

Who's on our side?

By Tom Chamberlain Oregon AFL-CIO President



Portland: Where rent empties workers' pockets

Over the years, Portland has been recognized as one of America's best cities in a number of categories: seniors, livability, food, beer drinking, vegans, and year after year for the best airport in the country. All of this is good. It all recognizes the uniqueness of Portland.

Recently, Portland received another first: It leads the nation with the fastest rising housing costs. Last year, Portland housing costs increased by 11.1 percent. According to a 2015-16 Wage Trend Report by the MBL Group, Portland Metro wages increased by only 3 percent.

Lower-income households have been disproportionately impacted. The rule of thumb of percentage income spent on housing is 30 percent of a worker's income. In Oregon, Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,008 a month, and \$1,208 in the Portland Metropolitan Area. The average Oregon renter is paying upwards of 50 percent of their income on housing costs. To state the problem in a different way: A minimum wage worker in Portland would have to work 100 hours per week to afford a two-bedroom apartment — if they can find one. Oregon's housing inventories are the lowest since 2005, when Oregon had 400,000 less in population.

Oregon's low inventory of housing has given landlords an unbridled opportunity to reap large profits at the expense of working people. It doesn't matter if you live in Medford, Bend, or Portland, workers are finding it harder and harder to pay the bills, feed their kids, and now a housing market that pushes them farther and farther from their workplace and essential services.

Evictions and rampant rent increases are left unchecked by a state which forbids rent control and until recently, forbade inclusionary zoning.

In 1999, the Oregon Legislature passed legislation that prohibited local jurisdictions from engaging in inclusionary policies. Inclusionary zoning policies are used across the United States to develop and implement strategies that increase low income and workforce housing inventories. For example, cities can require that building developers dedicate a percentage of new housing units to low income and workforce housing.

The 2015 and 2016 Oregon Legislature passed four bills which modified inclusionary zoning and created tax incentives for the construction of workforce and low income housing, giving local governments a valuable tool to increase their housing inventory.

While this legislation is a great start, we need much more. The four bills incentivize developers to do the right thing and build low income housing. The taxpayer is footing the bill. Oregon must move to a model that mandates a percentage of all new housing project be dedicated to low income and workforce housing.

I am so proud of the Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board, who approved unanimously to move forward with the development of our headquarters and building 100 to 120 low-income and workforce housing units. The Oregon AFL-CIO's mission is to make the lives of working people better. That is why our focus is on accomplishing that mission by raising the minimum wage, expanding earned sick days, organizing workers, providing unemployment benefits for locked out workers, and building housing for working families.

Tom Chamberlain is president of the Oregon AFL-CIO, a 130,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.



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