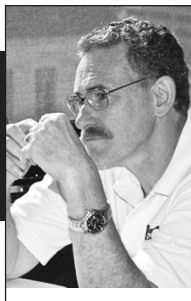


## Who's On Our Side?

By Tom Chamberlain



As 2013 draws to a close, there is much to be angry about.

An estimated 1,500 to 1,800 people are sleeping on Portland's streets or in their cars. Cuts to our country's food subsidy programs mean there will be more kids going to school hungry. And cuts to unemployment benefits in the recently-proposed budget will force unemployed families to move in with family and friends, seek space in shelters, or end up with nowhere to go, in any event joining the legion of the homeless.

As the stock market climbs to record levels, home prices soar, and we add over 200,000 jobs to our economy, it is easy for the Congress to think the recession is over and that now is the time to cut back on benefits for those in need.

I am angry, and when you're angry, it's easy to focus on what is wrong and forget about what is right.

The 2013 AFL-CIO National Convention is reinventing the union movement, demanding accountability and transparency, forcing our movement to grow from 50 disconnected unions to a federation with a national vision. Our vision grows our movement. It builds coalitions and fights for all workers. It passes comprehensive immigration reform and marriage equality; it creates middle class jobs and protects our environ-

ment while advancing an agenda that increases wages and benefits for low-wage workers; it not only allows our union movement to join with our partners but it reminds us that we must regain our historic role of being the voice for all workers – union and non, the poor, the sick and the disadvantaged.

Earned sick days is a classic example of those efforts. Working with and through coalitions, we passed an earned sick days ordinance in the City of Portland. And working with our coalition partners we will pass legislation to give all Oregon workers sick leave in 2015.

A \$15-an-hour living wage ordinance passed by SeaTac voters gives low-wage workers hope.

We witness Oregon's junior U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley evolve from a politician to a warrior against Congressional stagnation as he led the charge for filibuster reform. Without his efforts, workers would not have the protection of a functioning National Labor Relations Board.

The Oregon AFL-CIO came together in a big way in 2013. We worked together to ensure that the new Convention Center Hotel would be built union and that the 300 hotel workers who will eventually be hired have an unfettered path to join a union. We are developing strategies

and finding new resources to organize workers in a collaborative way that is proving to be a national model.

There is no question that America is following a pro-corporate agenda at the expense of American workers. And there is more going wrong for workers than going in our favor. But we as a movement are moving in the direction of change that will lead to greater power and influence.

As we march shoulder-to-shoulder with our sisters and brothers in Bend and Hermiston for comprehensive immigration reform, you can feel it. When you catch a ride with Union Cab, you can feel it. When you sign the petition for marriage equity, you can feel it. When you talk to the paratransit lift drivers who just obtained their first contract, you can feel it: pride, hope, and a renewed belief that we can together create the America we were promised, that we can create an America that we deserve.

As we look toward 2014, we know that the future is on our side.

*Tom Chamberlain is president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.*

## AFL-CIO department backs Blumenauer's gas tax plan

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — The AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department (TTD) is backing a plan by Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) to pay for more highway and mass transit construction and repair nationwide through doubling the federal gas tax, which hasn't been raised in 20 years.

The object, TTD Secretary-Treasurer Larry Willis says, is to provide money for needed infrastructure repairs and replacement and, not incidentally, to provide jobs for construction workers at a time of high unemployment in that economic sector.

Blumenauer introduced two pieces of legislation Dec. 4 to raise money for infrastructure. Falling gas tax revenues due to lessened driving and more fuel-efficient vehicles have left the highway-mass transit trust fund (HTF), which pays for such projects, strapped for cash.

One Blumenauer bill, HR3636, would increase the federal gas tax to 33.4 cents per gallon over the next few years. It has been 18.4 cents per gallon since 1993. The other bill, modeled on a program in Portland, would let states explore charging drivers taxes by vehicle miles traveled.

"The infrastructure deficit is every bit as serious as the budget deficit," Blumenauer said. But he admitted support for a gas tax hike — which polls show two-thirds of respondents oppose even if they know its money goes for highways and mass transit — "will be hard to find."

It isn't hard to find at TTD, which advocated the gas tax hike and looked favorably on the vehicle miles traveled plan, too.

"Here is the problem — we are trying to run a 2013 surface transportation system on a 1993 budget," Willis said at Blumenauer's press conference. "Of course it's not working. Bridges are literally falling down, highway delays are

choking our economy and public transit systems are cutting routes and jobs while Americans are demanding more transportation options.

"This bill is about creating and sustaining jobs for transit employees, construction workers and those who depend on an efficient and multimodal transportation system. It is about reversing years of neglect and underinvestment in our transit systems, highways and bridges. And it is about boosting the ability of our businesses to move goods efficiently and providing Americans with safe and reliable commutes.

"The nation needs its surface transportation infrastructure modernized and expanded, and millions of workers are unemployed or underemployed. Congress must summon the political will to do what virtually everyone agrees must be done," he said.

TTD, citing the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, said the trust fund may be insolvent after this coming October. It added that without more revenue, the trust fund "may incur a \$365.5 billion deficit over the next 23 years," its policy statement said.

Trust fund insolvency would cut annual federal spending on mass transit from \$11 billion to \$3.5 billion and on highways from \$40 billion to \$4.5 billion, TTD stated. "Allowing these programs to fall over this cliff would kill most planned projects and threaten millions of jobs. An answer must be found," the department declared.

"The simplest solution to the threat of insolvency is to increase the gas tax and index it to inflation" as "the labor movement and businesses of all sizes" agree, TTD added. "Yet to date, anti-tax zealots and extremists who clearly fail to understand how America maintains and modernizes its transportation system have managed to stop any progress."



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