

Who's on our side?

By Tom Chamberlain Oregon AFL-CIO President



We must not forget Oregon Democrats' betrayal on PERS

The best thing about being president of the Oregon AFL-CIO — with less than 100 days until the end of my term — is that I can now say whatever I want, whenever I want. For example, in the past, I felt limited in the ways I held legislative Democrats accountable. There is a tendency to soften one's criticism, understanding that there is always a next session and another legislative agenda. Holding legislative leadership accountable with statements that are too harsh could impact future legislative agendas. I am sorry to say: There are too few Republicans that we can count on to help move our agenda, making the Democrats the only game in town for labor issues.

I don't believe in exclusive support of political parties. Organized labor should support those who support workers, and hold those accountable who side with a corporate capitalist agenda at the expense of workers. But there was a wrong and a betrayal done to Oregon workers in 2019 that is so heinous it would be wrong to look the other way for the sake of future agendas.

The corporate capitalist agenda was on full display during the 2019 Oregon Legislature. It started with passage of the Student Success Act, which promises to increase much needed funding to Oregon schools by \$1 billion per year. Oregon corporations will pay for the increase through a gross receipts tax. In 2016, Oregon corporations paid the lowest corporate taxes in the nation. The Student Success Act will do little to change that, since a portion of the tax is being passed through to consumers.

I commend the Oregon Legislature for increasing K-12 funding. It is high time that Oregon corporations begin paying their fair share for Oregon services, and I

hope this is the first step in achieving that goal.

Since 2008, Oregon corporations have pounded the drum on their perception that PERS provides overly generous retirement benefits and funding. PERS is currently funded at 80%. Translation: If every active PERS member were to retire today, Oregon would be \$27 billion short. This shortfall is a result of the 2008 stock market crash and has little to do with Tier 3 members who make up just over 60% of current active public employees. These employees receive a much smaller benefit than previous retirees. The PERS Tier 3 payroll cost is 8%. Such legacy costs shouldn't be the responsibility of workers, but treated as an Oregon debt that needs to be paid.

Oregon corporations involved with the passage of the Student Success Act exacted a price for their support. Senate Bill 1049 will result in a loss of between 7 to 12.5% in workers' individual retirement accounts, according to the PERS agency. SB 1049 does little to nothing toward paying down the PERS unfunded liability. Tier 3 recipients already receive the lowest retirement benefits in PERS, and the only thing SB 1040 ensures is that Tier 3 will see even lower benefits in the future.

The bill passed both the House and Senate by one vote. Seven House Democrats and five Senate Democrats stood with Oregon workers and voted against SB 1049. Pressure from their leadership and

the governor's office did not dissuade them from fulfilling their promises to Oregon workers.

The 31 House Democrats and the 13 Senate Democrats who voted for the legislation, along with the governor, broke their promises to Oregon workers. I have reams of candidate questionnaires from union-endorsed House and Senate candidates who promised not to cut PERS benefits. The governor promised as well. To

go back on that promise undermines their credibility with the unions who endorsed them. Worse yet, such action undermines the very credibility of our political programs. Our members spent their hard-earned money and dedicated countless volunteer hours electing Democrats that they trusted to fulfill the commitments they made to them through the endorsement process.

These candidates sought our endorsements!

The Oregon Senate and House leadership kept in question exactly when SB 1049 would be up for a vote until the last minute. This blatant political manipulation of the legislative process intentionally prevented workers from witnessing the betrayal. *Then*, the legislative handwringing and excuses for the vote came like an avalanche. Excuses ranged from: "We stopped the Nesbitt PERS initiative, which would have been worse," to one senator actually saying: "You really didn't believe us, did you?"

Oregon unions should not base their endorsements on promises made by House and Senate members who are fast to break those promises when it is convenient. Rather, we must support candidates based on their demonstrated performance.

Workers at Fred Meyer and Safeway take strike votes

Thousands of workers in the Portland metro area are taking part in a series of strike authorization votes at Fred Meyer, QFC, Safeway and Albertsons. The votes are taking place department by department, and started with meat department workers May 20-23, followed by grocery workers June 10-12 and Fred Meyer central check-out cashiers June 18-20. Fred Meyer workers in non-food departments like apparel will vote June 25-27. The results won't be publicly announced until all groups have voted.

Bargaining between Local

555 and the multi-employer coalition passed the one-year mark June 19, and Aug. 5 will mark one year since the most recent set of contracts between the union and grocery employers expired. The two sides remain far apart on wages, health insurance and other proposals.

Veterans nursing home workers stay union

Workers at a nursing home for veterans in The Dalles, Oregon, voted June 10 by 60 to 37 to remain unionized with the United Steelworkers (USW). That meant defeat for an effort to dump the union that represents 170 workers at non-profit

Veterans Care Centers of Oregon.

The vote on "decertification" came just weeks after workers there — both union and nonunion — voted to approve a new three-year union contract that raises wages 15%. It's highly unusual for workers who aren't members of a union to be allowed to vote on a collective bargaining agreement, but USW representative Jim Kilborn explained that USW agreed in light of the nursing home agreeing, for the first time, that all workers would pay union dues as a condition of employment, a provision known as union security.

...Little Big Union

From Page 1

tional Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

Union supporter Cameron Crowell says there's been a day-to-day campaign in stores, with managers taking down union posters, and labor relations consultants meeting one-on-one with workers. Still, even though the union election is taking place at the company's initiative, Crowell thinks there's a good chance the union will prevail.

"We're fairly confident the people are on our side," Crowell

For the record, the Nesbitt PERS initiative, which takes an axe to PERS benefits, is still active and on course to be on the 2020 ballot.

It should not be lost on anyone that while corporations were at the table having input into the Student Success Act, Oregon public sector unions were not invited to have input into the governor's PERS proposal, or the House and Senate proposals. The PERS reforms of 2005 and 2013 both included the leadership of public sector unions. This begs the question: Why would the governor and legislative leadership totally silence the voice of workers in this process?

If it wasn't for the PERS betrayal, many would view the 2019 Oregon legislative session as the most successful in a decade. The SB 1049 betrayal becomes the focal point because unions and our members worked hard and spent their hard-earned dollars based on promises made during the campaign season. Members ask: How can we elect a governor, achieve super majorities in the House and Senate, and still public employee unions weren't even invited to the table in PERS reform? Oregon unions should not base their endorsements on promises made by House and Senate members who are fast to break those promises when it is convenient. Rather, we must support candidates based on their demonstrated performance.

There must be an analysis made for those union-endorsed candidates who faced the greatest odds in crowded primaries and are only in the Legislature due to the hard work of our members. We must not forget.

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

YOU CAN HELP

For the youthful workforce at Little Big Burger, this is a first encounter with the idea of a union. Now would be a great time to drop by to get a burger, fries, and shake — and give moral support and encouragement to the workers.