2019 OREGON AFL-CIO CONVENTION REPORT

By Don McIntosh

SEASIDE, Oregon — Representing 134,105 members of 170 union locals in 38 international unions, 221 delegates gathered Sept. 19-22 for the Oregon AFL-CIO's biennial convention. Over four days, they elected new leaders, bid farewell to outgoing ones, and marched in spirited protests in nearby Warrenton and Astoria.

Throughout, the mood was optimistic. A recent poll showed public support of unions at its highest level in decades. And a year after a teacher strike wave, 46,000 workers were on strike at GM and another 105,000 were getting ready to strike at Kaiser Permanente, grocery stores, and seven Oregon universities.

For nearly half the delegates, it was their first convention. Delegates learned new words, like "cisgender," charted a new political course, and passed the torch of leadership to a new generation: President Tom Chamberlain, 65, and Secretary-Treasurer Barbara Byrd, 70, retired and were succeeded by Graham Trainor, 38, and Christy O'Neill, 32.

Democrats' PERS betrayal

The biggest thing missing at this year's convention was Democratic politicians, except for a handful of labor allies who opposed a cut in public employee retirement benefits. For decades, state and local public employees have endured round after round of cuts and attempted cuts to their retirement benefits. But this year, the cuts came entirely courtesy of Democrats they'd helped to elect to the state House, Senate, and governor's office. SB 1049 seized up to 2.5% of public employee compensation in order to pay down the unfunded pension liability caused by the 2008 financial market collapse.

Judging by the convention, Oregon union members aren't likely to forget that any time soon. At the convention two years ago, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown spoke to a standing ovation and was endorsed on a near-unanimous voice vote. This time, she wasn't even invited. Politicians are normally plentiful at an awards ceremony the night before the convention; this year only the honorees were present: State Sen. Kathleen Taylor (lawmaker of the year), State Rep Rachel Prusak (Rookie of the Year), and State Sen. Shemia Fagan (working family champion).

"What happened in Oregon is not just unfair; it is a betrayal," national AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler told delegates. "How about we tax a millionaire instead of stealing from workers?"

The PERS vote wasn't the only betrayal felt by labor in this year's legislative session: Senate Democrats also spiked a prevailing wage expansion bill that passed the House. And neither chamber would consider a bill to penalize big companies that profit while sending their workers to the public safety net for food, housing and health care. No Democrat on the wrong side of those three items will get the Oregon AFL-CIO's backing in the 2020 primary, under a politician accountability resolution passed at the convention.

Turn to Page 9

OUT OF THEIR SEATS AND INTO THE STREETS

For many delegates, a highlight of the convention was an energetic back-to-back pair of demonstrations on Saturday: Four school buses transported about 150 delegates first to a Warrenton Fred Meyer to demand equal pay for women grocery workers, and then to the Astoria Labor Temple to call for a fair contract for nurses.

In Warrenton, a crew of women labor leaders dressed like Rosie the Riveter briefly took over a Fred Meyer store with a choreographed dance routine while singing a modified version of Aretha Franklin's Respect. They were there to publicize grocery union UFCW Local 555's finding that women are twice as likely as men to be assigned to a lower-paying wage scale at Fred Meyer, resulting in women grocery workers earning $1.31 an hour less on average. It was the second Fred Meyer flash mob organized by the group Oregon Women Labor Leaders (OWLL) and led by Oregon AFL-CIO organizer Alma Raya.

Next delegates held a rally and then marched through downtown Astoria in support of nurses in the Oregon Nurses Association (ONA) who have been struggling to get an acceptable union contract at Columbia-Memorial Hospital. For nurses, the arrival and departure of the buses was an emotional moment; some were near tears. In the parking lot outside the Labor Temple, unionists were joined by U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, whose wife is a member of ONA. They then took to the streets, chanting and singing the call-and-response marching cadence song "We are the nurses … the mighty mighty nurses … fighting for our patients … and a fair contract!" ONA members had worked hard to build community support, and many shop windows already had "We Support CMH nurses" posted. Now Commercial Street became a river of honking cars and upraised fists.