

THE UNITER

Tapped for the job at a time of crisis, Tom Chamberlain helped reunify Oregon's labor movement.

By Don McIntosh

Oregon's top labor leader is leaving office in two weeks to retire. Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain, who turned 65 in February, leaves behind a bigger, more unified, and more politically potent state labor federation than the one he was chosen to lead 14 years ago. To talk about his time in the labor movement, Chamberlain visited our Northeast Portland office Aug. 27.

The AFL-CIO isn't a union, but a union of unions. It's the federation that most U.S. unions belong to. With organizational bodies at the national, state, and local level, it coordinates union electoral and political efforts, provides help to affiliated unions, and tries to keep a sprawling and diverse labor movement unified.

With Chamberlain at the helm, the Oregon AFL-CIO earned national acclaim within labor circles as a small-state labor federation that brought about big accomplishments.

In recent years Oregon passed laws guaranteeing sick leave for all Oregon workers; increasing the minimum wage; enacting the first statewide limits on rent increases; cracking down on abusive scheduling practices; and establishing the most comprehensive paid family and medical leave program in the country. The Oregon AFL-CIO had a hand in each of those wins: helping elect pro-labor politicians, negotiating in the governor's office, and providing support to campaigns by affiliates like UFCW Local 555.

Yet the thing Chamberlain is most proud of is a 2015 internal reorganization that few people know about. Following a resolution passed by the national AFL-CIO, Oregon dissolved all but one of its local central labor councils and reformed them as chapters of the state AFL-CIO. That meant for the first time in decades the AFL-CIO would have paid staff to help local labor unions outside the Portland area.

"It really allowed us to go from being a Portland-centric labor movement to a statewide labor movement," Chamberlain says.

With permanent staff in Bend, Eugene and Medford, the Oregon AFL-CIO was able to expand its electoral program: Chamberlain says 40 percent of union volunteer shifts during election season are now in those areas. And those electoral wins helped make the legislative wins possible. The regional staff have also worked to build local community alliances and support affiliated unions in organizing, bargaining and strike campaigns.

"My whole perspective is this,"



A STRONG VOICE FOR OREGON LABOR: Tom Chamberlain, shown above at a demonstration against Obama's proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership, brought the Oregon AFL-CIO back from crisis to become a major force.

Chamberlain said. "You are using members' money, and you don't spend a dime unless you're building power."

Another way to build power is to bring more workers into unions. Chamberlain led the Oregon AFL-CIO to create what he thinks is the first state AFL-CIO organizing program in the modern era. The initiative began with a series of discussions among leaders and organizing directors of the biggest affiliated unions about how they could share resources and work together. With smaller affiliates, the Oregon AFL-CIO staff took a lead role in several campaigns.

The federation has also leveraged its political clout to make it easier for workers to unionize. A state law now bars public bodies from spending tax dollars to fight union campaigns. Union-friendly city, county and Metro officials conditioned support for a convention center hotel on Hyatt's willingness to agree to a union-neutrality "labor peace" agreement for the eventual hotel workers. Backers of a proposed major league baseball team signed a union pledge to earn labor support for the campaign.

The unlikely labor leader

Chamberlain became a union member in 1977 when he went to work at the Portland Fire Bureau at age 22 after serving in the U.S. Air Force. But because he worked a second job, he couldn't attend meetings of Portland Fire Fighters Local 43. One day he walked into his engine house at Southwest Fifth and College and was greeted by laughter and ribbing from his co-workers: At a union meeting he hadn't attended, he'd been nominated for the union executive board.

"I was mad, a little bit," Chamberlain recalls. "I was going to go to the office to take my name off the ballot. But then [two longtime executive board members] called me down to the basement and played on my Catholic guilt and got me to agree."

Thus started a life in labor. On the Local 43 executive board, he became an active member-lobbyist at the Legislature, and went on to be elected president of the Oregon State Fire Fighters Council. In 1998 he became president of his Local 43. He won his first re-election bid, but lost the second one, and in December 2003, he agreed to go to work as labor liaison for Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski. It lasted less

than two years.

"I hated working for the governor," Chamberlain recalls, "because you've got to represent the governor's position even if that goes against your core values. And 90 percent of the time he was right on board with what I thought was right, but there were times when he wasn't."

Looking to leave the governor's office, Chamberlain was working with political consultant Mark Wiener to raise money and prepare to run for Multnomah County Chair against incumbent Diane Linn. Then he got a call from Tim Nesbitt, who was then the Oregon AFL-CIO president. "We had lunch, and he said, 'I'm going to resign, and I want you to take my job.'"

"I think it had a lot to do with me being in the governor's office, and I knew most of labor. And it never hurts being a fire fighter."

On Nesbitt's recommendation, in October 2015 the Oregon AFL-CIO board appointed Chamberlain to serve the two remaining years of Nesbitt's term.

Chamberlain arrived at a time of crisis for the AFL-CIO: SEIU, Laborers, Teamsters, UNITE HERE, and United Food and Commercial Workers had just dropped out of the national AFL-CIO and formed their own Change To Win labor federation. The Oregon AFL-CIO went from 140,000 to 80,000 members almost overnight.

Chamberlain stepped into the job with the energy and purposefulness of a fire fighter arriving on the scene. Standing 6'2" with close-cropped red hair and mustache, he soon became a reliably fiery orator, getting hearts pumping on picket lines and union rallies. And behind the scenes, he worked to re-establish labor unity and build bridges to other movements.

Standing up for all workers

Meanwhile, realizing that the days when labor could go it alone are long past, Chamberlain made it a priority to form real and lasting alliances with community and civil rights groups like Causa and Unite Oregon. He also worked to expand the scope of what would be considered "labor" issues, and to cast the Oregon AFL-CIO as an advocate for all working people.

"Too often, folks think unions are just about their members," Chamberlain said. "And what I've tried to do and what our affiliates have allowed us to do is push beyond that.... When I came up in the Fire Fighters union, it was all about 'wages, hours, and working conditions,' and if you looked at anything else, it was controversial," Chamberlain said. "But that narrow view doesn't encompass what workers' issues are." Harassment in the workplace, immigration reform, housing, all those are workers' issues, Chamberlain says.

The labor movement suffered another blow in 2018 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Janus v AFSCME* case that no public employee can be required to