

...Coronacrisis

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World Health Organization (WHO) recommended droplet-level protection, while the U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommended airborne-level. Now WHO is recommending airborne as well.

“There’s not enough PPE in the country, or in the state, so we’re trying to figure out how to conserve what we have,” Engthouse said. “Our government was never planning for this, and they haven’t been stockpiling.”

To deal with the shortage of PPE and to free up staff to deal with an expected surge of patients, hospitals have been canceling elective surgeries. Kaiser Permanente is even canceling dental appointments, because dental staff use PPE that the system will need to handle coronavirus patients.

Kaiser also sent several dozen staff at its hospital in Hillsboro home on two weeks paid leave to self-quarantine after they were unknowingly exposed to a patient with coronavirus in early March.

Engthouse’s advice for union members? Stay home. And don’t go to the emergency room if you’re not sick enough to have gone in normal times.

“We need to be working on an economic package to help people stay at home. We have to drop the curve until we have a vaccination.”

Nursing home workers at risk

It’s not just registered nurses who are at personal risk when dealing with patients with the coronavirus: Certified nurse assistants, licensed practical nurses, and service workers at hospitals and nursing homes are also on the front lines. At press time, 13 patients had the virus at the Veterans Care Home in Lebanon, Oregon, where workers voted last year to unionize with United Steelworkers. The facility is on lockdown, with no visitors allowed, and over 200 staff and 150 residents are being tested.

Grocers on the front lines too

With restaurant dining rooms emptying out and ordered to close in Oregon and Washington, people are cooking and eating at home. Grocery workers represented by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555 have been busy, and shelves are emptying as customers make bigger purchases so they can make fewer trips. To help keep stores stocked with food and essentials, Fred Meyer is hiring across the nation.

But grocery workers—cashiers in particular—also are at heightened risk from shift-long contact with the public. UFCW nationally is calling on members to take extra care, and locals around the country are pushing employers to take measures to protect workers and the public. Thus far, very little appears to have changed: At most stores, no special precautions are being taken to wipe down

PANDEMIC ECONOMICS

UP

Home delivery With so many people determined to stay home, grocery and restaurant delivery services are booming. So is aggressively anti-union Amazon, which announced March 16 it will hire an additional 100,000 warehouse and delivery workers to meet the surge in demand — and raise their pay by \$2 an hour.

Television Executives at NexStar, the nation’s biggest owner of TV stations (and the company that’s currently trying to bust the union at KOIN-TV) were licking their chops as epidemic neared. In a Feb. 26 quarterly earnings call, NexStar chairman and CEO Perry A. Sook predicted the coronavirus would increase audience, and ad revenue. “If it becomes more widespread in the United States and there is more quarantine in home and all of that, it could potentially benefit our business because we’d be the primary source of entertainment,” Sook said. When the financial crash came, NexStar wasn’t spared: Its stock lost half its value in under four weeks.

DOWN

Restaurants (except for takeout, drive-through, and delivery), coffee shops, doughnut shops, salons, barbers, tattoo parlors, theaters, bowling alleys, gyms, museums, art galleries, and youth sports

Air travel The international aviation industry could face losses of \$113 billion, according to the International Air Transport Association.

Traffic jams

the handles of shopping carts and baskets between use, and at checkout, customers continue to line up in close proximity and then touch the same PIN pads.

Local 555 member Mary Lazard, who works at the in-store bakery at the Sweet Home Safeway, says she and co-workers are frustrated that they’re still being told by managers to hand out sample cookies, public contact that seems unnecessarily risky during an epidemic.

“We’re part of the public too,” Lazard said, “but we’re right in the middle of where everybody is going to get their survival supplies.”

Retirement savings hit hard

Coronavirus fears have led to a collapse in stock prices since the market peaked on Feb. 19: As of March 17 when this issue went to press, major stock indexes like the S&P 500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average had fallen nearly 30%, equivalent to the 2008 financial crash. If stock prices don’t bounce back shortly, that could spell a rapid slide to insolvency for multi-employer pension plans that were already classified as critical or endangered. The U.S. House already passed a bill last year, known as the Butch Lewis Act, that would rescue failing pension plans; a market collapse that leads to pension failures could result in dramatic pressure on the U.S. Senate to pass the legislation.

