

# Labor gets ready for an action-packed session of the Oregon Legislature

The five proposals from the new Fair Shot for All coalition [see related story on Page 1] may end up being some of the marquee issues considered by Oregon lawmakers this year, but labor and workers' rights organizations will be campaigning for dozens of other important bills when the Legislature convenes Feb. 2.

With increased Democratic majorities in both legislative chambers — and key committees led by lawmaker who are actually union members — the mood is optimistic.

"There were some clear messages that came out of the November election," says State Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland). "Voters are concerned about economic inequality, and they see that the fruits of the recovery are not being shared."

Dembrow — a community college instructor who's also a longtime union leader in American Federation of Teachers-Oregon — is now chair of the newly formed Senate Workforce Committee, where many of the labor-related bills will go to be worked on. And its counterpart House Business and Labor Committee will also be led by a trade unionist: state representative Paul Holvey (D-Eugene), a union rep at the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Car-

penters.

Here are some of the labor-related proposals lawmakers will consider:

**APPRENTICE UTILIZATION.** A bill supported by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters would require large public construction projects to meet certain minimum targets for utilizing apprentices. Not only would it open up pathways for more young, women and minority workers to gain entry into high-skill, high-wage building trades, but it could also mean more business for "high-road" construction employers — those that are already making investments in apprenticeship training, as union contractors do.

**WAGE THEFT.** Oregon Coalition to Stop Wage Theft, a broad labor-community alliance initiated by the nonprofit Northwest Workers' Justice Project, will be backing a bill to crack down on wage theft. Wage theft is a catch-all term for when employers cheat workers out of wages or benefits they're lawfully entitled to. Besides outright non-payment or under-payment of wages, wage theft includes cases where employees don't get paid rest breaks, don't get time-and-a-half for overtime, or work off-the-clock before or after shifts. It also includes cases where employers falsely classify

employees as "independent contractors," because the employees don't get workers compensation or unemployment insurance, and must pay the employers and their own Social Security and Medicare taxes.

**MAKING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS STICK.** To combat a growing tendency by public employers to push through changes outside of normal contract bargaining, Oregon AFSCME will back a bill to require mediation and binding arbitration before management can impose new changes during the life of a collective bargaining agreement — when those changes are mandatory subjects of bargaining.

**INFRASTRUCTURE JOBS.** For the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, the number one priority will be robust infrastructure funding, including roads and bridges. State gas taxes fund roads, but haven't kept up with increased costs. The Building Trades Council — in a coalition with three dozen other stakeholders called the Oregon Transportation Forum — is calling for the state gas tax to be increased and then indexed to offset the loss of road repair funds as cars become more fuel efficient. And they'll support plans for lot-

tery bonds to fund a new round of investment in "multimodal" transportation infrastructure, including air, rail, marine, transit, bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The Building Trades Council will also support increasing bond authority for the Oregon University System, both for new construction and for needed energy and seismic retrofits of existing buildings.

**CONTRACTING OUT.** Oregon AFSCME, together with other public sector unions, will also be promoting bills to bring greater transparency and accountability — and fairness — to public contracting. One bill would require that contract negotiations be open to the public, and that contracts be posted on a state transparency web site. Another bill would make it harder for governments to outsource if that involves chopping worker pay and benefits.

**SINGLE PAYER HEALTH CARE.** Last year, advocates of creating a universal public health insurance system were able to pass a law authorizing a study of how such a thing could be set up in Oregon. But the study was to be funded with private money, and supporters so far have raised only about \$50,000 of the \$200,000 needed. This year, the union-backed coalition Health Care for All Oregon will seek to extend authorization for the study, and seek a state match for private dollars raised.

**PAY IT FORWARD.** Oregon Working Families Party will advocate further development of a plan that was conceived by students in former party co-chair Barb Dudley's Portland State University class. Under the "Pay it Forward" proposal, students at public colleges and universities in Oregon could opt to attend tuition-free in return for an agreement to pay 2 to 4 percent of their income for the next 20 years, after graduation. In 2013, legislators authorized a work group which met in 2014 to design a pilot program. Its pilot program proposal — starting with 1,000 students a year — would need at least \$56 million in funds by the time the

first group graduated in four years.

**FUSION VOTING.** Oregon Working Families Party will also push a proposal for full-fledged fusion voting, along the lines of the system that prevails in New York, where the union-backed minor party is strongest. Under fusion voting, candidates can be endorsed by more than one political party. Oregon Working Families Party was able to pass "partial fusion" in 2009, so Oregon candidates today can run with the endorsement of more than one political party, but all the endorsements are listed together next to the candidate's name. Under "full fusion," each party can list the candidate's name on their own ballot line. As a result, candidates know how many votes each party delivered, giving minor parties more potential influence. The Oregon Working Families Party sees fusion voting as key to its strategy of delivering votes to candidates who commit to and deliver on a pro-worker agenda.

**CANNABIS WORKERS RISING.** Last November, Oregon voters legalized recreational marijuana effective next January, but many of the regulatory details about retail sales will be worked out this year by the Oregon Legislature. UFCW Local 555, which backed Ballot Measure 91, will be paying close attention. If lawmakers place limits on the number of retailers, the union will advocate that the state issue permits not by lottery but with a merit-based system that would favor responsible applicants, giving credit for good labor practices, for example. UFCW represents the workers at medical marijuana dispensaries and other legal cannabis operations in several other states.

**CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION.** Career and Technical Education — which includes things like shop classes and computerized drafting — has atrophied during Oregon's perennial budget crises, and is in need of reinvestment. Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, with labor support, will call for further restoration of CTE in high schools and middle schools. The governor is asking for a \$25 million increase, and trades unions would like to see even more.

"Working people did a lot of work during this election cycle to make sure candidates were running on issues that matter, and it paid off," says Graham Trainor, Oregon AFL-CIO political and legislative director. "Now the Legislature has an incredible opportunity to move the ball forward for working Oregonians."



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