peter DeFazio addressed delegates and guests Sept. 28 at the Oregon AFL-CIO's biennial convention in Eugene. It was the third and final day of the meeting of delegates to the state's 112,000-strong federation of labor unions. DeFazio's remarks are too lengthy for print. To read his entire message go online to www.nwlabornpress.org.

Teamsters at Fred Meyer vote to strike

TUKWILA — More than 350 Fred Meyer warehouse workers, members of Teamsters Local 117, voted last weekend to strike if a new contract isn't forthcoming.

Workers have continued to pack, pallet, and load goods at the warehouse since their contract extension expired Aug. 15. The distribution center serves approximately 140 stores in Washington, Alaska, and Idaho.

At issue is health care insurance.

According to the union, parent company Kroger, whose profits were over \$432 million in the first quarter of 2011 alone, is trying to slash health care coverage and double out-of-pocket costs.

Workers want health care coverage that compares to the coverage offered to Local 117 workers at other local distribution centers.

The union has filed 10 unfair labor practice charges against the company, including one for bad-faith bargaining.

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