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IN THIS ISSUE

CEMENT MASONS LOCAL 555 Business Manager Brett Hinsley called up by International Union | Page 3

TEAMSTERS MOURN LEHRBACH Longtime political director Lynn Lehrbach dies at age 79. | Page 5

Meeting Notices p. 4 Who's On Our Side? p. 6

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Repainting temporarily halted under Portland's Ross Island Bridge after a 40' fall put two workers in the hospital.

UNDER THE BRIDGE

Investigating a low-bid nonunion contractor, a union finds problems aplenty

By Don McIntosh

Under the Ross Island Bridge on Feb. 8, a painter working for nonunion Abhe & Svoboda plummeted 40 feet and landed on a co-worker, his own son, putting both in the hospital with serious injuries. Oregon-OSHA is investigating the accident and will produce a report in the next six months. But co-worker Omar Rubi says he has a pretty good idea what happened.

Near an over-large ladder hole on the highest level of

scaffolding, a loose metal plate had become a trip hazard, Rubi says — and Abhe & Svoboda employees were routinely failing to use fall protection. Workers at heights are supposed to wear harnesses and tie them to lines attached to scaffolding supports, but Rubi says that often wasn't happening.

In fact, the day before the accident, Rubi told co-workers they have the right under federal law to speak up about safety or other concerns. Soon after, a company safety inspec-

tor said he'd be writing Rubi up for not attaching his harness to a line. Rubi felt he'd been singled out for speaking up, and took pictures of his foremen and third-party inspectors not wearing harnesses. At the end of his shift, he was told not to come in the next day, despite having worked on the project five days a week since July 16, 2016.

An important thing to know about Rubi: He's a union "salt."

Turn to Page 2

Are unions becoming more popular?

Poll shows a surge in support, especially among the young

According to a Jan. 4-9 poll, 60 percent of the American public has a favorable opinion of labor unions, while 35 percent have an unfavorable opinion. That's the second highest level of support ever found for unions in this particular survey, which has been conducted off-and-on since 1985, sponsored by the Pew Research Center. It's also a big jump in union support since March 2015, the last time the survey was conducted, when 48 percent were favorable toward unions and 39 percent unfavorable.

The survey was conducted by telephone Jan. 4-9 among a national sample of 1,502 adults.



Results were also broken down by age, party affiliation, education, and income.

Young people were far more likely than older adults to view labor unions favorably: Three-quarters of those aged 18 to 29 say they have a favorable opinion of labor unions, while only 53 percent of those 50 and older do.

The survey also found that 76 percent of Democrats hold a favorable view of unions, compared to 44 percent of Republicans. But even among Republicans, the young were more likely to have a favorable view of labor unions: 55 percent of under-30 Republicans looked favorably on unions, compared to 32 percent of those 50 and older. Meanwhile, 49 percent of Republicans without a college degree favored unions, compared to 28 percent of college-educated Republicans.

Another 'right-to-work' state

Missouri follows close on the heels of Kentucky, and a right-to-work bill in Congress would bar any requirement to pay union dues nationwide

With the stroke of a governor's pen on Feb. 6, Missouri became the 28th "right-to-work" state. Right-to-work legislation passed in Missouri just weeks after Kentucky passed a right-to-work law.

Right-to-work is the rather misleading term for a law intended to keep unions weak and poorly funded — by barring any union contract that requires workers to pay union dues or fees.

New Hampshire might be the next right-to-work state: The state Senate passed a right-to-work bill Jan. 19, and the state House was scheduled to vote on it on Feb. 16, (after this issue



Eric Greitens, the newly-elected Republican governor of Missouri, campaigned on right-to-work. On Feb. 6, he signed the anti-union measure into law, above.

went to press). A right-to-work bill passed the New Hampshire Legislature once before, in

Turn to Page 8



Nicole Grant, executive secretary of the M.L. King County Labor Council in Seattle, leads a chant Feb. 9 at the State Capitol in Olympia protesting a bill introduced by Republican lawmakers to make Washington a "right-to-work" state. More than 1,000 union members and supporters swarmed the Capitol to voice their objection to the anti-union legislation. A hearing and overflow rooms set up to accommodate the crowd filled quickly, so hundreds protested in different buildings and outside in the rain.

Photo by David Groves