

Washington Legislature budget battle nearly closes state government

OLYMPIA, Wash.—Ending a months-long standoff that came within a day of shutting down state government, the Washington Legislature passed a two-year budget June 29 that increases funding for schools and colleges, raises gas taxes to pay for transportation investments, and gives schoolteachers and state employees a raise for the first time in seven years.

It took the regular session plus three special sessions to finalize the budget because of difficulty reconciling the vision of the Republican-led state Senate and the Democratic-led state House. Republicans proposed a budget of \$37.9 billion, and the Democrats

a budget of \$38.4 billion. And one of the differences was that Senate Republicans didn't want to fund public employee raises that Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee had agreed to in collective bargaining.

The final resolution came after rolling one-day strikes by up to 40,000 teachers and a series of lunch-time rallies by members of Washington Federation of State Employees (AFSCME Council 28). Public employee unions—including Washington Federation of State Employees, Teamsters Local 117, Service Employees, Professional & Technical Employees Local 17, HealthCare 1199NW, American Federation

of Teachers-Washington, and Washington Public Employees Association (United Food and Commercial Workers Local 365)—waged a “Public Service Matters” campaign combining protest demonstrations with newspaper and radio ads.

Ultimately, the two sides split the difference with a \$38.2 billion compromise budget. As part of the deal, Democrats dropped a proposal to institute a capital gains tax, something 41 other states have. Washington is unusual in that it has a sales tax and property tax, but no income tax. A union-backed coalition known as Washington United for Fair Revenue supported the capital

gains tax proposal, and also called on lawmakers to close corporate tax loopholes. Legislators did close a few of the loopholes, including preferential business sales tax rates for software manufacturers, for royalty income, and for out-of-state wholesalers. But they extended or adopted other tax breaks, including one for oil refineries.

The compromise budget deal also includes a transportation funding package paid for with a 7-cent gas tax hike Aug. 1, followed by a 4.9-cent hike on July 1, 2016. The increases will raise \$16 billion over 16 years to expand highways and pay for local roads, ferries, maintenance, safety, transit and trails. As part of the compromise, Democrats also dropped a low-carbon fuel standard Inslee had campaigned for. Environmental groups condemned the transportation pack-

age because of that.

The compromise budget passed the Senate by a 39-9 vote. Vancouver Republican Don Benton was among those voting against it, as was Republican John Braun in the 20th District (North of La Center).

State employees will get a 4.8 percent wage increase over the next two years—the first general wage increases for state employees in seven years—plus maintenance of health benefits. Republican legislators earlier threatened to cut health coverage for state employees' spouses.

The stand-off is not unlike the one in 2013, when House Democrats and Senate Republicans fought through one-and-a-half special sessions—and took Washington state government to the same brink before reaching agreement on June 27—three days before it would have shut down.

Who's on our side?

By Tom Chamberlain Oregon AFL-CIO President



Legislature ends with mixed reviews

The 2015 Oregon Legislature has ended, but with mixed reviews. Strong leadership from Oregon's House Speaker Tina Kotek ushered through a package of bills to lift up low-wage workers and address economic inequality.

Paid Sick Days: After passing a strong bill last month, nearly half a million more Oregon workers have access to paid sick time. No one should have to choose between taking care of their health, or the health of their family, and keeping their job. This is an important step forward. While we applaud legislation that gives hundreds of thousands of workers access to paid sick time, it comes at a cost. Senate leadership refused to pass a clean version of Paid Sick Days, and passed a compromise that includes a two-year ban on local governments enacting fair scheduling ordinances that can provide stability and fairness to workers. Such a decision by Senate leadership ignores challenges of workers who must juggle child care, transportation, or are working two jobs when work schedules can change at a moment's notice.

Retirement Security: This bill ensures that every worker in Oregon can plan for a secure retirement after a lifetime of work. Workers now have access to a simple, easy and effective way to save, because everyone should be able to provide security for themselves and their families, regardless of where they work.

Ban the Box: Qualified applicants with prior convictions and arrests are regularly shut out of jobs and not given a fair shot at achieving employment. HB 3025 removes from job applications any reference concerning whether an applicant has been arrested or incarcerated. This practice has long been used to deny thousands of ex-offenders access to a job interview trapping them in a cycle of un-

employment, low wage jobs and in some cases a return to past behavior. Ban the Box legislation is proven to significantly reduce recidivism.

End Profiling: Profiling by law enforcement happens in Oregon, whether it's based on race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or housing status, and there is no statewide system for reporting. By passing this important bill, law enforcement will be prohibited from profiling, and a system to report unfair profiling will be established, because people shouldn't live in fear and be targeted because of their appearance, country of origin, or religion.

While the 2015 session provided victories for low-wage workers, it failed to raise our minimum wage that currently keeps hundreds of thousands of workers under the federal poverty level. It was a session where Oregon's Senate was an obstacle to passing needed Oregon public employee collective bargaining reform, allowing public employers to unilaterally implement new programs and practices mid-term of a collective bargaining agreement without a fair process to raise concerns. The Legislature failed to pass a crucial transportation package that would have created thousands of jobs by expanding and improving Oregon's aging infrastructure by relieving congestion to increase the state's competitiveness in world markets.

Despite the shortcomings, the 2015 session was an example of the power of unions and community coalitions. The Fair Shot for All Coalition was instrumental in passing key components of a workers' agenda. Thank you for all your efforts.

Tom Chamberlain is president of the Oregon AFL-CIO, a 120,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.

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