

Don't rely on politicians, Avakian tells union retirees

The Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans (ORARA) held its 10th annual convention March 9 in Portland. ORARA is a constituency group of the AFL-CIO.

Delegates elected Scott Blau of the National Association of Letter Carriers as president; Linda Delucia of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), 1st vice president; Barney Gorter of SEIU, 2nd vice president; Jim Gerhardt of AFSCME, treasurer; Leanna Hakala of the Oregon School Employees Association, secretary; Jim Davis, board member-at-large; and Grady Storms of Communications Workers of America, Roz Geise of SEIU, and member-at-large Ron Rogers, trustees.

Delegates passed several resolutions, including: support of six-day delivery for the Postal Service; to undo the Citizens United (corporations are people) court decision; to close unnecessary tax loopholes for the wealthy and corporations; to strengthen truth-in-advertising laws for senior-oriented ads; and to correct flaws in voting procedures that make it more difficult for citizens to vote.

Keynote speaker, Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, talked about the future of organized labor. He expressed optimism that unions will survive, but

said, "it's going to take some work."

Avakian said with today's political system so totally dependent on money, unions shouldn't count on politicians for help. "Stay in touch with politicians, build relationships with them, and use them — but never rely on them," he said.

Avakian said when the labor movement was booming in the 1850s and early 20th century, "It didn't boom because politicians did things, it boomed because workers understood the importance; workers did it. Workers organized. Workers went to worksites and said 'join the union, because this is how you're going to get a living wage.' It wasn't some U.S. senator or state representative that went to the worksite and said 'let's all get together and even the playing field in the workplace.' It was workers and unions that did it, and if that is ever going to be that way again in this country, it's going to be because you do it."

Avakian challenged retirees to stay close to their union locals and to remind union leaders how important it is to organize new workers.

"Union membership is down across the country, and frankly, it's because unions are not out there organizing like they used to organize," he said.



Bob Pearson (photo above left), a delegate to the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans convention, asks a question of the keynote speaker, Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian. The annual gathering was held March 9 in Portland.



State Rep. Michael Dembrow reported on progress of his Health Care for All Oregonians bill in the Oregon Legislature. He said it will need the support of large numbers of Oregonians in order to pass. For now, he encouraged support for a bipartisan bill to

study and compare future costs of three types of health coverage for Oregon.

Dembrow received pushback from several delegates about potential changes to the PERS retirement system that could lower benefits to average recipients.

Membership to the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans is \$10 a year. The group meets the second Thursday each month in the board room of Labor's Community Service Agency, 1125 SE Madison, Portland. For more information, call 503-464-6062.

...Portland workers will have sick leave

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and checkout people have to be sick for three days before they can use the sick days that they already earned [in their union contract]," Fritz said.

Fritz said she would support a sick leave ordinance. But she didn't offer to lead it, at first. The coalition would need to demonstrate public support.

The campaign kicked into its public phase in the summer of 2012, and each component of the coalition had a special role to play.

The Oregon AFL-CIO deployed the door-to-door canvass operation of its community affiliate, Working America. The labor-backed Oregon Working Families Party joined that effort, joined by a dozen student interns from the Oregon Bus Project's Politicorps program. The allied field operation spent a good portion of the summer and fall talking to Portlanders about the sick days ordinance. All told, they knocked on 40,000 doors, generated 3,000 letters and 1,400 signatures on a petition in support of the ordinance. A later round of calls to the petition signers generated 1,300 live phone calls to City Council, says Oregon Working Families Party state director Steve Hughes.

In August, UFCW commissioned a poll that showed 60 percent of Portland voters in favor of a law guaranteeing all workers in Portland a minimum number of paid sick days, and 15 percent opposed. Local 555 — Oregon's largest private sector union — also threw its

weight behind Fritz' re-election, met repeatedly with commissioners, and then mobilized members to tell their stories at public hearings.

Other unions lent support behind the scenes, and met with commissioners to press for the ordinance.

The breakthrough occurred Oct. 27 at a mayoral candidates forum sponsored by the Latino civil rights group CAUSA. Fritz showed up and made a surprise announcement: She would work with other City Council members to pass a paid sick days ordinance.

CAUSA was an energetic member of the coalition, and with good reason: It's estimated that nearly three-fifths of Latino workers lack paid sick days. Latino workers are concentrated in low-wage service sector jobs. CAUSA began running Spanish language radio ads, and filled City Hall chambers several times with supporters of paid sick leave.

Meanwhile, a pair of local business groups, the Main Street Alliance and VOIS (Voice for Oregon Innovation and Sustainability), organized support within the business community and marshaled dozens of business owners to testify in support of a sick leave mandate. That undermined the ability of the Portland Business Alliance, which opposed the ordinance, to argue that the business community was united against it.

In the end, when it came time to vote March 13, all five City Council members thanked the coalition and lauded the measure's importance, with Fritz calling it "a historic moment for human rights."

"I think this is a simple question," said newly-elected Mayor Charlie Hales. "We should, when we act, do justice whenever we can. This is justice. This is the right thing to do."

How the ordinance works

Under the Portland ordinance, employees accrue one hour of sick leave for every 30 hours they work, and can use up to 40 hours a year. The leave can be used for diagnosis, care, or treatment of the employee or their family member's illness, injury or health condition, including pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum care, preventive medical care, and mental illness. Leave can be used to cover all of a shift, such as when an employee is sick, or just part, as in the case of a doctor's appointment. At employers with six or more employees, the leave is paid, based on the employee's base wage. The leave will be unpaid at employers with five or fewer employees.

Workers can't use the leave during the first 90 calendar days of employment.

For absences of more than three consecutive days, employers are allowed to require documentation, such as a note from a health care provider or a signed personal statement. But if an employer requires a note from a health care provider, the employer has to pay any part of the cost of such verification if it's not covered by insurance. On the other hand, if employers suspect abuse of sick time, and can show a pattern such as repeated use of unscheduled sick time on

or adjacent to weekends, holidays, or vacation, then they can require an employee to pay the cost of verification.

Employers may not retaliate against employees for using sick leave.

Nor may they require employees to search for or find a replacement worker as a condition using sick time, or to work an alternate shift to make up for using sick time. But employers may allow employees to trade shifts in lieu of using sick time.

Employers don't have to develop new policies or benefits if existing sick time or paid time off policies can be used in the same way, as long as the benefits are as good as or better than those in the ordinance.

Further details will be worked out by the City attorney's office by Aug. 31.

Taking it statewide

At the final hearing before the vote, several state legislators told Portland City Council that passing the Portland ordinance would greatly increase their chances of passing paid sick leave statewide.

Now an attempt to do that is under way, backed by the same coalition that pushed the Portland measure. And at the direction of City Council, the City's own lobbyists will also be pushing the Legislature to pass the law. Fritz herself has been lobbying lawmakers, and said the proposal is getting a lot of support.

"[The feeling is] it's not fair for workers in Portland to have a benefit

that workers in Medford do not," Fritz said.

One measure is Senate Bill 801, sponsored by state senators Diane Rosenbaum and Elizabeth Steiner Hayward. The other is House Bill 3390, sponsored by Democrats Michael Dembrow and Alissa Keny-Guyer.

A hearing on HB 3390 was scheduled for April 3 (after this issue went to press.) The measure is very similar to the Portland ordinance, except it wouldn't apply to businesses with fewer than six employees. It would also require 56 hours (seven days) a year of sick leave, compared to 40 hours in the Portland ordinance.



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