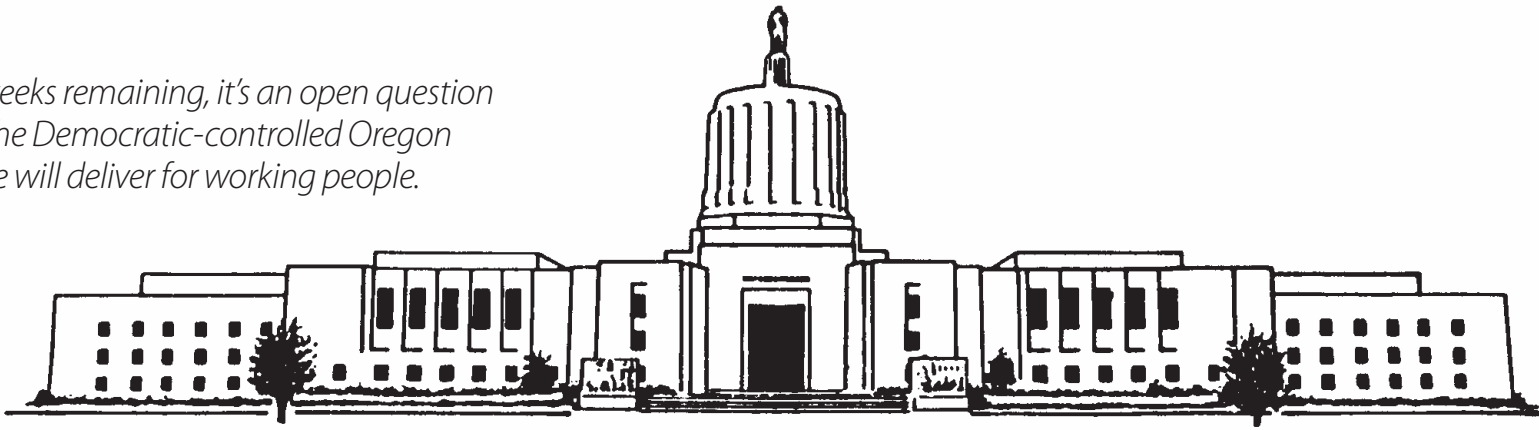


With six weeks remaining, it's an open question whether the Democratic-controlled Oregon Legislature will deliver for working people.



Oregon AFL-CIO's legislative agenda still in the air

By Don McIntosh
Associate Editor

With six weeks remaining in its 2015 session, the Oregon Legislature has entered the season of vote-counting and deal-cutting.

Democrats control 35 of the 60 seats in the House, and 18 of 30 seats in the Senate, yet it's an open question whether they'll deliver significant gains for working people this year. Several key labor-backed bills would require more from Oregon employers; if those bills come to a vote, corporate Democrats would have to demonstrate which side they're on.

The Oregon AFL-CIO this year is pushing to increase the state minimum wage, require paid sick leave, and penalize large employers that don't offer health insurance.

Raising the minimum wage

Senate President Peter Courtney told a business group March 26 that he won't allow a vote on raising the state minimum wage. His office hasn't responded to several requests from the Labor Press to clarify that stance. But labor lobbyists still hope to get around Courtney's curse, and

are trying to line up support among lawmakers to raise Oregon's minimum wage beyond its current \$9.25 an hour. On April 20, a whole set of bills to raise it various amounts made it out of the House Business and Labor Committee and the Senate Workforce Committee. Now the bills are in the House and Senate rules committees. There's also a bill to lift a statewide ban on local governments setting higher local minimum wages.

Meanwhile, supporters of a \$15 minimum wage are in the first phase of gathering signatures for an initiative aimed at the 2016 ballot. The chief petitioners on the measure are retired union letter carrier Jamie Partridge, farmworker leader Ramon Ramirez, and Marcy Westerling from the nonprofit Rural Organizing Project.

Paid Sick Leave

Oregon's statewide paid sick leave proposal is looking a little more sickly than when it was first introduced. As introduced, HB 2005 and SB 454 would have given all workers in Oregon 56 hours a year of paid sick leave. But as amended, the bill cuts that down to 40 hours, exempts businesses with five or fewer employees, and pre-empts any local jurisdiction from passing a stronger standard. The City of Eugene last year granted sick leave to all employees in an ordinance that's due to take effect July 1; that would be struck down under the amended bill. Still, advocates are saying a statewide sick leave policy would be a significant advance; if passed, Oregon would be only the fourth state to have such a requirement. The bill is currently in the House Rules Committee.

A publicly-sponsored retirement savings plan for the private sector

A House proposal to create a state-sponsored retirement savings program is in the Joint Ways and Means Committee. The plan would help workers who don't have an employer-sponsored plan, starting in June 2017.

Penalize large employers when their workers go on Medicaid

What do you do with large employers who don't offer health insurance, and who pay employees so little that they get public medical assistance? Under an AFL-CIO-backed Senate bill, they would face a penalty equivalent to 90 percent of the cost of coverage under a "silver level" health plan on the ObamaCare health insurance exchange. The bill passed the Senate Workforce Committee April 23 and is now in the Ways and Means Committee.

Transportation funding

For the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, the top priority this year is passing a new transportation investment package, which would include an increase in the gas tax. That would require a three-fifths supermajority in both legislative chambers, meaning at least some Republicans would have to vote for it. But Republican legislators are saying they won't support it unless Democrats agree to roll back the just-approved extension to Oregon's low-carbon fuel standard program.

Expansions and fixes to the state prevailing wage requirement

One bill would make it clear that newly self-governing state

universities are still obligated to pay prevailing wage on construction projects on university-owned land; it passed the House 41-18 and is now in the Senate Workforce Committee. Another bill would clarify that if more than \$750,000 of public funds is spent on a project, it must pay prevailing wage even if it's on private land; it passed the Senate 22-6 and is now in the House Business and Labor Committee.

Making public collective bargaining agreements stick

Public sector unions have complained about an abuse of the collective bargaining process: Public employers will bargain a union contract, and then after it's signed, bring up new issues and impose changes without the union's input. A bill to rein that in would require binding arbitration before an employer could impose new terms during the life of a collective bargaining agreement. It passed the House 32-25 on March 3, and is now in the Senate Workforce Committee.

Clearing the path for a convention center hotel

Metro is overseeing a \$200 million public-private partnership to construct a new convention center headquarters hotel, using private investment and public bonds backed by hotel taxes and lottery revenues. But the project faced several lawsuits saying Metro was exceeding its charter. A bill to make it clear that the Metro regional government has the authority to finance visitor-oriented facilities was backed by the Building Trades Council and others. It passed the Senate 20-10 and the house 35 to 24, and was signed into law by Governor Kate Brown on May 5.



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