

PEOPLE

Barbara Byrd wraps up 41-year career in labor movement

After 41 years as a labor educator and 14 years at the Oregon AFL-CIO, Barbara Byrd is retiring for real.

Two years ago, Barbara Byrd retired from the Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) of the University of Oregon after 20 years; last month she stepped down as Oregon AFL-CIO's secretary treasurer after 14 years. At 70, Byrd is wrapping up a 41-year career in which she's trained hundreds of union leaders across four states, promoted the apprenticeship model of job training, and urged labor organizations to confront climate change.

Growing up in San Antonio, Texas, Byrd got an early union education from her father, a newspaper reporter who became president of his Newspaper Guild local and representative for the international union.

"He would always say it wasn't about wages and benefits," Byrd told the Labor Press. "It was about being able to stand up at work and say what you thought and not be afraid of getting fired."



Byrd got a bachelor's degree in sociology at Rice University in Houston and a master's degree in labor studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

She discovered labor education at UMass when she followed an instructor from union hall to union hall doing steward training.

"I watched him teach and I watched the excitement of people in those classes, and it was like a light bulb going off. It was like, 'That's what I want to do.'"

In 1978, she began her first job as a labor educator at Indiana University, teaching union leaders from the steel mills near Gary, Indiana. When her father had a stroke, she returned to Texas in 1981 with then-husband Peter Donohue, an economist and labor union researcher. She helped start a labor studies program at San Antonio College, and earned a Ph.D. in adult education from the University of Texas in Austin. With newborn daughter Caitlin, they relocated to San Francisco in 1986 and Byrd took a job directing the Labor Studies and Apprenticeship Department at City College of San Francisco. But in 1995, frustrated by the high cost of living in San Francisco, they moved to Portland and Byrd began at LERC as a teacher and researcher.

At LERC, her teaching developed the

skills of countless union stewards and leaders. Her research made the case for the value of union apprenticeship programs, and looked at the challenges of attracting and retaining women in that program, and minority apprentices. In recent years, leadership development became her passion, particularly with the Cascade Region Labor Leadership Initiative. In that program, about two dozen high-level labor leaders from Oregon, Washington and British Columbia meet for three weeks for seminars on honing a vision, leading organizational change, and connecting with movements. They come away with a clearer game plan for building their organizations, and a network of peers to turn to for advice.

Mid-way through her tenure at LERC, a surprising thing happened. Newly installed Oregon AFL-CIO president Tom Chamberlain invited Byrd to become the union federation's number two officer, secretary-treasurer, in 2005. The Oregon AFL-CIO had just lost 40% of its membership because of a national union split,

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being met. Although CareOregon may be a nonprofit entity, their primary perspective will always be that of an insurance company."

"We're public servants. We don't want to work for an insurance company," said Kristine Britton Dills, a 19-year County health department employee who expects her position to be transferred to CareOregon. "One of the benefits of working for the County is being able to move around and do different things, to learn and grow, but always under the umbrella of the county's mission and values, always as a public servant," Britton Dills told commissioners.

The law that Multnomah County managers are citing says the transferred employees, for one year, can't be laid off or have their salary reduced. But after that, at non-union CareOregon, they would be at-will employees who could have wages and benefits reduced or be let go for any reason.

Oregon AFSCME union representative Eben Pullman says the county is misreading the law. Pullman says the law was intended to give public employees certain minimum protections if

their job is transferred from one public employer to another, or to a non-profit that's contracted to do the same work. It wasn't intended to supersede greater protections workers might have in a union contract, like the rights that come with seniority.

Why seniority matters

"More senior employees are more invested in the workplace," says Local 88 Vice President Raymond De Silva, explaining one of the rationales for the union seniority rights protection. "They're closer to retirement. If they don't get those last few years [of employment], this will impact their whole retirement, the money they were expecting after they retire. Some of the newer employees that might have been hired just in the last 12 months, yes this would displace them, but they are not as invested as the more senior employees."

De Silva himself has been a County employee for six years, and is one of the employees who expects to have his County position eliminated in the shift to CareOregon.

The decision to move to CareOregon wasn't the County's: The State of Oregon contracts with non-profit Health



"Many of my classmates and former colleagues have chosen to work for pharmaceutical companies and insurance carriers, while I have chosen to serve the public good. Every day it becomes harder to sustain that decision, as we are continually asked to do more with less, to earn less than those who've chosen to work for for-profit corporations, to have our retirement and all aspects of our work slowly erode..." — Sherry Yan, County Health Department

Share of Oregon to administer the Oregon Health Plan's mental health and addiction treatment benefits in Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties. Health Share is what's known in Oregon health policy jargon as a "coordinated care organization" (CCO). It's a network that was set up by the counties and the big health providers — Kaiser, Legacy, Providence, OHSU, and Adventist — to focus on prevention and management of chronic conditions like diabetes for people enrolled in the Oregon Health Plan. Until now, Health Share has subcontracted management of the behavioral health benefit to county health departments. Now it's giving the work instead to CareOregon, which administers the

Oregon Health Plan's health and dental benefits in the three counties.

Under the union contract, Local 88 could wait until the layoffs occur and then file a grievance, but it asked — and the County agreed — to arbitrate the dispute before Jan. 1.

In the meantime, with the transition just 12 weeks away, workers say they've gotten no information about whose jobs would be transferred, or what the wages, benefits, and conditions would be at CareOregon. De Silva said the union has asked the County for an official list and has asked CareOregon for compensation information, working titles and roles, onboarding documents. Crickets.

Pullman said the list is likely

to include mental health call center and crisis line workers, quality control and regulatory compliance specialists, and IT and other workers who manage billing and claims adjudication.

At the Oct. 4 commission meeting, health department workers appealed to County commissioners to step in. The County doesn't have to spend tax dollars to arbitrate the disagreement.

Chair Kafoury and the commissioners said nothing.

"I was hoping for some acknowledgment," De Silva said. "There was no comment."

In an emailed statement, County spokesperson Julie Sullivan-Springhetti said the County knows the move has been difficult and distracting for staff, and has been working with employees who want to stay to find other open positions at the County.

"One of the challenges for everyone is that we are still negotiating the transfer of this work and don't have all the answers at this stage in the process," Sullivan-Springhetti wrote.

De Silva said the union has met with several commissioners individually, and has further meetings scheduled.