PERS assets take a tumble

About 39% of the Public Employee Retirement Fund is invested in equities (stocks), and equities just lost more than a quarter of their value. That means PERS might have just lost a tenth of its assets in less than four weeks. Another 39% of the PERS portfolio is invested in private equity, real estate, and commodities; some losses are likely there too, though they won’t be as quick to tabulate. Oregon hadn’t even finished dealing with the 2008 market crash—which led to budget stresses and bitter political fights over how to deal with PERS asset losses. Thanks to the latest crash, we can expect that to worsen in the next few years.

Evictions, utility cut-offs suspended

To prevent calamity for thousands of workers suffering sudden layoff, Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury and Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler signed emergency orders March 17 banning the eviction of tenants who can’t pay rent due to coronavirus-related challenges. Under the orders, tenants will have up to six months to repay any rent they owe. It applies to people whose jobs are shut down, whose work hours are reduced, who miss work to provide child care due to school closures or who are unable to work due to themselves or a relative getting sick from the virus. At press time, Boston, Denver, San Antonio, San Francisco, Seattle, and the state of New York had also announced eviction moratoriums.

Meanwhile, PGE, Pacific Power, and NW Natural have all announced they won’t cut off service for non-payment during the epidemic.

A-holes show their colors

Contrary to myth, most people the world over react to disasters with bravery, generosity, and instantaneous solidarity. But not everyone. And certainly not the **Freedom Foundation**—the group that sends mail and door-to-door canvassers to ask workers to stop paying union dues. The day after the pandemic was declared, Freedom Foundation national director Aaron Withe posted a chart to Facebook which he falsely attributed to the Oregon Health Authority. It purports to list ways to avoid getting the coronavirus, but the fifth bullet point mocks the state employees who are working to protect public health: “Hire scores of new bureaucrats so as to create more government union members paying dues which eventually end up in the pockets of Democrats.”

A few days later, Washington anti-tax crusader **Tim Eyman** held a party for his Republican campaign for governor — and ridiculed and flouted efforts to slow the spread of the virus. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee had just issued an order banning public gatherings of over 250 people. “Let’s stick our finger in the eye of

Jay Inslee,” Eyman wrote to his supporters, “251 is the # of patriots I hope will join me at Oak Harbor today.... I’m bringing 6-pack of Corona!” Only about 60 showed up, the *Seattle Times* reported — in a region with the highest concentration of COVID-19 cases in the nation.

Laid-off workers occupy bar in protest

Crush, a Southeast Portland LGBT bar, announced March 16 it would close for the safety of customers and staff—and laid off all 27 employees with no notice. The next day a newly-formed “Crush Bar Workers Collective” announced that workers will physically occupy the bar until owner John Clarke agrees to let workers use up their accrued sick time, provide half pay for canceled shifts that had been scheduled, and guarantee rehires when the bar reopens.

“Until we can afford to maintain the roofs over our heads, we will make Crush our home,” said barista Emily Bennett in a communique announcing the occupation. The collective says it won’t damage property while inside the bar, and will limit the number of occupants to comply with federally recommended gathering limits.

Cancel culture

From the national AFL-CIO’s presidential forum to local meetings and apprenticeship classes, union meetings and events are being canceled nationwide or moving to online or telephone conferencing.

And local union offices and training centers are closing. The Seattle and Olympia offices of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO are closed at least through March, and staff are working from home. Plumbers and Fitters Local 290 called off its March 19 retiree wellness meeting and canceled all apprentice training classes until further notice. The NECA-IBEW Training Center canceled all evening courses for journeyman wiremen March 17-20.

Out-of-work violinists

Workers at hospitality and entertainment venues were hit with sudden layoff when the crisis hit. That includes employees of the Oregon Symphony, which canceled all performances through April 6, idling members of Musicians Local 99.

Boeing layoffs could loom

With airlines cutting flights, grounding planes, and considering deferring new jet deliveries, layoffs could be coming at Boeing and its suppliers.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Visit [cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus) for the latest information on the epidemic.

HOW TO PROTECT US ALL, ON THE JOB

The national AFL-CIO is calling on OSHA to set a temporary emergency standard needed to protect workers from the outbreak. Sign the petition at bit.ly/2WkGDGP