

Janus is coming, ready or not

In *Janus v. AFSCME*, the U.S. Supreme Court appears poised to rule that all public employee union fees must be voluntary, akin to 'right-to-work.' A decision is expected any day. The Labor Press talked with University of Oregon labor educator Gordon Lafer about what that means.



A grievance process, a right to due process, some agreement that your job description can't just be changed from day to day. In addition, public sector unions — in their political activity — are the number one force that keeps public services decently funded, to the extent that they are decently funded. [Maintaining] funding for public services is about keeping the jobs, but it's also about doing the job right. Most people want to be able to do their job right, in every kind of job. The ability to do your job right is to a large extent dependent on overall funding, and then on things like staff levels and work rules that unions negotiate. So I think there are no end of reasons why it makes sense to pay dues as a public sector employee. But you don't always get to have half hour conversations with everybody. We're going to need to have a lot more members doing things that up until now have been done by staff, including having these conversations.

Do you think there's any possibility that something good could come of Janus? Obviously all the corporate people aren't putting money into this because they think it's going to make the labor movement stronger, so I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish about it, but to the extent that unions move toward bargaining for the common good and engaging members to take over the work of the union — those are directions a lot of people in the labor movement have been wanting to move in anyway, as best practices of good unions. So to the extent that Janus is a spur to go in that direction, I do think that there are unions that could emerge stronger.

What do you think Janus' impact will be on unions? Even if there's a 15 or 20 percent decline in membership, that still has significant ramifications in budget and staffing. There's no way it's not going to be significant — even in unions that have done a good job of reaching out to explain to people why it makes sense for them to become members. Obviously that's a different conversation when the difference between being a union member or not goes from [a discount of] 10 percent [of union dues] to 100 percent.

What's the best reason public sector workers would want to pay union dues when they no longer have to? I think there's a million reasons. At the most minimal level, what you get in wages and benefits is far more than you pay in dues. A lot of that is established over years. At the end of negotiations, management says, "Here's our 'best and final' offer." But I think looking at the "first and worst" offer is a guide to what would be happening if there was no union. Management tells us when they make their initial proposals: "Here's what we want." So we know if they didn't have to bargain at all, they would not only have lower wages and benefits, but no seniority, and work responsibilities would be hugely increased. So I think it's money, but it's also many other things:

ONLINE EXTRA

Read the full interview at nwlaborpress.org/2018/06/janus

Who's on our side?

By Tom Chamberlain Oregon AFL-CIO President



A union is still the best option for workers

The war on the American worker appears to escalate every day. The U.S. Supreme Court will deliver a decision on *Janus v. AFSCME* that many believe will upend almost five decades of precedent and eliminate fair share fees for all public-sector workers. Federal workers who already operate in a right-to-work environment are being weakened further by recent presidential executive orders.

A Trump Executive Order eliminates official time, which allows union officers to represent all the members of the bargaining unit, union members and non, in grievances and matters of broad interest to the workforce, including labor management, safety, and productivity meetings.

Trump's attacks go farther than any president in modern history in undermining federal workers by proposing a wage freeze and reducing federal retirement benefits by \$143.5 billion over 10 years. Trump has instructed agency officials to prepare contract renegotiation recommendations that are "not subject to disclosure" to union representatives. These recommendations encourage managers to hasten dismissals of employees instead of suspending them while discouraging progressive discipline.

Trump's animus towards workers and the unions that represent them reflects his corporate background, prioritizing wealth at the expense of workers. Those priorities are reflected in soaring CEO pay and three decades of stagnant wages for workers.

While the attacks on workers intensify, many Americans are trying to readjust the direction of our nation. Though misguided, the election of Donald Trump was driven by voters who were fed up with a favored status of corporations, anti-worker trade agreements, stagnant wages, and shrinking benefits.

Americans do not trust the president, our government, or corporations, and they have had their fill of promises during elections which are only to be forgotten on Election Day. More and more Americans are looking to the union movement as a vehicle for change.

Over 60 percent of Americans support unions, the highest rating in two decades. That number is even higher among millennials. Last year, for the first time this century, union membership grew by 262,000, with over half of those millennials.

We are seeing an uptick in union organizing in Oregon: Precision Castparts workers, Burgerville workers, and Oregon State University faculty are seeing the value and potential for bettering their lives through a union.

And once again, workers are using the strike to achieve better wages and working conditions. Teachers across the country have taken to the streets to improve their living standards and increase education funding.

It should not be lost that until 1935, workers did not have a legal right to join a union — let alone bargain a contract. Without any rights or protections, working women and men formed unions and created power and improved living standards for all workers.

The future of our movement is not dependent on the whim of the president or a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court. We are a nation of workers who want a secure future for ourselves and children. As long as workers dream of a better life, they will see our movement as their best option. Yes, we are living through some very difficult times, but for our movement to survive and thrive we must not be discouraged and we must find the strength and determination to forge a 21st Century workers' movement that builds power and reflects the broad diversity of the American worker.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is a 138,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.

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