

Progressive talk radio host Carl Wolfson (photo above left), asks delegates to the 11th annual convention of the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans to be aware of what is happening around their community, share that knowledge with others, and remind everyone to vote. Wolfson, along with former Oregon governor Barbara Roberts, were guest speakers at the gathering held March 8 in Portland.

Oregon retirees group stays busy, involved in community

The Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans (ORARA) held its 11th annual convention March 8 in Portland. ORARA is a constituency group of the AFL-CIO. The gathering drew 60 delegates.

John O'Brien, ARA regional officer from Tacoma, Washington, reported that ARA's lobbying efforts helped persuade President Barack Obama to drop from his budget a proposal that would have reduced cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) for Social Security. The so-called "chained CPI (Consumer Price Index)" changes the inflation formula used to determine COLAs in Social Security checks, resulting in smaller benefit increases than under the more widely used consumer price index.

"Chained CPI is nothing but slow starvation," O'Brien said.

O'Brien suggested a more accurate way to calculate Social Security COLAs would be a CPI for the elderly. CPI-E is an alternate inflation measure developed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to track consumption among the elderly. Research has shown that spending patterns differ between those 65 and older and the general population, especially in the health care category, where costs have risen much faster than other categories. The CPI-E is still in an experimental stage.

ORARA at-large board member Jim Davis reported success at the just-ended Oregon Legislature in getting funding for placing senior and disability mental health and addiction specialists in all 36 county mental health programs.

Dick Schwarz, a retired executive director of the American Federation of Teachers-Oregon, warned retirees of continuing battles in future elections

over maintaining the rights of unions to have a closed shop and being able to use the dues check-off method of collecting dues and fees. He suggested having conversations with union opponents that begin with the question, "why don't you support democracy?" And then proceed to explain the democratic processes involved in forming and maintaining unions.

Delegates also heard from former governor Barbara Roberts and progressive talk radio host Carl Wolfson.

Roberts, Oregon's first woman governor, shared her life story and — in observance of International Women's Day — encouraged all women leaders to share their stories so that young women realize that they can accomplish big things, too.

Wolfson said it isn't tax cuts for the wealthy that will help America thrive — "it's unions that will help us. If you look at the decline in real wages, right next to it is the decline in union membership. It's a direct relationship. It's unions that built the middle class in this country, and it's the re-defining of unions through coalitions that's going to save us. It's the only path we have."

Wolfson said organized labor and the Democratic Party have to quit being so defensive and go on the offense.

"We don't need to talk about minimum wage — we need to talk about a thrivable wage. We don't need to talk about saving Social Security — we need to talk about expanding Social Security, getting rid of that cap so it's fully funded for 75 years, expanding benefits, lowering the retirement age, and moving to single-payer (health care system). That's what we ought to be talking about. Let them defend the other side of it," he said.


Wolfson asked delegates to "be aware of what's happening, share that knowledge, and get to the polls and make sure to vote."

Convention delegates passed several resolutions, including one that calls on the U.S. Postal Service to provide basic banking services. They re-


solved to promote the Northwest Labor Press and do outreach to other senior organizations (such as Meals on Wheels) and social groups (like the Sierra Club) to rally around common issues. Other resolutions opposed the agenda of the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council


(ALEC), and tuition debt schemes like "pay-it-forward."

ORARA is open to all retirees. Membership is \$10 a year. The group meets the second Thursday each month at the Oregon Labor Center, 3645 SE 32nd, Portland. For more information, call 503-667-8189.



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