

# Oregon building trades back Merkley for re-election

LINCOLN CITY — U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley picked up his first union endorsement Aug. 16 when the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council (OSBCTC) backed his re-election. The council was meeting at its 52nd annual convention Aug. 16-18 at Salishan Lodge.

Merkley, who is entering the final year of his first six-year term, focused his remarks on restoring middle-class jobs. OSBCTC represents more than 25,000 construction workers in 29 unions and six district councils.

“If we want this nation to get back on track and grow again, we’d better focus — hard — on jobs for the middle class,” he said. “...The byproducts are going to drive the economy back to success in a much more powerful way.”

Merkley said that thanks to a strong labor movement, America experienced a huge growth in its middle class from 1945 to 1975. Workers saw their real wages increase as productivity increased.

“And then something changed,” he said.

With increasingly virulent attacks on unions, wages went flat for the next three-and-half decades (despite continued increases in productivity). Then the Great Recession of 2008 hit and wages declined.

“Sixty to 80 percent of the jobs lost (in the Great Recession) were living wage jobs, but only about 40 percent of the jobs we’re getting back are living wage jobs,” he said. “We’re getting a whole lot of no benefit, minimum wage jobs.”

Merkley said the United States must invest more in its infrastructure, invest more in career technical education, get back to manufacturing, and require federally-funded projects to use American-made materials.

He has sponsored a number of bills that would provide low interest loans and loan guarantees and credits for installing energy-efficient renovations in commercial and multi-family residential buildings. The bills include the Rural Energy Savings Program and the Water Infrastructure Finance and the In-

novation Authority (WIFIA). The Rural Energy Savings Program would assist rural electric co-ops in offering low-interest loans to their customers, which families and businesses can repay through savings on their monthly energy bills. WIFIA would help urban and rural municipalities replace and repair aged and crumbling water supply infrastructure and wastewater treatment facilities using low-cost federal loans.

“This is the most cost effective strategy there is — the biggest bang for the buck in creating jobs. You get huge leverage for low interest loans, and you can’t outsource the jobs, and 95-plus percent of the materials are made in the United States,” Merkley said.

Both concepts have passed in the Senate but are now bogged down in the U.S. House.

Merkley pointed out that the U.S. spends only 2 percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure, compared to 10 percent in China and 5 percent in Europe.

“China has gone from bicycles to bullet trains over the last 10 years,” he said. “We’re barely repairing the infrastructure we already have, let alone building infrastructure for the future economy. That’s no way to prepare for the future economy.”

Merkley has championed several amendments on Buy America. One closed a loophole that allowed the San Francisco Bay Bridge to use Chinese steel. Merkley also employed a floor



U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley greets delegates after speaking at the 52nd annual convention of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council. He is pictured above shaking hands with A.J. Blair, financial secretary of Iron Workers Shopmen Local 516. At the left is Stan Daniels, business manager of Insulators Local 36.

amendment to include Buy America language in the WIFIA legislation.

In addition to Merkley, several elected leaders addressed the convention, including Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, Secretary of State Kate

Brown, state Treasurer Ted Wheeler, state Sen. Lee Beyer (D-Eugene), and state Reps. Val Hoyle, (D-Eugene), Caddy McKeown, (D-Coos Bay), Margaret Doherty, (D-Portland), and Julie Parrish, (R-Tualatin).

Hoyle was awarded the “Legislator of the Year,” and Doherty was recognized as having the “Fastest Gavel in the West.”

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