

## ...Exit interview: Washington AFL-CIO president Jeff Johnson

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be humble. Two, listen — not just to union leaders but to community leaders. And three, be bold; don't be timid. We can not take action based on the lowest common denominator. If you're trying to make everyone happy, you're not doing a damn thing.

### What do you think unions need to do differently to be able to fulfill their mission?

I think we need a certain amount of humility. We can't do it all ourselves. In fact, when we try to do that, more often than not we lose. We've got to bring other parts of the community into the struggle and work together with them and sometimes put their issues at the forefront, with ours perhaps following behind, because we've got to prove ourselves to be valued partners. I am thoroughly convinced from my study of history and my participation in this movement that that's how real economic, social, racial and climate justice is made. When we work together we can do amazing things. And when you do that there's less of an ability of your opponent to divide and conquer you.

### One of the biggest roles the Washington State Labor Council plays is coordinating union political efforts and getting legislation passed. What are some of the things that have most improved the lives of working people in Washington that you've been involved in?

We passed three initiatives that took our state minimum wage from \$2.30 an hour up to, at this point, \$12 an hour, and rising to \$13.50 on the state level. We passed \$15 minimum wages in Seatac and Seattle. We passed paid safe and sick leave statewide through an initiative which covers over a million workers that now have paid sick leave that they never had before. We covered farmworkers under workers compensation, unemployment insurance, minimum wage, child labor standards, and health and safety standards that they had never been covered under before. We helped negotiate and oversee two collective bargaining agreements representing farmworkers, one of the east side of the state and one on the west side of the state. We've increased collective bargaining rights for over a quarter of a million workers in our state over the last two decades — everything from state employees (prior to 2003 they were not covered under collective bargaining law) to teaching and research assistants at the university, part time faculty at the community and technical colleges, port officials, interpreters. We've vastly expanded collective bargaining rights. For the building trades we passed numerous transportation packages — in 2015 the largest in the history of our state. We passed Sound Transit 3, which was another generational job-creating mass

transit package for building trades workers. We passed a law that allows prevailing wages to be set by collective bargaining unit standards rather than a wage survey for all employers. We passed apprenticeship utilization standards. We passed arguably one of the best family leave laws in the country.

### When you lay it all out, that sounds like a pretty impressive list. So why have I had the impression that it's been very tough going in recent years? Washington is considered a blue state - but it seems Democrats have had a hard time getting legislation passed that you guys are behind. Why do you think that is?

You're right. In 2013 we had control of the governor's house, the House and the Senate. However in the Senate, two Democratic senators jumped ship, kept their democratic title, but went over to the Republicans and created what they called the Majority Coalition Caucus. So for five years, we had a divided legislature where it was really tough going. What was really hard for us at the state labor council as the lead political body in the state for labor was trying to get labor volunteers out to elect Democrats in the face of two Democrats jumping ship, in the face of really good legislation not getting passed and really bad legislation passing in the senate attacking us. Folks were less and less motivated to go out and volunteer politically. We ran campaign after campaign and we lost and we lost. Finally in 2017 we had a special election and elected a Democrat to the state senate, which gave us functional control of the senate. We passed a floodgate of bills — a whole series of civil liberties bills, everything from ban the box to ending the debt to prison cycle. We passed a state voting rights act, same day registration, automatic voter registration on license renewal, prevailing wage based on collective bargaining. We passed a series of anti-Janus bills, the most important of which was giving public sector unions the right to address new employees in an orientation session; we had never had that right before. This year we increased our majorities in the house by seven members, two in the senate. So we have another very large agenda that we stand to pass.

### How does Washington rate in terms of tax fairness - the idea that those who are able to pay pay the most?

[Groans.] Terrible. Citizens for Tax Justice, in their rankings, we're down at the bottom of the list. We have one of the most regressive tax systems in the country, because we rely a whole lot on sales tax, business and occupation taxes. We have no income tax. We have no capital gains tax. And so poor and middle income folks pay heavily in sales tax and various fees, licenses and whatnot. We also have somewhere in the

neighborhood of 650 to 750 tax exemptions, many of which were passed by Democrats. So we continue to have a structural budget deficit, which I think is about \$3 billion going into 2019. I think we can pass a capital gains tax. I don't think they'll be as ambitious as they need to be. We have so many wealthy people in our state that could well afford to pay. And we need significantly more revenue to meet the basic needs of people and to build the infrastructure we need to fight climate disaster, and the infrastructure we need just to create jobs for people. And the truth is I'm not advocating taxing the working person more; I think we are overtaxed. But there are wealthy folks that have the means to pay this, and corporations, that should feel some pride in paying that revenue.

### Suppose you found a bottle and freed a genie who gave you three

wishes. What would you wish for? I think I would wish for working people and their community allies having real voice in setting the economic decisions that determine what our economy and our communities look like. That would be my first wish — that we had control, decision making ability. Second, I would wish that we would stop arguing over the transition away from fossil fuels and simply do it by putting in place real 'just transition' strategies and real commonwealth benefits, so that it's not a zero sum game, so that it's not a question of some workers winning and some workers losing, so that — instead of investing in pumping every barrel of oil and every cubic foot of natural gas out of the ground — we're investing in long term care, we're investing in education and health care, and building up our communities in ways that create good high paying union jobs. I'm not sure what

the third wish would be. I think if we can do the first two, we're in a pretty good place.

**If you had just one message for the rank-and-file union member, what would it be?** Your union is your best investment for a good life and security for your family and your community. Don't take it for granted. Get involved. Speak up, disagree when you need to disagree, but get involved and stay involved.

### MORE ONLINE

In our interview, Jeff Johnson spoke candidly about racism in the union movement, and about the heart-break he felt when — after years of work on Clean Energy Jobs measure I-631 — he couldn't get 2/3 of WSLC affiliates to endorse it. That's at [nwlaborpress.org/johnson](http://nwlaborpress.org/johnson)



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