

BUILDING TRADES LOBBY DAY

Telling labor's story to lawmakers



For a day, there were more union construction workers than legislators in the State Capitol building.

By Don McIntosh

For the Oregon Building Trades Council, it was a massively successful lobby day, in which union members made their presence felt at the State Capitol. The plan was for 50 unionists to take part, and 40 were expected, but in the end over 90 members and leaders from over a dozen unions turned up at the Oregon Capitol early morning Feb. 19, cramming into a meeting room they'd reserved for orientation. About half were union staff and officers, the other half rank-and-file apprentices and journey-level workers who took the day off work to be there.

"This is about building power and getting to know each other," said Building Trades Executive Secretary Robert Camarillo, welcoming them. "We want them to know that we're here, and that we matter."

The Oregon Building Trades Council coordinates the legislative efforts of member unions representing over 35,000 work-

ing men and women in Oregon's union construction trades. Unlike its lobby days in previous years, this time union members weren't there to support or oppose any specific legislation. Instead, they were there to deliver a message: "We are the union." That way, when union representatives return to the Capitol later on to lobby for and against bills, lawmakers will remember meeting the workers they represent.

"This is our chance to tell our story, about a job where everyone is paid the same, and earns a family wage," Laborers Political and Legislative Director Jodi Guetzloe-Parker told attendees.

Before they headed out to meet lawmakers, Camarillo thanked by name dozens of people for organizing turnout. But Camarillo himself—since coming out of the Iron Workers in 2018 to lead the state's building trades—has come to be known as one of the hardest working figures in the Oregon union movement.

"I get emails from him at midnight, on a Sunday," IBEW

Local 48 Business Manager Garth Bachman told union members.

After a pep talk, unionists broke into 13 teams, each of

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which was scheduled to meet with two or three lawmakers. All told, meetings had been set with 35 lawmakers or their staffs.

But House Republicans threw a monkey wrench into their plans: To slow down majority Democrats' ability to pass legislation, Republicans insisted that each bill be read in its entirety on the House floor. That meant the House would be in full session from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. All the union meetings on the House side would be cancelled.

Camarillo announced a Plan

B: Messages would be sent to individual representatives, who would come off the House floor to meet with union members in the hall.

Meeting with lawmakers, union members told their own personal stories — about how unions had turned their lives around, or given them the chance to raise a family and live a life with dignity.

"What I was doing before, I wasn't a good role model." IBEW Local 48 apprentice Kaitlyn Kettner told State Sen. Kathleen Taylor. For Kettner, being union meant hope for a better life — and a chance to start over after serving time for a criminal conviction. A single mom, she's earning money to support her family while she learns her trade. "Now, my family is proud of me," she said. "My kids are proud of me."

Local 48 member Steven Reasons wishes he'd known about the union sooner: "I did the college route, and I wound up with a whole lot of debt and no career," he told an aide to State Sen. Shemia Fagan. "Then I stumbled upon the apprentice-

ship program, and that was the best thing that ever happened to me."

As members mingled between meetings, they got to know each other. The day was full of little moments of cross-craft fellowship, as members joked and talked about the differences between the trades.

While union delegations roamed the halls inside, outside the Capitol, several unions had informational displays set up. Most attention grabbing was Operating Engineers Local 701's heavy equipment simulator, which cost \$300,000 to construct and equip. It's a lifelike simulation of operating a crane or backhoe, and it's fun. One by one, lawmakers were invited out to try their hand at operating a crane or backhoe.

At one point, union members filed into Senate chambers and filled the back of the second floor gallery. Noticing their arrival, Eugene Democrat James Manning took to a microphone and addressed them from below.

"Welcome to your Capitol," Manning said. "This building belongs to you."