

# ...Rally to save USPS

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down. We're trying to keep it from being slowed down even more," said Mark Dimondstein, president of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). "Two days will become three days and four days. It will be a slowing down of the mail throughout the country." [Last summer, delegates to the APWU national convention voted unanimously for Donahoe to resign. The union represents 200,000 postal workers and retirees.]

Postal management says the closures are necessary because the USPS, which isn't funded by taxpayers, is losing money.

Postal unions maintain the cuts are "absolutely unnecessary" and that postal operations are profitable. USPS' "red ink," they say, stems from political interference, not from the mail. In 2006, a lame-duck Congress mandated that the Postal Service pre-fund future retiree health benefits 75 years in advance, something no other public

agency or private firm is required to do. That costs the Postal Service \$5.6 billion a year, and that's the red ink.

Postal unions acknowledge that revenue from First Class mail has been declining, but they say package delivery, largely due to the growth of e-commerce, has been rapidly expanding, resulting in an operating profit so far this year of more than \$1 billion.

Postal unions and their allies are calling on the next postmaster general to reverse Donahoe's policies of lowering standards, reducing hours, outsourcing work and diminishing a great American institution. They say if the shutdowns are implemented, all mail — medicine, online purchases, local newspapers, newsletters of religious organizations, bill payments, letters and invitations — throughout the country would be delayed.

"We call on USPS' Board of Governors to immediately freeze Donahoe's policies and to do no more harm," the postal unions said.



Jim Cook, a retired president of the National Association of Letter Carriers Branch 82, David Goldberg, an activist with Portland Communities and Postal Workers United, and Elana Guiney of the Oregon AFL-CIO take part in a Veterans Day march in downtown Portland to save the United States Post Office. Approximately 100 people were at the rally, including recently re-elected U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley. (Photo by Jamie Partridge)

## What would a REAL pro-worker legislative agenda look like?

### Nine ideas to make Oregon more worker-friendly

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In an era when a dysfunctional Congress can hardly pass federal budgets, let alone meaningful legislation, state legislatures have become, more than ever, laboratories of democracy. That's especially the case where one political party controls both legislative chambers and the governor's office, and thus can enact its agenda. When the Republican party is the one in power in statehouses, a corporate-funded group called ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) is ready to provide a template of bills to cut regulation, clip business taxes, and cripple unions. But what about states like Oregon, where Democrats find themselves in charge of the House, Senate and governor's office?

We Oregonians like to brag about the landmark laws of yesteryear — public access beaches, farm and timber lands protected from sprawl, bottle deposits keeping highways clean (and no sales tax or self-serve gas!) But where are today's bold ideas? Today the state is hobbled by tax limitations and the decline of the high-wage wood products industry. Compared to other states, it's at the high end for hunger and the low end for higher ed funding. Oregon did well in the past making a livable environment. Maybe it's time to reopen the laboratory of democracy to make it livable for working people again.

If lawmakers are interested in intervening decisively on the side of working people, here are a few ideas:

**Raise the Minimum Wage** Oregon's low-wage workers need a raise, and it's within the Legislature's power to grant it. Raising the minimum wage (currently \$9.10 an hour) is the most direct way to help workers who need help the most. And it's hard to think of a bigger boon to the economy than a law putting money in workers' pockets. How much? If low-wage workers had gotten their fair share of America's workplace productivity gains for the last 45 years, they'd be making \$18.67 an hour today. But we'd gladly settle for \$15.

**Paid Sick Leave For All** All across the world, in 163 countries, paid sick leave is just taken for granted as a basic workplace right. Not in America. Only three states have it so far — plus Portland and Eugene, in Oregon. Remember during the 2013 sick leave debate at Portland City Council, when the local chamber of commerce said it would be a hassle to have different rules for Portland than surrounding areas? They're right: It's time for every Oregon worker to have paid sick leave.

