

A labor report from the Paris Climate Talks

Washington AFL-CIO President Jeff Johnson tells why he was there, and why labor *must* get involved

Change is coming. Will it be just? At the Nov. 30 to Dec. 11 meeting of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris, foreign ministers from 195 countries hammered out a legally binding agreement to fight climate change. Behind the scenes, a small delegation of U.S. labor officials worked with union leaders from other nations to make sure workers' interests were represented in the final document. Jeff Johnson, president of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, was one of them. The Labor Press interviewed him by phone Dec. 14, the day he returned.

You're Washington state's top-ranking labor leader. Why were you attending the Paris climate talks? Our state labor movement has prioritized climate change as one of those core issues that the labor movement has to be involved in. Given the level of seriousness of climate change and the negative impacts it's having on the world around us and on the economy, labor has to be at the table. We're about to experience one of the largest economic transformations that will ever occur, and if we're not at the table, we're going to be served up as part of the meal. We've got to be at the table talking about how this transition to a clean energy economy occurs, how we mitigate carbon

emissions, and how we adapt to climate catastrophes. In Oregon and Washington we've seen drought, forest fires, rapid glacier melts, and flooding, causing hundreds of millions of dollars to property, in some cases taking lives ... and this is just the beginning. In Paris as I talked to trade unionists from around the world, I heard about the devastating impacts of rising sea levels, of ocean acidification, of glacier melts and droughts. We've already got millions of food and water refugees being created out there, and we're going to have more. So why is it important to labor? It's important because everything that happens around climate is going to have an impact on communities, our health, on our jobs, and on our economy. The transition is going to happen, and we're saying it has to be done in a fair and just manner.

You mentioned you were part of a labor delegation. How did that come about, and were you inside or outside the talks?

The national AFL-CIO attends each one of these [United Nations] climate negotiation sessions. They knew I'd been doing a lot of work on climate; I put together a resolution for our convention in July that puts us on record as a labor movement supporting carbon reductions and a cap-and-invest system, working on rebuilding our infrastructure and organizing clean energy jobs. They asked whether I'd be interested in be-



At the UN Climate Summit in Paris, Washington State Labor Council president Jeff Johnson carries a chair — one of 196 chairs taken by demonstrators from banks all over France. The chairs, one for each country at the summit, were meant to make the point that money from corporate tax evasion should be repurposed to fight climate change.

ing part of the delegation, and I said 'absolutely.' We were fortunate that the United Nations gave us enough badges that we could go. I was really pleased that I got to go, because we got to do some heavy-duty lobbying of the U.S. delegation.

A lot of your efforts were about promoting something called "just transition." Can you explain what that means?

It's clear there's a huge economic transition coming. Trying to wean ourselves off of fossil fuels by the second half of this

century will necessitate that most of our coal, natural gas and oil stay in the ground. That's going to create huge dislocations for fossil fuel workers and workers in energy-intensive

Turn to Page 16

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