

Summer Institute for Women comes to Portland

From June 23 to 27, Reed College's tranquil summertime campus was once again the site of a summit for union women from around the Western United States and Canada. The Western Region Summer Institute for Union Women is an annual event that rotates between British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and northern and southern California. It comes to Portland every five years.

This year's Institute drew 150 attendees, including about 60 from Canada. The event is a chance for women trade union activists and leaders to meet, share experiences, and learn.

"Not only do they learn new skills and get new ideas," says conference organizer Barbara Byrd, "but they leave with a network of friends who can support them into the future as they take on more responsibilities in their unions. They get a sense of themselves as part of a larger movement."

The conference was sponsored by the Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) of the University of Oregon, and co-sponsored by the Washington State Labor Education and Research Center.



Pictured above, a plenary panel features Vancouver & District Labor Council President Joey Hartman (at podium), national AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler, SEIU Local 503 Executive Director Heather Conroy, and Family Forward Oregon Outreach Director Ashnie Butler.

...New pension rules could impact retirees' benefits

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more than three retirees for every active worker.

Multi-employer plans get their pension contributions from active employers, who pay a certain amount per hour under the terms of their collective bargaining agreements. When a plan has many more retirees than active workers, that can make it impossible to recover from financial market losses.

The biggest failing pension fund—and the one most expected to seek permission to cut benefits—is the Teamsters 411,000-member Central States pension fund, which has nearly five retirees for every active employee.

NCCMP executive director Randy DeFrehn says thus far he's aware of only a handful of plans that are planning to use the law, including Central States, another Teamster plan in the New York area, and a construction industry plan in Ohio. DeFrehn said he's not yet aware of any plans in the Pacific Northwest that are planning to ask for permission to cut benefits. And DeFrehn said the Ohio construction plan might be typical of what's to come: The plan won't be asking to cut all the way down to 110 percent of the PBGC guarantee, because partial reductions of about 25 percent will be enough to restore solvency: Retirees under 80 who earn about \$3,500 a month now in the Ohio plan would be looking at about a 25 percent reduction to about \$2,600 a month. [That's much more than 110 percent of the PBGC guarantee, a formula that would provide at most \$1,179 a month.]

DeFrehn said plans that are

going to need to cut benefits should do so sooner rather than later, because cuts would need to be bigger the longer they wait.

So far, no plans have asked the Treasury Department for permission to make retiree benefit cuts, because the rules were just released. And the Treasury Department says it does not expect to approve any applications until these proposed temporary regulations are finalized after a public comment period which ends Aug. 18, 2015.

The new "special master" in

charge of approving the applications is attorney Kenneth Feinberg. Feinberg has held a number of previous special appointments: He was in charge of the executive compensation restrictions banks were subject to under the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) following the financial crisis, and he was the administrator of benefit programs set up to compensate victims of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the September 11 attacks, the Boston Marathon bombings, and the Virginia Tech

shootings.

On June 18, the day after Feinberg's appointment and the new rules were announced, U.S. Sen. Sanders and U.S. Rep. Kaptur announced the introduction of the "Keep Our Pension Promises Act," which would repeal the pension-cut provisions of the Kline-Miller Act. Instead, the bill would allow distressed plans to partition off "orphaned" participants into separate plans, relieving participating employers from the burden and risk of paying benefits to employees of

defunct employers. To pay the promised benefits of the orphaned participants, the bill would create a legacy fund within the PBGC, paid for by closing tax loopholes used by the very wealthy to accumulate expensive art and avoid estate and gift taxes. Sanders and Kaptur said closing the two loopholes would raise \$29 billion over 10 years. Thus far, the bill has seven co-sponsors in the House and three co-sponsors in the Senate (none from Oregon or Washington).

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