

Nesbitt discusses future of labor at retirees conference

Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans holds 9th annual convention in Portland

In a remarkably candid speech to the annual convention of the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans (OARA), former Oregon AFL-CIO president Tim Nesbitt said it's time for public sector unions to re-examine their leadership roles and for all of labor to re-examine its organizing models if it wants to survive.

Approximately 50 retirees attended the 9th annual conference of the OARA held March 10 in Portland. The Alliance for Retired Americans is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, with chapters in 31 states.

"Whence the Middle Class?" was the theme of this year's conference.

"Looking back over the last 12 years, the last 20 years, the last 30 years, if the measure of the success of the union movement is making sure that working people get their fair share of what they contributed to the economy, we have failed. Or there has been a failure despite our best efforts," said Nesbitt, who served as president of the Oregon AFL-CIO from 1999 to 2005.

"If workers had simply shared in the productivity gains of this economy, we would not have the poverty inequality we have now. It would be a very different situation. So it does force some re-examination," he said.

Earlier at the conference, Jason Gettle, a policy analyst for the Oregon Center for Public Policy, reported that over the last decade Oregon has led the nation in worker productivity gains. In 2001, a typical Oregon worker produced about \$57,000 worth of goods

and services in today's dollars. By 2010, productivity had increased to about \$76,000.

"That translates to a growth in productivity of 32 percent — over three times the national increase of 9.8 percent over the same period," Gettle said.

Yet, despite that economic growth, the average Oregon worker wage, adjusted for inflation, actually declined by 10 percent since 1979, to a median income of \$30,327.

By contrast, those at the top of Oregon's income scale saw their incomes soar. The average income of the top 1 percent was about \$635,000 in 2009 (the most recent year with data available). That's nearly double the inflation-adjusted average of about \$340,000 for the top 1 percent in 1979.

During Nesbitt's presentation, he called to mind a slogan the Oregon AFL-CIO employed in 2004 — No Unions, No Middle Class.

"Unfortunately, we continue to prove that slogan with fewer unions and a smaller middle class," he said.

"You've seen stats today about how things have gotten worse — and they have. And we've been talking about that for several decades. I think it's time to back up and start talking about ways to make things better.

"And some of what we're going to have to do to get out of this is going to involve some tough decisions."

Nesbitt believes public sector unions are best suited for driving change because they make up the largest portion of the labor movement, and they have the resources to do it. But he worries that public employees are losing support among the larger private sector workforce.

A long-time leader of the Service Employees International Union, Nesbitt said there was a time in the '60s and



Former Oregon AFL-CIO president Tim Nesbitt chats with American Federation of Teachers retiree Val Jack at 10th annual conference of the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans. Nesbitt was a quest speaker.

'70s when public sector workers lagged far behind their counterparts in the private sector in terms of wages, pensions, and health care.

"By the mid '90s or so, I think that had pretty much changed. We were kind of on par," he said. "But we in the public sector didn't recognize that, and we continued to push forward."

Over time, he said public employees' pursuit of higher pay became less and less compelling to the general public — and less sustainable — "when the majority of workers in our economy in the private sector are facing stagnation if not outright decline in their compensation."

Nesbitt, who for the last six years has worked as an adviser to governors Ted Kulongoski and John Kitzhaber, also questioned whether labor's fight to reform federal labor laws was the right way to proceed.

"We keep pushing hard for reforms to our labor laws, for card check, but it's worth asking ourselves as well whether a system of labor laws which promote the idea of a site-based bargaining unit, not just employer specific, but often job specific, can really survive in a global economy in which capital is so mobile. Which is why we continue to struggle — and why I'm not sure that reforms to our labor laws, the kinds that are represented by card check, are sufficient to make a difference longer term."

Nesbitt acknowledged that he doesn't have the answers for how to regenerate the labor movement, though he said Working America is a model that intrigues him. Working America is an

allied organization of the AFL-CIO that works to build alliances among non-union working people. "To the extent that we can build those larger organizations of working people, even self-employed people, and find ways to connect with them on economic issues, I think that is a path we need to continue to explore," he said, noting that individuals who are self-employed or own a small business now outnumber union members nationwide. "Many of those self employed are probably working for less than the minimum wage," he said.

