

Workers rally to back national pension legislation

By Barb Kucera
Press Associates Inc.

Millions of Americans who depend on multi-employer pension plans for their retirement security would benefit from federal legislation introduced May 9 to make sure their pension is there when they need it.

The new bill would attempt to restore the financial health of multi-employer pension plans — which are common in industries such as trucking, grocery, and entertainment.

The bill's original author, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) — who also introduced it in the last Congress — said it could save the pensions of up to 10 million workers the multi-employer plans cover.

"We have got to send a very loud and clear message to the Republican leadership in Congress and the president of the United States. When a promise is made to the working people of this country with respect to their pensions and retiree health benefits, that promise cannot be broken," Sanders said. "If Congress could bail out Wall Street and foreign banks throughout the world, we certainly can protect the pension benefits of American workers."

To show support for the measure, members of Minnesota Pension Rights and of the Teamsters — whose multi-employer Central States Pension Fund faces insolvency — organized a rally at the state Capitol in St. Paul. It coincided with similar events nationwide and a D.C. news conference with Sanders, Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.), and Machinists President Bob Martinez that unveiled the Keep Our Pension Promises Act of 2017.

Franken knows what it is like to be in a multi-employer pension plan, having been a member of the Writers Guild and SAG-AFTRA unions during his career in entertainment.

"These agreements should mean something," Franken said. "That's all we're talking about here — live up to your agreement ... If you care about the working men and women of this country, then you will want them to have secure retirements, and that means honoring their pensions."

"Too many Americans have already had their earned retirements ripped away from them through no fault of their own. Where I'm from in Texas, we call that highway robbery," Martinez told the D.C. news conference.

Besides the Americans covered by multi-employer pension

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plans, 30 million more are in single-employer pensions. The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) oversees and insures both.

In 2014, Congress changed the rules, allowing struggling pension plans to cut workers' promised benefits now, with approval from the U.S. Treasury Department, to keep the plans solvent later. Some of the 400,000 workers and retirees covered by the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund faced cuts of 50 percent or more.

Treasury rejected the planned Central States cuts. Retirees depending on that plan have been spared — for now. But the long-term future of the Teamsters' benefits remains in doubt. Treasury has also rejected several other multi-employer plans that wanted to cut present benefits to preserve future solvency. It called their proposals inadequate.

But it approved cutting the pensions for beneficiaries of Iron Workers Local 17 in Cleveland. Two-thirds of voters there agreed to cut their present benefits in order to keep the plan solvent beyond 2024. The plan covers 1,938 people, and just under half voted, the union said.

[Treasury is currently reviewing a proposal submitted by the Western States Pension Plan of Office and Professional Employees, which would impact Vancouver-based Local 11.]

The Keep Our Pension Promises Act would boost funding for the PBGC so it can keep the promises made to pensioners, by closing two tax loopholes used by the wealthiest Americans. It is currently the only legislative solution to the multi-employer pension crisis, Franken's office said.

Participants at the rally in St. Paul welcomed the federal legislation. U.S. Reps. Keith Ellison, Rick Nolan and Tim Walz, all Minnesota Democrats, joined them.

"It's something you negotiated on in good faith, with the assumption and the belief that it would be there when you needed it," Walz, a union teacher, said. "Keep in mind — that bailout that happened on Wall Street put the pressure on these pensions. While we were there as taxpayers to ensure our financial system was supported, we need to be there to make sure our workers are supported."

Ellison urged people to keep up the heat, saying action "will send a signal throughout Minnesota and the United States that you cannot mess around with people's pensions that they have worked for their whole life."

Nolan said the threat to worker pensions is yet another example of "a system that is rigged to help the few at the expense of the many. It calls and begs and demands for change!"

The three, along with Rep. Betty McCollum and Sen. Amy Klobuchar, both Democrats from Minnesota, who could not attend the rally, pledged their support for the Keep Our Pension Promises Act. Other backers include Sens. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), and Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Reps. Marcy Kaptur and Tim Ryan, both D-Ohio, and Debbie Dingell (D-Mich.), and both Democratic U.S. Senators from Michigan and Rhode Island.

"A secure retirement is a central pillar of economic security for our working class. The Keep Our Pensions Promise Act ends a loophole and tax break for the wealthy so we can protect the retirement security families have worked for, planned for and depend on," Baldwin said.

Who's on our side?

By Tom Chamberlain Oregon AFL-CIO President



Investing in transportation benefits working people

Every day another 80 people move to the Portland metro area. Oregon's population has grown by over 275,000 in the last six years. Whether you live in Bend, Medford, Eugene or Portland, our roads are approaching capacity. A 15 minute daily commute in 2012 is now 20 to 30 minutes — and growing longer. In Portland, the I-5 curves, 217, I-205 and I-5 at the Coliseum are major traffic choke points — not to mention the 100-year-old I-5 Interstate Bridge between Portland and Vancouver that can back up traffic for miles. Any disruption or accident or construction can easily double commute time. Not only are our roads at near capacity, they are in disrepair due to lack of maintenance and increased use by a ballooning population.

Tire-pounding pot holes not only dot our side streets, but are now invading main thoroughfares, highways and interstate routes. Thirty-four percent of Clackamas County roads are rated at poor or worse. The average lifespan of an asphalt road is 26 years. Ongoing maintenance can almost double their lifetime, but we must invest in that maintenance to get the most out of our roads.

Damaged roads mean damaged vehicles, which is driving up costs for working people just trying to get to their jobs each day. Congested roads mean that businesses are spending more on fuel and drivetime, which can increase the cost of the goods we buy at grocery stores. That's moving our economy in the wrong direction, and it's time to take action.

After a failed attempt at increasing transportation funding during the 2015 Oregon Legislature, two Democrats and two Republican leaders (Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Eugene; Rep. Caddy McKeown, D-Coos Bay; Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas; and Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario) have brought forth a transportation package that will invest \$8.2 billion into Oregon's transportation infrastructure over the next decade. Our lawmakers spent over a year developing this bipartisan plan. They traveled across the state listening to the concerns of Oregonians who spoke up about unsafe road conditions, the need for public transit expansion, and concerns over ever-increasing commute times. In both rural and urban communities across the state, it's clear there is work to do — and that work will help move our economy forward.

Proposed projects are outlined for almost every Oregon county. That means across the state, over the next 10 years, we have a real opportunity to create jobs, ease compressive choke points, and improve transportation infrastructure. Unless our Legislature takes action, transportation choke points in the Portland metro area will continue to drive up costs for farmers, manufacturers, and businesses across Oregon. Unless the transportation package is approved during this legislative session, the increased commute times, which impact both workers and businesses, will only get worse.

Oregon's union movement can step into the driver's seat to make sure this important proposal makes it through our Legislature. Whether you are in Klamath Falls, Ontario, Astoria or Portland, our legislators need to hear from union members who are ready to see real investment in Oregon's transportation infrastructure.

Call your legislator, send them an email, or schedule a meeting and tell them that transportation funding is important to you and your community. To find out who represents you and how to contact them, head to orafclcio.org/salem.

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