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A SENATOR FOR THE WORKING CLASS

In his first six-year term, Democratic U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley has proven to be one of organized labor's closest allies

Democrat Jeff Merkley — one of organized labor's most dependable allies in the U.S. Senate — is up for re-election in Oregon this November against Monica Wehby, a Republican challenger backed by the billionaire Koch brothers.

Oregon labor unions aren't taking any chances, and are working to get the word out in union workplaces about Merkley's record in his first six-year term. A Republican minority has used the Senate's filibuster rules to bring the chamber to a standstill, but that hasn't prevented Merkley from advancing priorities like energy efficiency and infrastructure investment, consumer protections against financial abuses, and pro-family workplace rules like the right of breastfeeding mothers to a private place to pump milk.

Merkley prizes his close relationship with organized labor, and is proud of his working-class roots. The son of a millworker, he grew up in Myrtle Creek, Roseburg and Portland. Today when he's not in Washington, D.C., he lives with his wife and kids in a blue-collar outer East Portland neighborhood. Their daughter Brynne attends David Douglas High School, and their son Jonathan graduated from David Douglas in June. It's the same public school Jeff Merkley attended — and was elected student body president.

In a legislative chamber full of outsized personalities, Merkley is known as a calm, thoughtful, persistent figure. Former Oregon Labor Commissioner Dan Gardner — now a DC lobbyist for International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers — says Merkley comes across as an ordinary guy, albeit an extremely smart ordinary guy whose job is representing the people.

"He doesn't go for pomp and hoopla like other

senators," Gardner says. "Some senators come into a building with an entourage. Jeff Merkley takes the Metro [DC's subway.]"

Merkley is also one of the Senate's most reliable pro-labor votes. In 82 votes tallied by the AFL-CIO over five years, Merkley cast just one vote the AFL-CIO deemed "wrong."

Spin and propaganda are par for the course in political campaigns, but one well-aided Koch-funded attack ad against Merkley goes beyond unfair. "In six years, Merkley wrote only one bill that became law," the ad says, insinuating that Merkley lacks a work ethic. It's true on the surface: The unanimously passed Klamath Basin water bill is the only Merkley-authored legislation yet to win passage. But it ignores the dozens of successful amendments Merkley sponsored. [In the Senate, most of today's legislative work takes the form of amendments to big omnibus bills.] And more importantly, it leaves out why Merkley, and every other Democratic Senator, has passed so few bills in recent years: the Republican minority's rampant use of the filibuster, which Merkley has campaigned to reform since the day he arrived.

Along with New Mexico Democrat Tom Udall, Merkley is the Senate's biggest filibuster reform advocate. Under current filibuster rules, it takes a supermajority of 60 of the 100 senators in order to close off debate and move legislation to a vote. In practice, it means that a minority of 41 senators can prevent votes on anything they oppose. Labor unions, particularly Communications Workers of America, have campaigned to get the Senate to change the rules.

So Republicans faulting Merkley's bill-pass-

ing record are like arsonists who complain of smoke and ash after setting fire to the fire marshal's house.

To talk about the filibuster and other issues, Labor Press associate editor Don McIntosh interviewed Merkley in his Lloyd Center campaign office.

LABOR PRESS: Outside Oregon, you're probably best known for your role in reforming the filibuster. Why has that been your priority?

JEFF MERKLEY: The biggest shock of going to the U.S. Senate was to see how paralyzed it had become. I was first around the Senate in 1976-

77, when I interned with Senator Mark Hatfield. I went back and saw the Senate again when I worked for Congress in the 1980s. It worked as a legislative body should. It had a functioning protocol for introducing and voting on amendments and bills.

The heart of the dysfunction that's grown since then is the filibuster. Filibuster is a Dutch word. It means freebooter. That's a pirate. Piracy has overtaken the Senate. To give you a sense of this: In the six years that Lyndon B. Johnson was majority leader of the Senate, there was only one time that

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Fired pro-union PIRG fundraiser takes settlement after devastating crash

By DON MCINTOSH
Associate Editor

David Neel's 20-month fight for reinstatement ended with a crash.

Neel, 37, is a telephone fundraiser who believes passionately in the union movement. He helped win a 2012 campaign by workers at the Portland call center of PIRG-affiliated Fund for the Public Interest to join Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7901, and then became an active volunteer on the union contract bargaining team. Then on Nov. 6, 2012, he was fired on a string of trumped-up accusations.

Neel, unlike at least 12 other pro-union workers fired by the Fund for the Public Interest, was

able to prove to a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) agent and a federal judge that his union activism was a factor in his firing. The judge ordered the Fund to reinstate Neel with back pay, but the Fund appealed to the NLRB's five-member board in Washington, D.C. The Fund lost there too, and then appeared to defy a May 2014 Board order for reinstatement. The Fund wanted Neel to accept a financial settlement in return for waiving his right to reinstatement, but Neel refused.

"I wanted them to be forced to do the right thing," Neel said. "I wanted to go back."

But in early morning July 5, Neel and his fi-

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