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INSIDE

OR Legislature	3
Union meetings	6
Local Motion	9
Classified ads	11

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Fast Track runs off the rails

Fast Track appeared to go down to defeat in the U.S. House June 12, even though a Fast Track bill passed the House 219-211. But that apparent defeat might unravel, because House Republican leaders could schedule a re-vote any time through the end of July.

As with everything Congress does these days, it's complicated.

Fast Track is a proposal by Congress to tie its own hands in how it deals with future NAFTA-style trade deals: Those foreign agreements, once negotiated and signed by the president, would get a speedy up-or-down vote in Congress with limited debate and no ability to amend. The labor movement has fought Fast Track time and again, and Fast Track hasn't been renewed since the last one

expired in 2007.

But President Barack Obama has made passing Fast Track his top priority, and has pushed Democrats to give it to him so he can finish negotiations on several secret deals, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership with 11 other Pacific Rim nations, including Vietnam and Japan.

In the lead-up to the June 12 House vote, Obama met privately with the entire House Democratic caucus; it was the first time in nearly two years that Obama had visited the Capitol to lobby members. It didn't go well.

"Basically the president tried to both guilt people and then impugn their integrity," Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), told Talking Points Memo afterward. "There was a number of us who were insulted."

The Senate had passed Fast Track 62-37 May 22, but the Senate bill also included renewal of Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), the program that provides benefits to American workers who lose their jobs because of foreign trade. The House Republican leadership decided to consider those two parts separately. Fast Track passed 219-211, but TAA failed 126-302.

For a bill to get to the president's desk, House and Senate versions have to match. If they don't, one or both of the legislative chambers have to change and re-vote the legislation so the two versions conform. The Senate, with its filibuster rule, can be a tough place to pass any legislation. Some Senate Democrats were reluctant to pass Fast Track without TAA. Thus, a de-

In Congress, Money Talks

Several early June polls show that Fast Track—and the trade deals it would grease the skids for—are unpopular with the public. A poll by New York Times and CBS News showed that 55 percent oppose Fast Track, and an NBC News poll found that 66 percent agree that "protecting American industries and jobs by limiting imports from other countries" is more important than "allowing free trade so you can buy products at low prices no matter what country they come from."

Given its unpopularity among voters, why is Fast Track even being considered? The answer: It's popular among corporate political donors. The nonpartisan research group MapLight tallied \$198 million in Congressional campaign contributions over the last two years from industry and business groups in favor of fast track, compared to \$23 million from labor, civic and business groups opposing it.

feat of the TAA bill in the House would set back Fast Track. Knowing that Republicans have tended to oppose TAA, many House Democrats voted against TAA as a way to slow down Fast Track, even though TAA itself is supported by nearly all Democrats.

But even as she led members of the Democratic caucus to vote no on TAA, Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi signaled possible support for Fast Track later on.

"I was hopeful from the start

Turn to Page 10

Food Front Cooperative Grocery workers vote to unionize

By Don McIntosh
Associate Editor

Workers at Food Front Cooperative Grocery voted 64 to 11 to join United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555. The June 2 vote adds 91 workers at the co-op's two locations to Local 555.

Food Front Co-op is not a worker co-op but a consumer co-op, with more than 10,000 member-owners, and two stores: at 2375 NW Thurman Street, and in Hillsdale at 6344 SW Capitol Highway.

UFCW Local 555 represents workers at Fred Meyer, Safeway, Albertsons, and other grocers.

Food Front workers joined Local 555 once before, in the late 1990s, but voted to go non-union in August 2007 by 20 to 8.

Andrea Uehara, a 27-year Food Front employee, was one of those who voted the union out, and now thinks it was a mistake.

"Over the 10 years we were in a union, we got complacent," Uehara told the Labor Press



Andrea Uehara, a 27-year employee, at the checkstand at Food Front.

June 10. "At the time we hadn't had major problems, so we thought, 'What do we need the union for? All of us now recognize that the union actually was a stabilizing factor in how com-

plaints were handled."

Uehara says at the time Food Front workers decertified the union, management was responsive. But conditions worsened. The company increasingly re-

lied on on-call workers to fill positions, and fell into internal turmoil.

In November 2014, the neighborhood newspaper Northwest Examiner reported widespread discontent at Food Front under the leadership of general manager Holly Jarvis. Ten current and former employees told the paper of autocratic management and a toxic work environment ruled by intimidation.

The union campaign began in January and kept going after Jarvis retired in April. On May 11, Local 555 petitioned for the union election. Uehara says Food Front management didn't fight the union effort.

Concern about Food Front's future was also a big part of workers' decision to unionize, Uehara said. As the Northwest Examiner reported, Food Front has suffered six straight years of operating losses and now faces the likelihood of stiff competition: A new 28,000-square-foot New Seasons Market is slated to open in August at Northwest

21st and Raleigh, four blocks away. A co-op consultant predicts a big drop in Food Front sales after New Seasons opens.

"We want a say in any staff cuts and benefit cuts if it gets that severe," Uehara said.

New Seasons has never been union. Its Southeast Division store was the target of a February 2012 workers rights protest after a nine-year employee was fired for eating tofu without paying for it. The worker was known to New Seasons management as a union supporter, but the National Labor Relations Board found insufficient evidence that was a motive in the firing, and declined to pursue a charge against the company.

By unionizing, Food Front workers hope to gain the stability of a union contract, transparency in pay scales, and a process for resolving complaints.

"We're organizing to make the co-op better," Uehara says. "Today I had a co-worker come up to me and say: 'I really feel excited to work here now.'"