

Labor attorney Susan Stoner retires after decades defending bus drivers

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 general counsel Susan Stoner retired effective Feb. 28.

Over the 24 years she was an in-house attorney, she was an important figure behind the scenes in the life of the union. Stoner's legal work helped win arbitrations and defend contracts, and won reinstatement for dozens of transit workers. She also advised union leaders during years of battles with public transit agencies like TriMet and private contractors like multinational First Student.

Stoner, 65, is a Portland native and the daughter of Cal Stoner, an ardently pro-union electrical contractor. Stoner Electric Group, which he founded in 1960, continues to

employ members of IBEW Local 48 to this day.

"My dad loved IBEW," Stoner says. "I grew up thinking unions were wonderful."

And she still thinks that. Despite their decline, unions are still workers' best defense, Stoner says, and the most democratic institutions they'll encounter.

"Our job in the union," Stoner says, "is to resist exploitation and the greed of the people who are running our working lives."

Before settling down as a labor lawyer, Stoner says she was a hippie and an activist. Graduating from Wilson High School in 1967, she joined up with causes from anti-war to anti-poverty to historical preservation. She worked for the homeless youth clinic Outside In, started a women's health clinic, and volunteered with a prisoner support group. She enrolled at Marylhurst College in 1975, and earned independent study credit interviewing activists in the Eastern and Southern United



Susan Stoner

States. She studied law at University of Houston, and met videographer George Slanina, whom she later married.

Moving back to Portland in 1988, she passed the Oregon bar and did outside legal work for Local 757 and other clients until joining the union as staff attorney in 1991.

Stoner says she's grateful to have represented bus drivers and mechanics: "They are oriented toward service to others, and they're always on time," Stoner said.

If she has one bit of parting advice, it's a call for unity: "Members need to realize that dissension within the union empowers the employer."

In retirement, Stoner will spend time at home in Southeast Portland finishing the fifth book in her series of self-published historical mystery novels set amid the labor union ferment of 1900s Portland. Titled *Deadline*, it deals with a real-life conflict between cattle and sheep ranchers in Central Oregon.

Stoner's successor as ATU Local 757's general counsel is Lane Toensmeier.

...Fast track fight begins

From Page 1

leaks show U.S. negotiators pushing the other countries to:

- Agree to an "Investor-State Dispute Resolution" process in which foreign investors can sue governments in special tribunals of trade lawyers — if new regulations reduce expected profits;

- Agree to extraordinarily long monopolies for copyrighted works — 70 years after the death of a copyright holder; and

- Expand drug company profits by giving them the right to extend drug patents for new uses, requiring generic manufacturers to re-run expensive tests to prove drug safety, and outlawing systems that price medicine according to clinical benefits.

For the AFL-CIO, TPP comes in a larger context of 20-plus years of trade agreements that have coincided with record trade deficits and the loss of millions of American manufacturing jobs.

"Today, the trade policies of the United States are undermining the interests of working people," the national AFL-CIO Executive Council declared in an official statement adopted Feb. 23 in Atlanta. "When decisions about economic policy are made behind closed doors, those decisions tend to advance the policy preferences of political and economic elites, not the broad interests of the populace at large.... U.S. trade deals — from NAFTA and CAFTA to Korea and Colombia — form a mountain of broken promises made to workers. With NAFTA and Korea, we were promised more jobs and higher wages because the deals would make it easier to export U.S. products. Instead, the deals made it easier to export U.S. jobs."

Both supporters and opponents of the TPP have stepped up their campaigns. Obama cabinet officials are criss-crossing the country to stump for the TPP. Obama's Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker — the billionaire Hyatt heiress — flew to Portland Feb. 17 to talk up the TPP with local execs at a nonunion Leatherman Group factory. And Obama trade czar Michael Froman — in magazine articles, TV interviews, and meetings with elected officials — has been selling the idea that the TPP will bring jobs back to America. [It's already brought his predecessor a job: Ron Kirk, who started the TPP negotiations in 2009, left in

2013 to take a job as an international trade lawyer providing "strategic advice to companies with global interests."]

On Feb. 26, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) and seven other senators took to the Senate floor to speak in opposition to fast track and the TPP.

The same day, President Obama met in person with members of Congress, including Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Oregon), to seek support. Obama even invited a reporter from Portland's KGW-TV to the White House for a two-minute interview in which he implied the TPP will have "tough protections for labor rights and the environment."

Congressman Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon), who voted against NAFTA and every agreement since, just laughed at that claim.

"These things can change at any time," DeFazio told the Labor Press by phone, "but the last time I checked, the environmental provisions were meaningless and the labor provisions were non-binding, yet the 'investor-state' provisions are stronger than ever: Corporations can sue the United States of America for a loss of anticipated profits — to undermine environmental, labor or consumer protection laws."

Elizabeth Swager, director of the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign, says DeFazio and Merkley are certain "no" votes on fast track. But other members of Congress from Oregon and Southwest Washington aren't signaling how they'll vote. And fast track's fate may depend on Wyden, the most senior Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee. Wyden voted for NAFTA in 1993, and most other trade agreements since then. But a disagreement between Wyden and Senate Finance Chair Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) over the details is causing a delay in the fast track bill.

On March 4, Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain flew to Washington, D.C., to lobby members of the Oregon delegation.

"I think we have a shot at stopping this one," Chamberlain said. "But it's going to take people calling their elected representatives."

The Oregon AFL-CIO is holding a "Push Back the Fast Track" rally Monday, March 9, at 5:30 p.m. at Director Park, 815 SW Park Ave., Portland.

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