

# Back for August recess, Sen. Ron Wyden hears from labor

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U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) took questions on trade policy and banking regulation during an hour-long Aug. 19 breakfast meeting with about 70 Portland area union leaders, staffers, and activists. The meeting was hosted by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council at Westmoreland's Union Manor, a union-sponsored senior living center in Portland.

Opening the meeting, Wyden said he had labor to thank for being elected to Congress in the first place. That was in 1980. Since then, Wyden has voted in accord with organized labor 90 percent of the time, according to the national AFL-CIO's "lifetime" Committee on Political Education (COPE) rating.

But trade policy has been a consistent area of disagreement. Wyden has been a supporter of NAFTA-style trade agreements for 20 years, starting with a vote for NAFTA itself in 1993 when he was in the U.S. House of Representatives. Since then, he's voted for every NAFTA-style trade treaty except agreements with Chile and Singapore in 2003 and Oman in 2006. Labor union leaders hold the agreements responsible for accelerating the offshoring of American manufacturing.

Now in his fourth Senate term, Wyden is in a position to affect trade policy, as chair of the Senate Subcommittee on International Trade, Customs and Global Competitiveness. But he's given no sign that he'll oppose the next big treaty — the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) — which the

Obama Administration is negotiating in secret with 11 Pacific Rim nations. Wyden *has* called for the TPP talks to be more transparent, however, a stance which garnered praise at the breakfast from Elizabeth Swager of the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign.

"I will lead a fight this fall to find out what's being talked about," Wyden told the Portland labor leaders. TPP negotiations are slated to wrap up in October.

Wyden called TPP "our chance to have new leverage with China," though without explaining how that would work. In 2000, Wyden voted with 82 other U.S. senators to grant permanent normal trade relations to China.

Wyden also talked up a bill he sponsored that would "take away tax breaks for sending jobs overseas." Since 1962, it's been a feature of U.S. tax law that U.S. taxpayers don't pay federal income tax on the foreign profits of their foreign subsidiaries — until those profits are brought back to the United States. Wyden's bill would eliminate that tax deferral and grant a one-time chance to bring foreign earnings back at a low tax rate. His bill would also reduce the U.S. corporate income tax rate from its current top rate of 35 percent to a flat 24 percent. Wyden's bill, S. 727, had two co-sponsors, but didn't go anywhere after it was introduced in 2011, and Wyden hasn't reintroduced it in the current session of Congress, which began in January.

Northwest Oregon Labor Council Executive Secretary-Treasurer Bob Tackett asked Wyden if

he supports a bill by U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren to reinstate the Glass-Steagall Act, which kept commercial banking separate from investment banking from 1933 until it was repealed in 1999. Wyden said he eats lunch with Warren, is "looking closely" at her bill, and will have more to say about it this fall.

Members of the National Association of Letter Carriers thanked Wyden for support of a bill to return the U.S. Postal Service to fiscal health by ending a legal requirement that it pre-fund retiree health benefits.

Oregon Building Trades Executive Secretary-John Mohlis updated Wyden about the Jordan Cove Energy Project, a proposed liquified natural gas export facility in Coos Bay. Mohlis said the project's front-end engineering and design work

has been completed. Construction contractors for Jordan Cove signed a project labor agreement in April, pledging to employ union construction workers if construction moves forward. The proposal is to construct a 234-mile pipeline from Malin, Oregon, to the Port of Coos Bay, where a natural gas fired power plant would be constructed alongside storage tanks, a liquefaction plant, and a shipping terminal.

Wyden is chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Jordan Cove — a subsidiary of Canada-headquartered pipeline and natural gas company Versen Inc. — is seeking construction, operation and export permits approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Department of Energy.

## ...March on Washington revisited

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and Portland. Speakers at both events talked about workers' rights, women's rights, the right to vote, preserving Social Security, good jobs, fixing the criminal justice system, and comprehensive immigration reform.

"So much of what we sought to achieve 50 years ago is gravely threatened today," the Communications Workers of America said in a statement. "We gather together not as a commemora-

tion, but as a continuation and a call to action."

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said, "The unforgettable sounds and images from 1963 also remind us that change is possible.

In the run-up to the anniversary march, the AFL-CIO pledged to recommit itself to building a strong social and economic justice movement in the U.S. The national labor federation will initiate a plan of action at its upcoming convention Sept. 8-11 in Los Angeles.

## TriMet's Expensive "Dead Air" Decision

TriMet's expensive hi-tech purchases have been repeatedly called into question. The effects of such unwise decisions ripple throughout the entire system, impacting safety, health, service and finances.

Take the case of TriMet's new \$35 million radio dispatch system that was rolled out in 2012. Months later, the system remains plagued with problems. Consequently, dispatchers must simultaneously monitor both the old and the new systems. Here is a look at the growing number of problems this pricey new system has caused . . .

**RISKS TO SAFETY:** Like air traffic controllers, TriMet dispatchers are responsible for the moment-to-moment safety of thousands of passengers, as well as fellow workers and the public. This job is now incredibly challenging in the face of:

- **Emergency calls to dispatch that not only automatically "time out" after two minutes – even in the middle of an emergency – but also force operators to wait another two minutes before they can reconnect**
- **"Dead zones" throughout the system where none of the new radios work at all and instances where the entire system has gone dead for more than 45 minutes.**
- **Frequent failure of GPS tracking devices such that they misidentify where a bus is actually located**
- **An unworkable emergency phone procedure that delays police response times.**

**COMPROMISES TO PASSENGERS SAFETY AND SERVICE:** Forced to rely on a flawed communications system and unable to respond to problems and emergencies, dispatchers operate in non-stop crisis mode. Passengers are put in dangerous situations, missing connections and experiencing late arrivals. Service is worsening. TriMet fares are already higher than fares in other West Coast cities. System expansion, \$30 million vending machines and \$35 million dispatching systems cut deep into TriMet's operations budget. To get more money, TriMet cuts service and raises fares—both of which lower ridership and revenue.

**THREATS TO WORKERS' HEALTH:** As a consequence of the chronic dispatch problems, workplace stress is taking an increased physical toll on dispatchers. They are experiencing more repetitive injuries and sick days. This results in staffing shortages, skipped breaks, increased overtime and cancelled vacations. That in turn, leads to even more stress and higher rates of illness.

Like many of TriMet's multi-million dollar purchases, management never consulted the dispatchers before buying this problem-plagued dispatch system. Instead, management ignored these workers' decades of experience. Now, it is the dispatchers, operators, passengers and taxpayers who are forced to pay the price of another flawed purchase.

*Sincerely, Your Transit Workers*

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