

55TH CONVENTION OF THE OREGON AFL-CIO

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS — excerpted from the convention speech of Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain

I did not wake up one day and decide I wanted to be president of the Oregon AFL-CIO. When I was a young firefighter, like many of the firefighters of my generation, I had to work a second job to support my family. I never had time to attend union meetings. One day as I walked into the station, I discovered that two longtime executive board members had nominated me to the executive board. They began to tell me about their union experience, how they had dedicated decades of their lives to their co-workers and their families. I would never have thought about serving my union unless someone reached out and recruited me.

I became a firefighter when there were no women and few black or Latino or Asian men in the fire service. I was recruited for union leadership when the entire executive board looked like me.

I know that for some, my words may be troubling, or make one feel angry, defensive or guilty. I know because I have



felt that way many times in my life, from my first racial justice training in the military in the 1970s, to racial and gender trainings and discussions in the Fire Service and at the Oregon AFL-CIO. As a poor white kid who couldn't afford to go to college, who joined the Air Force right out high school because it was my best opportunity, I saw racial justice as an economic issue. I was uncomfortable with the term white privilege. I believed I had worked and fought to achieve what I have. But the truth is I have had great opportunities given to me by well-

meaning people because I am white, because I am a man.

People are drawn to what is comfortable, drawn to people who look, think and have similar backgrounds. People who would never classify themselves as biased, who view themselves as progressive, who want to do the right thing nonetheless continue practices that make the lives of women, communities of color, the disabled and LBGTQ more difficult, denying them advancement, hiring, or just treating them as less than.

That, my brothers and sisters, is institutional discrimination.

Our nation has come a long way, but not far enough.

Today America stands upon a dusty path that stretches back to the first explorer stepping foot on this continent. It is a path riddled with despair, poverty, struggle, discrimination and death, and it ends today in the streets of Charlottesville where gun-toting hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and neo-nazis spew hate and discontent. Such an agenda runs counter to the very principles of unionism and a just society.

We have always had hate groups that have pushed an agenda of white supremacy. Such groups grow in power when an economic trigger is pulled, when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Hate is a capitalist relief valve that diverts the attention of people away from an economy that is rigged for the rich, and onto those who are different. If we are to be a workers movement for all people, then we must address institutional racism and sexism head on. It is time to talk

to one and other: black, white, brown, LBGTQ, women.

When hate raises its head in Charlottesville or Ferguson, we as the workers movement must take a stand.

We as a movement must continually seek new talent for union positions. We must diversify, mentor, lead, challenge ourselves to reach out and grow our movement to reflect the broad diversity of our membership. Stopping institutional racism and sexism will only be possible when individuals like you interrupt it when we see or hear it. It is time to incorporate gender and racial justice into our strategic plans and educational programs.

Our mission as a worker's movement is to build a just economy that rewards those who work hard and play by the rules. My sisters and brothers, before you can build such economy, a sustainable economy, an economy that works for all, first you have to lay a foundation of gender and racial justice.

2017 OREGON AFL-CIO CONVENTION REPORT

From Page 1

affiliates to support fundraising connected with an Oct. 11 celebration; and resolving to defend LERC vigorously against any efforts to reduce its funding

The convention also served as the public debut of a new group, Oregon Women Labor Leaders (OWLL), which seeks to promote women's leadership in the local labor movement. A convention resolution supporting their effort passed unanimously. And delegates were invited to sign a pledge in which they promise to promote bargaining contract provisions about paid family leave, provision of child care and flexible work schedules, and recruit and support women to serve as union staff and elected leaders. As many as 150 labor union women have attended OWLL get togethers since a dozen women labor leaders first met in February. The group is getting together quarterly, with the next meeting scheduled for Oct. 16.

Delegates twice took up collections for charity, raising \$1,000 to help union members harmed by recent Oregon forest fires and another \$1,000 to help DACA applicants pay the \$495 application fee.



REPORT FROM THE FRONT LINES OF THE ANTI-UNION FIGHT Iowa AFSCME President Danny Homan holds up Iowa state workers' new 26-page union contract. That's what replaced their 256-page contract, after Republican state lawmakers stripped public employees of most of their collective bargaining rights. "I don't want your pity," Homan told delegates. "That's not why I'm here. I'm here to tell you to get off your ass and get engaged and do the work so that this doesn't happen here."



WAIT, ISN'T THAT SGT. FRANCO FROM THE TV SHOW GRIMM? Yes it is, and convention delegates greeted him with boos and heckling. Actor Robert Blanche — president of the local Screen Actors Guild — was pretending to be a representative of the anti-union Freedom Foundation, a group active in Washington and Oregon that sues unions and uses TV and radio ads and door-to-door canvassing to talk public employee union members into quitting their unions.

LABOR UNITED AGAINST HATE On Saturday, about 100 delegates took part in a brief rally just outside the convention center entrance to oppose racial hatred of the kind displayed at an Aug. 12 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia; and also to condemn President Trump's revocation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA is the program set up by President Obama under which law-abiding undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children can apply for a work permit and indefinite deferral of deportation.



Photo by Russell Sanders, courtesy of Oregon AFL-CIO.