

Labor bills continue to move in Oregon Legislature

Attention OUS: No more prevailing wage loopholes

A bill that is a priority for building trades unions passed the Oregon House March 21 and is headed to the Senate. The bill says that regardless of where funds come from, if construction work is done on property that Oregon University System (OUS) owns, will use, occupy, or will ultimately own, the requirement to pay prevailing wage applies. The bill is a response to the construction of several buildings in recent years on public university land, but done with private funds to avoid the requirement to pay the prevailing wage.

HB 2646, sponsored by state representatives Margaret Doherty and Michael Dembrow, passed the Oregon House 47-10.

The day before the vote, Nike lobbyist Julia Brim-Edwards texted state representatives asking that they postpone the vote. They declined.

As of press time, she was said to be working on "modest changes," to be proposed in the Senate.

It was before the Senate Business and Transportation committee as of press time.

John Mohlis, executive secretary of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, said the governor has assured building trades

unions he would sign it if it gets to his desk.

Mohlis said the bill is not about restricting donations; it's about fairness.

"When an owner goes out with a project, they sign an agreement with an architect that says how much they'll be paid to design a building, and with an engineer that says how much they'll be paid, and with a general contractor that says how much they'll be paid, and they in turn sign agreements with subcontractors that say how much they'll be paid, who sign agreements with material providers as to how much they'll be paid. The only one that's not in the equation is the worker. All we're trying to do with the prevailing wage is make sure the worker gets paid a fair wage and benefits."

No public money for union-busting

The Oregon AFL-CIO is optimistic about a long-sought reform to stop government managers from spending tax dollars to fight employees attempts to unionize. HB 3342, a bill to do that, got a March 27 hearing at the House Business and Labor Committee.

One example of conduct that would be barred: When faculty at University of Oregon began organizing a union, the university paid \$25,000 to a \$300-

an-hour California anti-union consultant to oppose it, and later, brought in two law firms with expertise in opposing union drives.

PERS fight

Oregon AFSCME is attempting to rally opposition to SB 822, which would apply a new formula to retirees' cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increases. Under SB 822, retirees would receive the current 2 percent increase on their first \$20,000 of retirement income, but the COLA would gradually decrease above that: Retirees would then receive 1.5 percent on any retirement income up to \$40,000, 1 percent up to \$60,000, and 0.25 percent above that.

The bill passed out of the Senate Rules Committee March 28, and was scheduled for an April 3 vote in the Joint Ways and Means Committee as of press time.

AFSCME's argument is that retired public employees held up their end of the bargain: They did their jobs and were told at retirement what they'd be receiving. SB 822 changes the state's end of the bargain. AFSCME also says it's wrong for the state to seek sacrifices from retired public employees when it's not asking any new sacrifice from corporations and the wealthiest Orego-

nians; at the very least, tax breaks and loopholes should be reviewed before retirees and middle class families are targeted.

College tuition equity

Gov. Kitzhaber signed House Bill 2787, the Tuition Equity bill, April 2. The bill allows in-state tuition to students who have attended school in Oregon for at least three years and graduated from an Oregon high school, regardless of their immigration status.

"Telling Oregon kids who have grown up in our state that once it's time for college they don't have the same opportunities as their peers has been a losing game," said Tom Chamberlain, president of the Oregon AFL-CIO, which supported the legislation. "When

students want to become well-prepared for our changing economy, we should never discourage them or make their goals financially unachievable."

The legislation passed the Senate 19-11, with all 16 Democrats and three Republicans in favor.

The bill was passed by the House on a 38-18 vote, with five Republicans joining 33 Democrats in favor.

State Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), a former president of American Federation of Teachers-Oregon, Portland Community College Faculty Federation, led the House effort. He was invited to join Kitzhaber, Senate President Peter Courtney, Oregon students affected by the legislation, and legislative, education, and community leaders, at the signing ceremony.

Free tax preparation available for low income

Low- to moderate-income Oregonians will be able to have their income tax returns prepared free by trained volunteers statewide. CASH Oregon, a non-profit group in partnership with AARP Tax-Aide, supports free tax preparation and tax credit outreach in 32 counties in Oregon at more than 140 tax sites.

Many people who earn very little may be eligible for a refund, too. Tax credits that many could qualify for are

the Federal and Oregon Earned Income Tax Credit, the Federal Child Tax Credit, and the Oregon Working Family Child Care Credit.

Trained volunteers will help taxpayers sort through their questions and provide assistance.

Free tax preparation sites are available statewide. For more information call 2-1-1, or visit www.cashoregon.org.

Open Letter to Our TriMet Passengers and Community

TriMet continues to blame its budget woes on the cost of transit workers' health care. We don't apologize that we and management agreed on decent health insurance over the years. Everyone should have the same coverage, and many in our community do. Yet, our health insurance costs more. Why? It's because we need medical treatment more often. Countless studies have found that the transit worker's job is more stressful and physically damaging than almost every other job.

Fact: Transit workers become disabled and die younger than people working in other occupations.

(Source: National Institutes of Health)

Fact: Transit workers suffer more often from serious diseases including: cancer, heart failure, urinary/gastrointestinal/kidney failure, strokes, diabetes and musculoskeletal damage.

(Source: National Institutes of Health)

Fact: Transit workers have the highest incidence of on-the-job injury, even higher than police and firemen.

(Source: U.S. Dept. of Labor)

Fact: Transit workers rank third as victims of on-the-job assaults, just behind police and corrections officers.

(Source: U.S. Dept. of Labor)

STRESS IS THE NUMBER ONE CAUSE OF MAJOR HEALTH PROBLEMS FOR TRANSIT WORKERS

and is linked directly to obesity and heart disease. The second cause is one that may surprise people—no opportunity to use the restroom. Computerized transit schedules leave operators with little or no time for breaks. How do we cope? Two ways. We "hold it" for hours, and we keep ourselves dehydrated—often drinking nothing in a 14-hour stretch. Daily "holding it" and voluntary dehydration damage our internal organs, causing catastrophic long-term effects on our health.

Being confined to the driver's seat for long hours is the third major cause of illness and injury. That immobility, as well as constant road vibration, have been linked to a wide range of chronic health conditions.

Finally, we recognize that many in our community suffer from the high cost of health care in the U.S. We understand that, given the current state of TriMet's finances, we are going to have to shoulder more of the health care burden created by our jobs. At the same time, there is a much larger issue looming over this discussion. That is the need for every American to have access to decent, affordable health care. The richest nation in the world should not rank 37th in health care. We must address this critical issue together, in our community, our state and our country.

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