

Labor's future in the age of Trump

Corporate interests dominate Congress and state houses. Unions are in retreat. Americans are agitated about immigrants and in a panic about followers of an unfamiliar religion. Is it the 1890s, the 1920s, or the 2010s?

All of the above, says Mark McDermott.

On the evening of June 1, McDermott, 67, is at the IBEW Local 48 hall at the invitation of Washington State Building Trades Council — speaking to 17 local union activists and staff members. It's his 296th workshop in the last five years. [It was Iron Workers Local 29 the day before.]

At union conventions, apprenticeship classes, and public forums, McDermott delivers a message: Working people need to understand and learn from history, both the good and the bad, if they want to rebuild the labor movement and take the country back.

There's no question the labor movement is at a low point today. As a percent of the workforce, unionized workers overall are at their lowest level in 80 years, and if you look just the private sector, they're at levels not seen since about 1902 — 115 years ago. In 1955, building trades union members did 80 percent of construction work in



Trump is America's first billionaire president, but immigrant-bashing is nothing new in American history, says labor educator Mark McDermott.

the United States; today they do less than 15 percent.

As unions decline, divisions grow. America is more divided and polarized today than it has been in more than a generation. Now, the nation's first billionaire president got to office fanning the flames of fear about immigration and Islam. That's not new, McDermott says: In the 1890s, hostility to Asian immigrants was rampant. Later it was Catholics, and immigrants from

Southern and Eastern Europe. In 1925, the Ku Klux Klan had more members than the union movement.

And looking back, unions weren't blameless. When Samuel Gompers was president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) — from its founding in 1886 to his death in 1924 — no fewer than 11 unions affiliated with his AFL denied membership altogether to Black workers, McDermott says.

"None of us in this room are responsible for this," McDermott said, "but this is what happened."

And yet, as Martin Luther King Jr. later observed, the labor movement went on to become "the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress." It lifted up millions and made America more just.

McDermott says labor's power to do good began to decline in the early 1970s, when a renewed corporate counter-attack got under way at the same time union leadership was exhibiting a disastrous complacency.

"I used to worry about the size of the membership," said AFL-CIO president George Meany in 1972. "I stopped worrying, because it doesn't make any difference. The organized fellow is the only fellow who matters."

McDermott experienced Reagan-era corporate savagery up close and personal. In May 1982, he was working as a union machinist in Seattle when guys in suits announced the company had been sold and all employees would be laid off at the end of the day. They could reapply for their jobs with the new owner, but without their union contract. McDermott

wasn't rehired, and says his interviewing managers told him why: because he was a union officer in Machinists Local 79. McDermott ended up unemployed for 15 months, lost his health insurance, had to move in with friends, and took a 50 percent pay cut in his next job.

"I swore that day I'd never shut up, never stop fighting for working people and organized labor, until I'm dead."

Three decades later, McDermott retired after a career in local, state and federal governments as a labor advisor and advocate for working people. [Along the way, his wife Diane Zahn became secretary treasurer of Seattle-based UFCW Local 21, and his brother Jim McDermott became a Seattle Congressman and stalwart union ally.] Now he's hitting the road in hopes of rekindling the movement.

"We have to figure out how to turn this around, and what we can learn from the past that will help us do that," McDermott said.

NEXT UP

McDermott's next Portland-area workshop will take place June 19 for apprentices at the Sheet Metal Local 16 training center.



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From Page 1

have to publish employee work schedules two weeks in advance, and compensate employees with one hour of pay for changing the schedule after that (except in cases where employees mutually agree to swap shifts), and pay half-time for any hours lost from shortened or cancelled shifts, as well as for any on-call shifts if the employee isn't asked to work. And they'd be barred from requiring employees to work a shift less than 10 hours after the end of the previous day's shift. Employees who agreed to those so-called "clopening" shifts would get time-and-a-half pay for hours they work that are less than 10 hours after the previous shift. Chief petitioner: UFCW Local 555 Secretary-Treasurer Jeff Anderson.

IP 25: Corporate Accountability and Transparency

Each year, publicly traded corporations would have to publicly disclose information including how much they pay in state taxes, as well as their total Oregon sales, and the total Oregon wages and compensation they pay. Chief petitioners: SEIU Local 503 President Steve Demarest, and Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Stacy Chamberlain.

IP 26: Oregon's Kids Deserve Quality Schools

Amends the Constitution to require the Oregon Legislature to appropriate sufficient funds to ensure that the state's system of public education meets quality goals established by law. And in order to comply with that obligation, it would allow the Legislature to raise taxes on corporations via a simple majority vote, not the supermajority required by a previous constitutional change approved narrowly by voters in 1996. Chief petitioners: OEA Director Jennifer Scurlock and board member Benjamin Gorman.

IP 27: Invest in Oregon's Future

Legislates a slight decrease in personal income taxes, and a new corporate minimum income tax equal to 0.95 percent of gross sales. The new business tax would go into a special account: 80 percent would go to K-12 schools, and 20 percent to community colleges and state universities. Chief petitioners: OEA Director Jennifer Scurlock and board member John Larson

As a constitutional change, IP 26 would require 117,578 valid signatures from Oregon voters to get on the ballot; all the others would need 88,184 signatures.