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EXIT INTERVIEW

Questions for Washington AFL-CIO's Jeff Johnson

Washington's top labor leader, Jeff Johnson, 67, is retiring Jan. 4 after a 32-year career at the Washington State Labor Council (WSLC), a federation of 600 local unions with over 400,000 members. Labor Press senior staff reporter Don McIntosh spoke with him by phone Dec. 13.



You've been WSLC president eight years. What are you most proud of? I think what I'm most proud of is that we made deep and meaningful relationships with community. Adding those voices to union voices made us so much more powerful. . . . I think this is how we build the movement to get a voice for workers in determining what our future economy looks like.

Do you think Washington's labor movement is stronger or weaker than it was 30 years ago? It's much stronger and bigger. I mean, there was a time in Washington state history in the mid-'50s where we actually had 55 percent of the work force organized. I really wouldn't know what that meant on a daily basis here — in 1955 I was four years old and lived on the East Coast — but I presume it meant that we were fairly powerful. But relative to when I started in this movement in this state in

1986, we are much stronger, more powerful. We have a much stronger social and economic vision than we did before, and we have more leaders that are willing to take the risks necessary to lead a movement, and fewer leaders that are just worried about maintaining their positions in office.

Is there anything you're not going to miss about the job? The things you don't miss are the inter-union squabbles over jurisdiction, when 90 percent of the workforce is unorganized. I'm not going to miss the squabbling about whether we are a social movement or strictly a movement about wages, hours, and

working conditions. That stuff is old. I've been a progressive union member since the 1970s coming out of New York City. In my estimation we resolved that issue 40 years ago: We're a social movement. That doesn't mean we don't care for and advocate for our own members every day of our lives. It's just that we do it in a larger context.

Your career in the labor movement began with teaching labor economics at Empire State College in the State University of New York. How did you get there? I went to college because my mother forced me to. I was working as a cabinet maker in high

school. I loved the work. But I was facing an ultimatum, so I went to college. It was the late '60s, early '70s. I went to college [at Georgetown University] in D.C. and got radicalized pretty quickly, trying to sort through the meaning of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, and that led me to the study of economics and study of political economy. Through that work and living in the inner city in D.C., I decided I needed to get a better handle on economics. And I chose to go to graduate school at the New School for Social Research in New York City. I enjoyed the studies, but I worked full time, drove a truck for a moving company. And I got more and more interested in the labor movement. Then I saw there was an opening for a position teaching labor economics at the Harry Van Arsdale Center for Labor studies, which was a really brilliant program negotiated by [IBEW leader] Van Arsdale with the State University of New York so that all IBEW Local 3's apprentices, as they went through their formal apprenticeship program, also were required to get an associates degree in labor studies. I got to teach in that program, which catered to union members across the labor movement.

Do you have any advice for other leaders in the labor movement? One,

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DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Morales won in the end
In an article in our Nov. 16 issue on the election results for labor-endorsed candidates and measures, we reported that former Jobs with Justice board member Eddy Morales lost narrowly to incumbent Kirk French in a race for Gresham City Council. But after the issue went to press, Morales pulled ahead of incumbent Kirk French and in the end won by 25 votes.

Don't forget Canada!
In the article "A sister to lead the Brotherhood" in our Dec. 7 issue, we referred to Evelyn Shapiro — the newly elected leader of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters — as the first woman to lead a regional council of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. Actually, she's the first in the United States, but within the Carpenters union as a whole that trail was blazed by Deb Romero, executive secretary-treasurer of the Atlantic Canada Regional Council.

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