Nesbitt offered that public employee unions try to establish some type of mechanism that can provide private sector workers and possibly the self-employed access to more affordable health insurance (perhaps through the new health insurance exchange), and better retirement programs.

"Until we find ways again to reach private sector workers, we're not going to find a way out," he said.

Other issues Nesbitt touched on: **Medicare and Medicaid:** "I don't think most people realize just how one crisis away from family collapse we can be without safety net support systems like Medicaid and Medicare. Yet, the debate about how we pay for them, I think it comes down to this — what are we willing to pay to support those social insurance programs? Because if the debate is just about taxing the rich, there's only so far we can go with that. I mean fairness is important. But some of these solutions to maintain these social safety net services, I think involve the contributions of the working middle class.

"It's not just a matter of if we're going to save those safety net programs, that we argue that the rich are going to have to pay for them. I think we're all going to have to pay for them more as well.

"But until middle class families understand how fragile their situations can be without those programs, I'm not sure we're going to get the willingness to do that."

On Wisconsin and the attempt to recall Gov. Scott Walker after he stripped public employees of their right to collective bargaining: "I hope the recall succeeds and I hope that the Democrats can agree on a good candidate to replace him, but at this point I would have to say it's been a draw. Unions have poured resources into that state — and still not a victory yet. It's an exhausting and bruising and resource-depleting struggle and I'm worried that as we go through these struggles we get back to a plateau, but that plateau is no higher than where we were before."

His proudest moment as president of the Oregon AFL-CIO: The union-led ballot measure in 2002 that indexed minimum wage pay to inflation. "It really has made a difference. Yes, inequality is high in our society, but because of our minimum wage (law), it's not as unequal as many other states.

"That's to the credit of our union movement. It's not a gain that we can attribute to our bargaining; but we can attribute it to union members; to the strength of our membership. We should celebrate successes like that."

In other convention business, delegates to the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans elected new officers and passed three resolutions.

Scott Blau, a retired letter carrier, was elected president; Linda DeLucia was elected first vice president; Roz Gieze was elected trustee; and Jim Davis was elected member at-large. DeLucia and Gieze are retired from Service Employees International Union. Davis is not a union member.

The resolutions called for a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United*, a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court which held that the First Amendment prohibited the government from restricting political expenditures by corporations and unions; for support of a federal law requiring full disclosure of corporate donations to political campaign advertising; and for Congress to reauthorize the Older Americans Act.

The Alliance also issued a special award to past president Verna Porter, who was unable to attend due to illness. She received an "honorary membership" for her work with the organization since its inception.

Volunteers, donations sought for kids' fishing derby in Vancouver

VANCOUVER — Union sponsors and volunteers are being sought for the 13th annual Kline Kids Fishing Derby, Friday and Saturday, April 13-14. Kline Pond is located at Salmon Creek Park in Vancouver.

One of the biggest events in Clark County, the derby attracts more than 1,500 children ages five to 14. The Friday fish-in is for special needs kids. The event received this year's Spirit of Clark County award presented by the Clark County board of commissioners.

With a \$5 entry fee, each child receives a fishing rod, T-shirt, and lunch. The fish they catch are cleaned and bagged for them to take home. There are also lots of prizes, including bicycles, tackle boxes with gear, and much more.

Approximately 700 volunteers are needed to assemble fishing rods and reels prior to the fish-in, and to assist kids the day of the event. Members of several unions have been instrumental in the continuing success of the event, but more are still needed.

Union local sponsors also are needed.

A contribution of \$250 will get your union logo on T-shirts and provide space to hang your union banner the day of the event.

For participation, sponsorship, or volunteer opportunities, call Roben White at 360-608-8537.

The fish-in is presented by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Kline Kids Fishing.

For more information about the derby, go online to <http://www.klinekidsfishing.org/>.

**The deadline to register to vote in Oregon is Tuesday, April 24.
To register, go online to <http://oregonvotes.org/>**