

## UNION DEMOCRACY

# Oregon AFSCME convention: Respect for public service

The public sector union's biennial convention started with a noisy rally in the Capitol Rotunda

Nearly 140 delegates representing over 22,000 members gathered at the Salem Convention Center April 28-30 for Oregon AFSCME's biennial convention. Oregon AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, & Municipal Employees) is the statewide coordinating body for 113 AFSCME locals in Oregon, each representing workers at a different employer. As the name suggests, Oregon AFSCME represents state, county, and municipal employees, but also some employees of nonprofit organizations or private contractors that do work formerly done by public employees.

## Budget fight

The convention began with a rally in the Capitol Rotunda to protest a "cost containment plan" proposed April 21 by the co-chairs of the Oregon Legislature's Joint Ways and Means Committee. The plan includes a temporary hiring freeze, an increase in public employees' share of retirement costs, and a policy of limiting collective bargaining agreements to two years for economic issues. Rally-goers' message: Cuts to public services are unacceptable so long as Oregon corporations continue to pay the lowest effective tax rate in the nation. Lawmakers must have heard them: Their chants made a deafening din inside the echoey rotunda chamber.

The following day, Oregon Governor Kate Brown came to the convention floor to address delegates, pledging to work with Oregon AFSCME to make sure that the state budget isn't balanced on members' backs.

## Right-to-work coming

The opening night keynote speaker was Lee Saunders, AFSCME national president. Saunders delivered a fiery wake-up call: 1.6-million-member AFSCME — like all other public sector unions — is likely six to 12 months away from a financial crisis. Members of the U.S. Supreme Court have indicated that they are open to overturning the Court's 1977 unanimous *Abood v. De-*



**REVENUE, NOT CUTS:** The message at an April 28 union rally at the Oregon Capitol. (All photos by Ross Grami, courtesy Oregon AFSCME)



Oregon AFSCME interim executive director Stacy Chamberlain at the April 28 Capitol rally.



Newly elected Oregon AFSCME officers (from left): secretary Korie Erickson, treasurer Beth Toms, president Jeff Klatke, first vice president Christy O'Neill, and second vice president Dominic López.

troit Board of Education decision. The *Abood* decision said that union-represented workers who don't want to join the union can still be assessed "agency" or "fair share" fees to recover the costs of collective bargaining, contract administration, and grievance adjustment. But a pending case called *Janus vs AFSCME* challenges the *Abood* decision, and it's thought that the new 5-4 majority is likely to overturn it. If that happens, public employees wouldn't be required to pay anything at all to the union for representation.

To prepare, Oregon AFSCME — like other unions — has been working to persuade "fair share" payers to convert to full membership. Oregon AFSCME president Jeff Klatke says union membership has gone from about 78 percent of total represented workers to about 85 percent in the last few years. Total membership now

stands at just over 27,000.

Klatke, who's been president since 2013, says lately he's been seeing an upsurge of new members, and of energy.

"A lot of people are saying: 'I can't sit on my hands. What can I do in my local?'" Klatke said.

## A welcoming union

In light of recent tensions around immigration and religious belief, delegates passed a resolution affirming that Oregon AFSCME is "a welcoming and safe union for all members and their families," and that signage announcing that be posted at all of its offices.

## Equity

Oregon AFSCME's Diversity Committee gave a presentation to delegates about the "equity lens" it has crafted over the last few years with the help of the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Ore-

gon. The equity lens is an approach to examining the union's policies and practices to make sure all members are being treated "equitably," not just equally. For example, union meetings are open to all members equally, but are they scheduled at times and locations that make it easy for car-free members to attend? Is child care available, to make it easier for single parents to attend? And in bargaining, are there proposals that benefit some groups of workers more than others? Using the equity lens means asking those questions and taking action to make the union more equitable.

"This isn't just about creating diversity," said Klatke, who's a member of the committee. "It's about creating a union that honors the input of all members, and it's about holding our employers accountable for equitable practices."

## Honors

Delegates recognized Michael Arken, former Oregon AFSCME vice president for retirees, for his years of service to the union with a new award named after him. Going forward, every statewide convention will present the Michael Arken Leadership Award to honor a member who has served the union selflessly.

## Officer elections

Delegates also nominated and elected members of Oregon AFSCME's 85-member Executive Board, including local and regional seats, as well as eight statewide officers:

- **President** Jeff Klatke of Local 3135 (Home Forward)
- **First vice president** Christy O'Neill of Local 2619 (Southern Oregon Head Start, Medford)
- **Second vice president** (and Political Action Committee chair) Dominic López of Local 1790 (Basic Rights Oregon)
- **Treasurer** Beth Toms of Local 173 (Polk County)
- **Secretary** Korie Erickson of Local 88 (Multnomah County)
- **Trustees** Denise Choin of Local 3241 (Oregon Office of Emergency Management); Jeff Coffman of Local 3361 (Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution); and Theresia Lloyd-Siemer of Local 328 (Oregon Health & Science University)

All the newly elected officers ran as a team. Lopez outpolled Local 3361 member Bryan Branstetter, and Erickson outpolled incumbent Annette Skillman of Local 2376; the others ran unopposed and were elected by acclamation. Except for Klatke, it's an all-new team of officers.

All the elected officer positions are unpaid and are for two year terms of office. The organization's staff of about 60 is led by an executive director appointed and overseen by the Executive Board.

Oregon AFSCME Stacy Chamberlain has served as interim executive director since the March 31 departure of Michael Seville, who served than a year on the job. The executive committee of the Executive Board is recommending that the full board name Chamberlain to the post permanently when the board next meets in July.