**Stop Wage Theft** It's very nice to have laws requiring minimum wage, overtime and rest breaks, but they only work if employers obey the law. But evidence is growing that we're seeing an epidemic of employer lawlessness. Employers are illegally classifying workers as independent contractors to avoid payroll taxes, unemployment insurance, and workers comp. Workers are being denied breaks or told to work off the clock before or after shifts. They're working under the table, paid piece rates less than the minimum, and even being paid late or not at all. It's time the

state get serious about ending wage theft. Either beef up enforcement budgets and go after violators, or get out of the way by making it easier for workers to sue — legislating punitive damages so that attorneys and unions can better defend workers.

**Ban the Box** Mass incarceration has become a workers rights issue: Over 2.2 million Americans are today behind bars, and they're overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately minority. When they get out, they face further hurdles getting housing and employment because they can legally be discriminated against for past convictions, even if that has nothing to do with what they're applying for. Model "ban the box" legislation would give them an opportunity to start over by removing the "have you ever been convicted" box from initial applications. Employers and landlords could still do criminal background checks and discriminate based on relevant convictions. But ex-offenders would at least get a chance to explain their record, and show they've reformed.

**Just Cause, not "Just Because"** There's a basic union contract right that's little-known but hugely important. It's called "just cause," and it means that employers have to have a legitimate reason, and demonstrate it, before they can fire a worker. Without just cause, employment is "at will," meaning a worker can be fired at any time for any reason, or for no reason at all. But a union contract isn't the only way workers can get just cause. Legislators could make it legally required. They did so in Montana in 1987, and as a result, workers in the Big Sky state have a little

more job security, and employers are a little less arbitrary. In 2008, the Colorado AFL-CIO had a ballot initiative that would have done the same, but dropped it in exchange for withdrawal of an anti-union initiative. Do Oregon's workers deserve the same protection as Montana's? Just cause is common sense fairness, and deserves a look.

**Eight-Hour Day** Remember May Day, known throughout the world as International Workers Day? It got its start 128 years ago as a general strike by American workers for the eight-hour day. Incredibly, American workers still don't have the eight-hour day. They have the 40-hour week. And it's not the same, as any worker on a mandatory 12-hour shift will tell you. But there's a place where the eight-hour day is the law of the land, where workers earn overtime when they have to work longer. It's called California. Surely the Beaver State can do as well.

**Do Business With Responsible Contractors** Why is it that for low-income criminals, we have jails, but for high-income criminals, we have ... public contracts? Big banks defraud Oregonians and cheat public employee pensions, but continue to get public business. Vendors commit wage theft, or break laws to squash union campaigns, but continue to sell to the state. Is it too much to ask that the Legislature stop giving business to companies that break the law?

**Get Something Back for Our Money** You don't want government pushing workers' wages down, so when the state spends money on construction, it rightly requires that the workers be

paid at least the prevailing wage. But what about when the state spends money through a tax break, as it does through programs like the Enterprise Zone tax abatements? Currently, despite hundreds of millions of dollars going out the door in the form of tax subsidies, there's no requirement to pay the prevailing wage. Maybe this will be the Legislature which changes that.

**Paid Family Leave** It's great that Oregon has a state family leave act. It requires employers of 25 or more employees to grant leave when workers have a baby, or a death in the family. But many workers can't afford to take the leave, because it's unpaid. A penny per hour payroll tax would generate enough to give new parents six weeks leave at minimum wage. And two pennies might be enough to pay for seven weeks at \$15 an hour.

Unions and their allies spent the last few months helping elect many of the lawmakers who will serve in Salem next year. Now they'll spend the next few months getting pro-worker agendas ready for the legislative session that begins in February 2015. The Northwest Workers Justice Project is readying legislation to combat wage theft. An alliance of civil rights and labor will push for Ban the Box. The building trades council will call for prevailing wage on tax-subsidized construction projects. A campaign called Fair Shot Oregon will call for paid sick leave and a higher minimum wage.

If Democratic lawmakers rise to the challenge, they'll have a chance to restore Oregon's reputation for innovation, and pass pro-worker policies that inspire others to do the same.