

NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS

IN THIS ISSUE

FAIR SCHEDULING Seattle get ready to pass fair scheduling ordinance. | Page 2

NO ENDORSEMENT FOR YOU! Support for TPP costs Oregon governor Machinists endorsement. | Page 3

Labor Day Picnic Photos p. 4-5 **Meeting Notices** p. 7

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CALM BEFORE THE LABOR DAY STORM. Bob and Janet Tackett sit practically alone an hour before the opening of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council's Labor Day picnic at Oaks Park. Tackett is the executive secretary-treasurer of the council, which sponsors the event. A few hours later, nearly 15,000 people filled the park, according to park officials. **For more photos from Labor Day picnics throughout Oregon, turn to Pages 4 and 5.**

In Labor Day speech

Sen. Merkley calls for national motor-voter

Just as Oregon led the nation as the first state to recognize Labor Day as a holiday, the United States should follow Oregon's lead by implementing a national motor voter registration law. That was the message U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley shared at a Labor Day picnic at Oaks Park.

The picnic, sponsored by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, attracted nearly 15,000 people, according to park officials.

"Across the nation there are dark forces that are all about voter suppression," Merkley said. "They don't believe in democracy. They want the powerful and the privileged to run our country."

"But what are the first three words of the Constitution?" Merkley asked. "'We the people.' It's not 'we the privileged.' It's not 'we the powerful.'"

Oregon is the first state in the country to make voter registration automatic when you go to the DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles). Since its inception on Jan. 1, 2016, a total of 222,197 new voters have been registered, according to the Elections Division.

"With each month of 2016, we are adding a new wave of Oregon voters," said Secretary of State Jeanne P. Atkins. "With fewer than 90 days until November 8, we are on track to give over 250,000 new voters the opportunity to participate in the general election."

During his remarks, Merkley called for a doubling of the national minimum wage; for national (paid) sick leave; and for a public option choice under the federal Affordable Care Act.

"And let's make sure that we don't have trade agreements that undermine the success of American workers," Merkley continued. "We can't compete against countries that pay workers less than a dollar an hour and no environmental rules. We know that already. Let's not dig this hole any deeper."

Merkley said if the U.S. doesn't make things in America, "we won't have a middle class in America. So let's make things in the United States of America!"

The Northwest Oregon Labor Council didn't invite U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden or U.S. Reps. Earl

Blumenauer, Kurt Schrader, and Suzanne Bonamici on to the stage to speak because of their support for fast tracking the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Fast track status requires Congress to take an up-or-down vote on trade agreements, with limited debate and no amendments.

Merkley gave a shout out to Gov. Kate Brown, Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, and Tobias Read, a candidate for state treasurer. He asked picnickers to vote for them in the general election in November. He also put in a big plug for Brad Avakian, who is running for secretary of state.

Republicans "really want to control" this office, he said. "And they're bringing in a lot of outside money to do it." Merkley said redistricting is a big reason the GOP is working so hard for the seat. "We've seen what's happened in Texas and North Carolina and other states" that redistricted in a way that give Republican candidates an advantage at the polls. "Let's make sure that Brad Avakian wins. It's a critical, critical race," Merkley said.

Portland truck plant layoffs put Machinist pension in danger

Daimler's Portland truck plant set a new record this summer: Fewest manufacturing jobs ever. The plant, which entered the 21st century with about 3,000 production workers, today has 570. That's after the most recent round of 170 layoffs in June. Remaining at the plant are about 350 members of Machinists Local 1005, 85 members of Teamsters Local 305, 50 members of Sign Painters and Paint Makers Local 1094, and 18 members of Service Employees Local 49.

The Daimler layoffs won't just hurt Daimler workers: Machinists District Lodge W24 Business Rep Joe Kear says the latest downsizing will push the multi-employer Automotive Machinists Pension Plan toward insolvency within 20 years.

The Seattle-based pension plan, founded in 1958, is responsible for the retirement benefits of 8,416 current and former employees of firms that have had contracts with the Machinists union. But the pension plan has been severely weakened by job losses at participating union employers: As of the end of 2014, the pension was paying benefits to 4,137 retirees, while taking in employer contributions for just 1,605 active workers. (And another 2,674 former employees are entitled to benefits in the future.) That "upside down" structure makes it difficult or impossible for the fund to recover from investment losses in the 2008 financial crash. As of the end of 2014, the pension plan had an estimated \$1.5 billion in future liabilities, and \$717 million in current assets.

Daimler — the pension plan's largest employer — is currently paying \$10.62 an hour into the pension, of which \$6.15 is a surcharge to make up for the plan's funding shortfall. That surcharge was part of a rehabilita-

tion plan designed to help the pension plan recover, but thanks to the newest layoffs, it won't be enough. Looming insolvency could even lead pension plan trustees to seek government permission to reduce current retiree benefits, which they're allowed to do under a controversial law passed in 2014.

What to do about the Machinists pension will be a big part of the next joint union contract negotiations with Daimler, which are set to begin Sept. 20. The current contracts covering members of the four unions expire on Oct. 28. Three years ago, Machinists and Painters struck for 23 days before the current Daimler deal was reached.

Ultimately, unions say U.S. trade policy — especially the North American Free Trade Agreement — is largely to blame for the long-term decline in jobs at Daimler's Portland plant. Portland is where Freightliner was born, but Daimler gradually shifted its production to Mexico, then stopped its Portland production altogether in 2007. Since that time, the Portland plant has produced Western Star trucks. [Daimler bought Western Star in 2000, and closed the Kelowna, British Columbia, plant where that truck originated.]

A federal government program called Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) provides extra benefits to manufacturing workers who lose their jobs because of trade. Even though there were 270 layoffs at a Daimler plant in Mexico too, the Oregon Employment Department has asked the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to approve TAA benefits for the latest layoffs. The state's petition to the DOL cited reports that Portland work is being moved to Mexico and India.